

THE STEEPLE ON THE COMMON

A sermon preached by the Reverend John H. Nichols to the Channing Memorial Church on March 13, 2011

Prominent in many New England communities you will find a building with a steeple. The old meeting house often built at the highest point of land usually near the spot where all roads intersect, with its steeple towering over everything else, may seem purely ornamental now. It is not. It had then and it still has a vital purpose. These who built it wanted to place a symbol of uncompromised values at the center of the community.

“Uncompromised” or “uncompromising” seem like such formidable words. If we were asked what qualities we would use to describe ourselves, few of us would say, “Well, I kind of like to think of myself as uncompromising.” We would prefer to be thought of as “flexible.” We would like to be remembered as “open minded” or “tolerant” and able to grow or be changed by new insights. The word, “Uncompromised” popularly suggests someone who is a fanatic of the far right or the far left. And yet, sometimes, uncompromised is exactly what we need other people to be.

People who are ethically uncompromising are also said to have integrity. People who are thought to have integrity can be counted on to be honest and fair according to their ethics. We trust them to be concerned with justice and to hold themselves to high standards of behavior. They may be difficult people at times. They may be tough on themselves and tough on others.

They may even be fearsome when one happens to cross them on an issue at public meeting. They can occasionally be wrong as we all can be wrong. Nevertheless, we need individuals with an uncompromised integrity in our lives and in our communities. And sometimes we need institutions to be like these individuals.

Our quaint steeples represent an allegiance to something more fundamental than human devices, desires and politics – something uncompromising. As these steeples command attention in our communities they exercise a pull on our aesthetic imaginations and even over our moral imaginations. What did this church’s founders want that steeple to mean? Surely, it was intended for something more than a bell tower or a roosting spot for pigeons.

In most of our communities the notion that churches and their steeples reflect something important is so strong that the presence of such a church, like Channing, even increases the property values in the community around it. It

makes the community seem more desirable, because there is an unspoken reassurance of stability that is brought by the presence of a viable religious institution in the center of a community.

Try to picture Newport, without Channing situated where it is on this hillside. Imagine this site taken up instead by a Walmart or by a row of stores. Imagine the villages of Lexington or Wayland, Concord or Sudbury with their church buildings gone from the center of town. Many of the people of the town of Brewster on Cape Cod have pitched in to help the Unitarian Universalists rebuild the front of their Nineteenth Century meeting house, because they think having that beautiful building and its steeple in the center of town says something important about the community.

There is something about the old church, here and elsewhere, that promises however vaguely – and perhaps misleadingly -- that there is an anchor to the community's life, a bottom line of safe and acceptable behavior.

That reassurance has always been there even for those who are not institutionally religious. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, was not a deeply religious man. He reached his religious maturity in the Gilded Age when profits had begun to tower over principles as the basic rule of life just as the office buildings of Boston had begun to tower over its church steeples. Justice Holmes, felt drawn to the steeples of his parents generation and in 1911 he wrote this to the fiftieth anniversary of his Harvard graduating class.

“When one listens from above to the roar of a great city there comes to one's ears – almost indistinguishable but there – the sound of church bells chiming the hours, or offering a pause in the rush, a moment of withdrawal and prayer. Commerce has out soared the steeples that once looked down upon the marts, but still their note makes music of the din. For most of those who are not parishioners the symbol still lives.”

A twice wounded veteran of the Civil War, he continued, “Life is a roar of bargain and battle, but in the very heart of it there rises a mystic spiritual tone that gives meaning to the whole. It transmutes the dull detail into romance. It reminds us that our only, but wholly adequate significance is as parts of an unimaginable whole. It suggests that even while we think we are egoists, we are living to ends outside of ourselves.”

The steeple stands over and against “The roar of bargain and battle.” It stands against high winds and ice storms, termites, gravity and every other possible internal or external force of decay. It stands for values that will not be traded away. It stands uncompromising until a greater force topples it over. And should that disaster happen, more often than not, the congregation goes to a

great deal of expense to rebuild their symbol so that something of the congregation will be able to rise above a world of change.

You did that a few years ago. You spent precious funds to preserve your steeple from the deterioration it had suffered. It was a difficult decision, and yet what you did was not only important to the architectural integrity of the building but it was important to the integrity of this community.

To suggest a contrast, many church buildings built in the last fifty years present a very different symbol. They do not command their settings nor do they make any single strong statement. In Evanston, Illinois, the two story UU sanctuary is so like an all-purpose gymnasium you keep waiting for them to lower the basketball backboards so that we can shoot some hoops. The Unitarian congregation in which I grew up looked like a public school building.

To find many of the D.C. area congregations you have to rely on good directions, because most of the buildings were intended to melt into the subdivisions in which they were located. Our newest buildings in the South almost crouch down behind trees and bushes on remote sections of woodland. This message to newcomers is, "If you are smart enough to find us, maybe we'll let you come in to worship with us."

