
Sermon
The Free Mind

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Hope Unitarian Church
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First Reading: Mark Twain

I wish to run on the Truth Party. Wouldn't that be refreshing in Washington? Always tell the truth; it will amaze your friends and confound your enemies. No party holds the privilege of dictating to me how I shall vote. If loyalty to party is a form of patriotism, I am no patriot. If there is any valuable difference between a monarchist and an American, it lies in the theory that the American can decide for himself what is patriotic and what isn't. I claim the difference. I am the only person in the sixty millions that is privileged to dictate my patriotism. I had been accustomed to vote for Republicans more frequently than for Democrats, but I was never a Republican and never a Democrat. I owe my allegiance to country and to the Constitution of the United States.

Second Reading: William Lloyd Garrison. *The Free Mind*.

High walls, and huge, the body may confine,
And iron grates obstruct the prisoner's gaze,
And massive bolts may baffle his design,
And vigilant keepers watch his devious ways :
But scorns the immortal mind this base control!
No chains can bind it. and no cell enclose :
Swifter than light, it flies from pole to pole,
And in a flash from earth to heaven it goes!
It leaps from mount to mount — from vale to vale
It wanders, plucking honeyed fruits and flowers;
It visits home, to hear the fire-side tale,
And in sweet converse pass the joyous hours.
'Tis up before the sun, roaming afar,
And in its watches wearies every star!

Third Reading: Alfred Lord Tennyson. From *In Memoriam*.

You say, but with no touch of scorn,
Sweet-hearted, you, whose light-blue eyes
Are tender over drowning flies,
You tell me, doubt is Devil-born.

I know not: one indeed I knew
In many a subtle question versed,
Who touch'd a jarring lyre at first,
But ever strove to make it true:

Perplex'd in faith, but pure in deeds,
At last he beat his music out.
There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

He fought his doubts and gather'd strength,
He would not make his judgment blind,
He faced the spectres of the mind
And laid them: thus he came at length

To find a stronger faith his own;
And Power was with him in the night,
Which makes the darkness and the light,
And dwells not in the light alone,

But in the darkness and the cloud,
As over Sinai's peaks of old,
While Israel made their gods of gold,
Altho' the trumpet blew so loud.

Sermon

This last week I've seen several news reports about the disruption of town hall meetings held on the health care issue. Crowds have gathered and angrily shouted, "Just say no!" over and over preventing anyone else from speaking. I've seen some video clips of what's happening and that's why I have deliberately added the word 'angrily' to that last sentence. Complaints have been voiced that these are mobs organized around core groups that have been bused in by national groups intent on preventing healthcare reform. Given the billions of dollars that are at stake for those opposed to healthcare reform I have no trouble believing the charges. But organized or not there's a lesson here about freedom. A crowd of people angrily shouting, "Just say no!" that prevents anyone else from speaking is not an exercise in participatory democracy, it's not a group of people exercising free speech. It's a mob whose goal is to prevent free speech, who are using verbal violence that skates dangerously close to physical violence, an activity that evidences fear and uncertainty about the democratic process, fear that it might just work and – I believe – a profound sense of personal insecurity and fearfulness. And that fear and insecurity is not necessarily about healthcare reform. I believe it is a more generalized kind of fearfulness. I see evidence of this in the fact that at one of the recent town hall meetings the protestors were asked a question: [Do you] "oppose any form of socialized or government-run health care." Every hand shot up. They were then asked, if any of them were on Medicare?" Just under half the hands rose. When I read that story I was reminded of how wealthy slave owners were able to persuade poor white farmers who did not own slaves and were in

fact economically hurt by slavery to fight and die for the Confederacy and the slave culture it represented.

The ancestry of such groups is long and they have many relatives. One of their ancestors and a warning of how verbal violence can escalate is to be found in one of the darkest moments in our country's legislative history. In 1856 there were angry words exchanged on the floor of the Senate over the issue of slavery. In reaction thereto U.S. Representative Preston Brooks charged onto the Senate floor and used his walking stick to beat Senator Charles Sumner within an inch of his life. That's where such behavior can lead. Some of the relatives of such behavior are with us now in what has become known as the 'birther' movement. I believe the fundamental characteristics are the same – a sense of personal fear and insecurity that is independent of outwardly expressed issues – insecurity and fear that manifests itself in angry words and – sometimes – in angry and violent deeds. Religious fundamentalists, whether they are Fundamentalist Christians, Fundamentalist Muslims or some other type of Fundamentalists, are – to my mind – similar. Regardless of the theologies they espouse or deny I believe the anger they so often express is a product of an interior sense of insecurity and fearfulness. The same is true of political fundamentalists of every variety. They cannot bear the thought of hearing someone say something that contradicts what they believe. Calm words do not sooth them. They use freedom of speech and freedom of religion, but they are not free. They are captives of their inner fears.

