

Theodore Parker: A Life of Reform

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Channing Memorial Church

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READING: *Recollections of Boyhood*, Theodore Parker

The following reading is an excerpt from Theodore Parker's *Recollections of Boyhood*. Toward the end of his life, the Unitarian minister and social reformer was reflecting on his own moral and spiritual development.

When a little boy in petticoats in my fourth year, one fine day in spring, my father led me by the hand to a distant part of the farm, but soon sent me home alone. On the way I had to pass a little "pond-hole" then spreading its waters wide; a rhodora in full bloom—a rare flower in my neighborhood, and which grew only in that locality—attracted my attention and drew me to the spot. I saw a little spotted tortoise sunning himself in the shallow water at the root of the flaming shrub. I lifted the stick I had in my hand to strike the harmless reptile; for, though I had never killed any creature, yet I had seen other boys out of sport destroy birds, squirrels, and the like, and I felt a disposition to follow their wicked example. But all at once something checked my little arm, and a voice within me said, clear and loud, "It is wrong!" I held my uplifted stick in wonder at the new emotion—the consciousness of an involuntary but inward check upon my actions, till the tortoise and the rhodora both vanished from my sight. I hastened home and told the tale to my mother, and asked what was it that told me it was wrong? She wiped a tear from her eye with her apron, and taking me in her arms, said, "Some men call it conscience, but I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul of man. If you listen and obey it, then it will speak clearer and clearer, and always guide you right; but if you turn a deaf ear or disobey, then it will fade out little by little, and leave you all in the dark and without a guide. Your life depends on heeding this little voice." . . . I am sure no other event in my life has made so deep and lasting an impression on me.

PRAYER: *To Join the Human Race*, Theodore Parker

O God, may we join the human race in daring to live in the prophetic spirit: seeking inspiration like the seers and sages of this and other lands, judging the past as they, acting on the present like them, envisioning a new and nobler era of the spirit.

May our doctrines and forms fit the soul as the limbs fit the body: growing out of it, growing with it.

May we have communities for the whole person: truth for the mind, good works for the hands, love for the heart; and for the soul that aspiring after perfection, that unfaltering faith in life, which like lightning in the clouds, shines brightest when elsewhere it is most dark.

SERMON: *Theodore Parker: A Life of Reform*, Rev. Amy Bowden Freedman

“What can we do to make things better?”¹ This was Theodore Parker’s constant refrain. He asked this question again and again to the crowds that assembled to hear him while at the same time searching his own mind and heart.

Theodore Parker has an important place in our religious movement and in American history. In an Association whose congregations have remained relatively small, Theodore Parker’s congregation had a parish roll of seven thousand, drawing men and women of all classes to listen to his sermons that often lasted over an hour. He filled the Melodeon in Boston until demand for seating required a move to the larger Music Hall.

“What can we do to make things better?” a message that people longed to hear; a message that is as needed today as ever. We are gathered here this morning not only as members of Channing Memorial Church but as members of other congregations, and people who have come today for the first time. Coming together in this way reminds us that our community, the human family extends beyond the walls of our individual parishes.

“What can we do to make things better?” Our ability to make life better for all people grows as we make connections in ever greater circles. This marks the fifth anniversary of Rhode Island Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice, a state-wide advocacy group. Through working together, we have become better organized in our efforts to effect legislation in our state. John Glasheen, the current chair will speak later about upcoming legislation and some actions you can take in effecting positive change in our state.

Our lives are very busy these days. Many of us struggle with conflicting demands on our time, caring for our families, and making ends meet. As we rush around attending to our personal and professional lives, there is a constant drone of world reports. The news is not good. From nearby drunk driving fatalities and collapsing infrastructures to climate change, the War in Iraq, growing infringement of our privacy in the name of security, questionable ethics of our government, guns in the hands of children, the recall of unsafe products manufactured in China, and predatory lending practices just to name a few issues of our times.