The UU church in Charlotte, North Carolina is built down into the swale of a woodlot. By contrast, the largest evangelical church in the Charlotte area is perched so high on a bluff that it can be seen for twenty miles, particularly when the sun reflects off of it which it does when commuter traffic is heaviest at morning and evening.

The old New England message was clear. They placed their houses of worship prominently in the community with their steeples raised high against the winter winds, and they said, "We stand for something." The message of many contemporary liberal church buildings is, "Don't mind us. We're just here. We're just a quiet, intimate little place trying to be one with everything else that is going on. We'll try not to bother anyone."

It is the purpose of a religious institution to bother the community at least a little. Our steeples should stand for something that weighs on the community's conscience even as it weighs on our own. Many years ago Stephen J. Carter, in his book The Culture of Disbelief argued that the best contribution religion makes to a democratic society is that it holds some beliefs it will not compromise no matter how many people say that its beliefs are hopelessly old fashioned or wrong. How undemocratic that seems? How unsophisticated? How necessary no matter how much we hate to admit it. No matter how much we disagree with it sometimes.

Somewhere along the road to maturity, most of us have learned that we have to go along in order to get along. Problems occur, however when we haven't really thought through the part where getting along might have to give way to our standing firm as an ethical and moral priority. Protecting a democracy requires people who know where they will stand firm. Even if that standing firm is a major pain and inconvenience for the rest of us, perhaps we ought to value it – as we value that steeple – because it is a right we ourselves may want to exercise some day.

One of a dictator's first acts is to try to compromise each religious community. That way the dictator's most dedicated opponents will be check mated. This is not done by force of arms as that would create martyrs. Instead the dictator will move friends into positions of denominational power, so that those who are dictator friendly will gravitate toward religious leadership. This worked very well in Romania and in Russia, where the debilitating effect of compromised leadership has been felt for years after the dictator is gone.

In Hitler's Germany, compromising the church turned out to be fairly easy. The religious liberals, who should have been expected to oppose Hitler, instead fell right into line at least in the early years when opposition was still possible. They just didn't want to attract attention to themselves or make a fuss. Believing that there were no really ultimate values worth defending and attracted to Hitler's program to improve the Aryan race the liberals found it easy to support such a progressive regime, which after all was also the safest thing they could have done.

Only the crusty conservatives, who believed that the sovereignty of something higher anchored the freedom of men and women, only these recognized who Hitler was and what the issues were and what accommodations they could not make without violating all they held sacred. All other religions simply followed their noses until they were so intoxicated with the heady perfumes of National Socialism they were too incapacitated and subordinated to do anything else but go along.

We are not attracted to the stiff-necked qualities in religion. People who speak strongly out of their religious faith are sometimes viewed as blocking the consensus, and yet when Martin Luther King Jr. thundered from hundreds of Southern pulpits about the dignity of all men and women, he wasn't just spouting social theory. He believed that God desired nothing less than equality, which is why he was blocking the consensus that the country had already seen enough change.

It is interesting that the Hebrew prophets have very little bad to say about people who have no religion, though surely there were as many non-religious folk then as now. But they got apoplectic about compromised religion and those

who praised what was convenient when it was convenient and accommodated everything else.

So when those stiff necked New Englanders raised their steeples above the trees and shops and homes of their village they were not intending to create an image of pastoral quaintness. They were intending quite the opposite. They were saying they would not be completely conformed to the world. Believing this, they even held their town meeting in the sanctuary underneath the steeple, in the presence of what they believed was a higher power than human politics.

The current steeple of this church is not probably as tall as the steeple of the Universalist Church in Provincetown, which acts as a beacon for sailors entering the harbor, nor as tall as the majestic steeple of our church in Gloucester, which performs a similar function. It does create an atmosphere in the area that surrounds it, and it was intended to.

I would like to think it stands for something in our own faith that will not be compromised, something so important to us that we want others to see it as we do.. What would that be? Every year you have the chance to decide. Do you, as a congregation, want only to dwell safely within these gothic walls, or do you want to build on your experience here to make a better world outside?

Beneath this steeple, men and women of many faiths have worshipped what is ultimate in life without divisiveness. Beneath it, children have learned that whatever is sacred within each person transcends national, ethnic, gender or creedal symbolisms and distinctions. Beneath it the difficult issues of the day have been debated in an atmosphere of respect for all sides.

Beneath it, food has been prepared for the hungry, and clothing has been gathered, petitions have been circulated, issues have been aired and money was raised for important causes both here and abroad.

Here our children learn what it means to be the member of a community where individuals have rights but also great responsibilities. Beneath this congregation's steeple all have a chance to learn and relearn the discipline of community building and rebuilding here and in the world..

Our New England heritage of steeples has given us a formidable responsibility. It is to be there and to recognize when the secular world's efficiency in transacting its own business rolls over the spirits of human beings. It is to stand for something in a world where everything else is a matter of convenience; in a world too rushed to care. It is to be a beacon against callousness and indifference. It is to be a light against cynicism. It is to remind us that there are larger principles by which we need to live. What great principles will you live by as the congregation of Channing Memorial Church of

Newport. That is the question before as you enter into the ministerial search process.