We are, of course, free to speak in anger and there are circumstances when anger is appropriate, sometimes demanded by the situation. I believe that is the idea behind the old saying that the purpose of newspapers is to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted. It's an idea that has sometimes been applied to religion and preachers. I suspect it's an idea that just about everyone at one time or another claims as his or her right or privilege. But it's an idea that reminds me of the old saying, "When the only tool you have is a hammer everything begins to look like a nail." All too often people transform the freedom to speak in anger into the habit of speaking only in anger or only in opposition. In doing so they become prisoners of their anger.

This does not mean that I am opposed to passionate belief. I've known people who can't seem to decide what they believe, people who stand for this and then that, people whose only passion seems to be in moving from one position to another, never taking a stand. It is, I think, just another manifestation of what motivates those who insist on screaming in anger, just another manifestation of an inward insecurity and fearfulness.

I believe in the necessity of passion. I believe in the importance of believing. I think kindly of the proverb that says, "Lead, follow or get out of the way." But the mind that knows only a blind certainty of belief is not free. The mind that cannot imagine the possibility that it is in error is not free. It is not free anymore than the mind that cannot decide what it believes, that constantly turns from one idea to another, constantly seeing the fault with every position – or perhaps most fatuously – concluding that every position must be equally correct. And all too often it is the extremes that are front and center in matters of religion. Some insist that religion and church should be a buffet from which they can pick and choose. This week believe this, next week believe that. But that is to believe nothing. The obligation of the free mind, of the honest mind, is to

be open, but that does not mean – as James Luther Adams was fond of saying – that we should have minds open at both ends.

There are also those in churches who insist on creeds. “God said it; I believe it; that settles it!” is often their cry. It may surprise you to know that I am not opposed to creeds. I whole heartedly support the idea of creeds. But I am opposed to the idea that any person has the right to force his or her creed upon another. This church is one that rejects creeds. But it is as a church that it rejects them. I believe each and every one of us should have a creed, a set of beliefs to stand by – and those beliefs need to be something worth standing by. But no one has the right to impose their creed upon another. If you believe in a supernatural God, so be it. Be proud of what you believe and live your life accordingly. And if you don’t, do not hesitate to say where you stand. As Thomas Jefferson so eloquently said,

Fix Reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason than of blindfolded fear. ... Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it end in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise and in the love of others which it will procure for you

That is the challenge that our kind of church presents people. We do not have a prepackaged set of beliefs to which you must subscribe. You are expected to think for yourself. You are expected to believe for yourself. There are, of course, some limits. As the saying goes, everyone is entitled to their opinion, but not to their own facts. We are obligated to apply the limits of logic. William Ellery Channing, the most famous Unitarian minister of the nineteenth century, laid down the law for our tradition when he said,

Say what we may, God has given us a rational nature, and will call us to account for it. We may let it sleep, but we do so at our peril. Revelation is addressed to us as rational beings.

It is a different kind of religion. It is the religion of the free mind. That is why it is sometimes said that a church such as ours is a free church for the free mind. The religion of the free mind is not for the faint of heart. It does not offer easy answers. It insists that the mind is not made free by unquestioning belief and blind faith. It insists that the free mind must question even the most widely held opinions and decide for itself. And it must be willing to be challenged in turn. There is no better example of this than a story I once heard about the philosopher David Hume. He was one of the leading lights during the age of reason and a man who was openly agnostic. But Hume continued to go to church every week. When questioned about that seeming inconsistency he replied with words to the effect, “I go for one reason. Because one time each week I need to hear one person who speaks freely from his deepest convictions, as profound or stupid as he may sound.”

The free mind is one that is on a voyage of discovery. It reveres and honors the past and the lessons it has to teach. But it understands – as Emerson argued so strongly in his essay on the American Scholar – that it must be willing to question the past and

explore the unknown. And its greatest challenge, the greatest threat to the free mind is never an external enemy; it is always to be found within in the form of fear.

How then might one sum up the idea of the free mind? My colleague, Alice Blair Wesley wrote these words a few years ago and they come as close to the mark as any I know.

So, in the spirit of the covenant of persuasion, in the free church each member is called to give utterance, to ask, say, explain, defend what is the truth she or he sees. To be unforthcoming is to be disloyal; for how can we learn from one another without candor! Each member is also called to yield the floor with humble courtesy, to listen, be open to, and try again and again to imagine what others see. To be unwilling or to forget to hear is to betray; for how can we receive what others may impart without their counsel! Our covenant is an abiding commitment to take and to give counsel.

That is the spirit of the free church. That is the spirit of the free mind. Creeds do not bind us. We are, however, bound by the obligation to be forthcoming, to speak the truth in love as best we know it; to be willing to listen to those who disagree with us and to test ever belief we have in the fire of reason. This is not a religion for the timid. It is a religion of the free mind. It is a religion, in the words of William Ellery Channing,

Which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering: which recognizes in all human beings the image of god and the rights of God's children, and offers itself up a willing sacrifice to the cause of humankind. . . ., that cast[s] off all fear but that of wrongdoing, and which no menace or peril can enthrall: which is calm in the midst of tumults, and possesses itself, through all else be lost.

For the free church and the free mind,
Amen.