“What can we do to make things better?” Foremost, we need to believe that it is possible to make things better, to reform society for the common good. When my faith wavers, I turn to my spiritual ancestors for inspiration. Theodore Parker lived the charge of his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, “What is man born for, but to be a reformer?”

Parker and fellow Transcendentalists believed that we are endowed with God-given abilities to bring forth truth, beauty, and justice. This means that not only the politicians have the answers to the problems of our times. In fact, the politicians may be more clouded from the truth. Parker would assert that every person here has knowledge that can benefit the common good. It is part of our very make-up. We are born with the

ability to discern right from wrong, if the circumstances of our lives do not lead us to ignore this still small voice within.

An illustration of the still small voice is Parker's experience at the age of four. As he was about to pick a rare flower and strike an innocent turtle, "all at once something checked [his] little arm, and a voice within [him] said, clear and loud, 'It is wrong!'" The lesson his mother offered made a lasting impression, she said, "Some men call it conscience, but I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul of man. If you listen and obey it, then it will speak clearer and clearer, and always guide you right; but if you turn a deaf ear or disobey, then it will fade out little by little, and leave you all in the dark and without a guide. Your life depends on heeding this little voice."

Little Theodore Parker could have followed the crowd, smashing the turtle as he had seen so many other boys kill birds and squirrels for sport. However, even at the age of four, something rose within him, the knowledge that it was not right to do so. Whether you call it "the voice of God in the soul" or "conscience", reflect for a moment on the times when a sense of right and wrong rose within you. Even more important, consider whether you chose to heed the guiding voice within or to follow the crowd.

Theodore Parker was not one to follow the crowd. He had sparkling blue eyes and a sense of humor that bubbled up at inopportune moments. Parker left behind his family roots as a Lexington farmer to become a minister.

From a young age, he had a voracious appetite for knowledge that was never sated. He read Homer and Plutarch by the time he was seven. He read Pope, Milton, and Dryden while he was nine. At ten he began study of Latin and translated Virgil and Cicero. He began the study of Greek at the age of elevenⁱⁱ. By his twenties he could read almost any language, although his interest was more in grammar than vocabulary. When in Europe he found he could not be understood in German or French.

Although he passed the entrance exam, Theodore Parker could not afford to attend Harvard full-time at first. He became a school teacher until he secured the means. I was delighted to discover that Charles Brooks, the first minister of this Newport congregation, was a classmate of Parker's and shared his passion for German scholarship.

Theodore Parker's first call was as the minister of Spring Street Church in West Roxbury, which was then a small country parish. Even though he was a scholar, Parker spoke in plain language and resolved "to preach nothing as religion that I have not experienced inwardly and made my own."

On May 19, 1841, Parker became the "best-hated man in America"ⁱⁱⁱ. He delivered an ordination sermon entitled "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity." In our day and age, it is hard to imagine that a sermon could cause so much controversy. We must remember that at the time ministry was a highly respected and learned profession. Also, Theodore Parker and his colleagues represented the second generation of Unitarianism following William Ellery Channing, who first articulated Unitarian theology as the unity of God, the brotherhood of man, and the leadership of Jesus.

Parker asserted that a Natural Religion exists beyond the doctrines of the church, beyond the authority of the Bible, and even beyond the existence of Jesus himself. In other words, even if it was discovered that Jesus never lived, the truth of religion is eternal. In his words, “An undue place has often been assigned to forms and doctrines, while too little stress has been laid on the divine life of the soul, love to God and love to man.”

As you can imagine, his sermon caused quite a stir! Members of other denominations called Parker an infidel and a heretic. Parker was censured by the Boston Association of Unitarian Ministers who refused to exchange pulpits with him. The reason Parker was “the best-hated man in America” is that despite the reprimand from other clergy, he spoke to a larger audience than many of his colleagues not only moving his pulpit to Boston’s Music Hall but speaking to packed lecture halls all over the United States.

For us who gather here today, Theodore Parker’s message questioning the authority of church doctrine, the Bible and Jesus may no longer be as shocking. We come together for worship with diverse beliefs about ultimate meaning some holding faith in God, others finding inspiration in the rhythms of Nature or the workings of Science. I know that many who enter our doors for the first time are still surprised to find a congregation that is open to the stirrings of religion in the individual without being rigid about religious dogma. This allows each one of us to connect with the still small voice within, and to bring our authentic selves into religious community.

Theodore Parker began his ministry as a scholar and a pastor. As he listened to the “voice of God in the soul” or “conscience”, he became increasingly a reformer. He was a close friend of George Ripley and so often visited the utopian community of Brook Farm, interested in the intellectual exchange and new forms of living being tried there. In the end, Parker concluded that although Brook Farm might have been a success for individuals, really the members were escaping the ills of society. The experimental community did not advance society, solve problems or reform institutions^{iv}.

When Parker moved to Boston, his home on Exeter Place became a meeting place of reformers including Julia Ward Howe, member of this church and peace activist. Parker spoke out about issues of labor, property, war, education, women’s rights, and temperance. He was a tireless abolitionist speaking in Faneuil Hall, serving as a stop on the Underground Railroad, and even marrying escaped slaves.

For us in the twenty-first century, it is easy to look back into history and know the abolitionists were just in their cause. However, at the time, the voices in support of slavery were loud and influential. The God-given order of mankind and the Bible was often cited in support of the institution of slavery.

Theodore Parker had the wisdom to say in response to the Biblical passages in support of slavery, that if the Bible supported slavery, the Bible was wrong. He pressed people to see a Higher Law than the superstition of religious dogma. Parker also pressed people to see a Higher Law than economics or property or materialism.

What can we do to make things better? We too must listen to “the voice of God in the soul” or “conscience” welling up within us to distinguish right from wrong. Our religious movement has been freed from the baggage of superstition. However, we must believe in a Higher Law than individualism, than relativism.

We are intelligent people. We can understand the interests of corporations. We know why jobs have been outsourced. We know why manufacturing is now parceled out so that the companies can deliver the cheapest products to Americans, the top-consumers of the world. However, the interests of these ever-larger corporations operating in a global market, should not rise above the worth of the human family. The cost of jobs lost to the mechanization of labor is too high. The cost of food and toys being manufactured by workers with few rights and questionable practices is too high. Coca-cola and Pepsi Cola are currently buying springs in Mexico to sell bottled water. Private ownership of water is against Higher Laws.

What can we do to make things better? Foremost, we must believe in democracy and the principles of freedom. In a speech at the New England Anti-Slavery Convention in Boston, Parker said, “There is what I call the American idea. . . . This idea demands, as the proximate organization thereof, a democracy,--that is, a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people; of course, a government of the principles of eternal justice, the unchanging law of God; for shortness' sake I will call it the idea of Freedom.” This speech actually inspired President Abraham Lincoln. Now more than ever, we need to preserve “a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people”.

In 1859, Theodore Parker traveled to Italy with his wife for rest and study. He died at the age of fifty and is buried in Florence. His gravestone reads:

THEODORE PARKER
THE GREAT AMERICAN PREACHER
BORN AT LEXINGTON MASSACHUSETTS
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
AUGUST 24 1810
DIED AT FLORENCE ITALY
MAY 10 1860
HIS NAME IS ENGRAVED IN MARBLE
HIS VIRTUES IN THE HEARTS OF THOSE HE
HELPED TO FREE FROM SLAVERY
AND SUPERSTITION

What can we do to make things better?
Follow the guidance of the still small voice within.
Look beyond our own self-interests to Higher Laws.
Join with other people in reform efforts.
Use our God-given abilities of reason, compassion, and courage.
After all, what are we born for, but to be reformers?

ⁱ p.155, *Theodore Parker, An Anthology*, Henry Steele Commager

ⁱⁱ p. 1, *Theodore Parker: A Unitarian Conscience*, Royal Cloud

ⁱⁱⁱ p.27, *Theodore Parker, Yankee Crusader*, Henry Steele Commager

^{iv} p.50, *ibid.*