

## ENDOWED WITH LIGHT

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

This morning we consider the miracle of light. As the darkness of winter settles upon us...as the winds of war continue to blow, as the unrealistic longings for Christmas's past begin to haunt our sleep...as we struggle with illness and death and losses of all kinds...we come seeking the light of our liberal faith.

But what does that mean exactly? What is the light of our faith? How do we carry on the flame lit by our Unitarian Universalist forebears?

And what are the purposes of this religious community we call the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville? As we consider the AIDS/HIV Epidemic, hunger, greed and government corruption, poverty, war and immorality at all levels...what do we do?

Let me distill the many questions on my heart...to a single one. Is worship possible? Is Unitarian Universalist worship possible? With all that we know of the evil in the world, with all that we experience of disappointment and chaos and fear- is worship possible?

Consider the fear in your heart this morning. What is it that makes you afraid? What is it that keeps you awake at night, or makes you want to stay in bed in the morning? What troubles your soul?

Any religion worth its salt, should address these fundamental spiritual questions. Any religion that offers good news, must do so in the light of the truth of the human condition.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism is such a religion...ours is a religion that is worthy of our devotion, ours is a religion that speaks to the truths of our day and circumstance.

Is Unitarian Universalist worship possible? If we, as a religious movement question the existence of God, question the truth of Biblical miracles, question the authority of the clergy, question the wisdom of church leadership, question the need to attend church, question the very existence of our own soul...is worship possible?

I'll come back to this question....

Controversy is the bedrock of our liberal tradition. Asking the difficult questions is our only catechism.

It was ever thus. For all of our almost 500 year history...controversy and questioning is our faith's foundation.

And onto this rocky foundation, we have, for centuries now, been lighting fires...lighting flames, lighting chalices, lighting candles, lighting our way. For centuries now, we UU's have been endowed with light.

Let me share a bit our history...a bit of the endowment of our faith...a bit of the light that has never gone out....

In mid-nineteenth century Massachusetts, there was a group of Unitarian clergy and scholars, most of whom had studied at Harvard college and Harvard divinity school...many of whom served pulpits in and around Boston; they were the radicals of their day...they were constantly embroiled in controversy for they openly challenged the prevailing religious orthodoxy.

They formed a club called the Transcendentalist Club. They published a magazine and a steady stream of pamphlets and tracts. There were many well-known names among them...Emerson, Thoreau, Beecher, Fuller, Alcott...and Theodore Parker.

This is the name I want you to remember- Theodore Parker. His is a glorious story of faith and devotion and righteousness.

His words of wisdom and his acts of courage are part of our endowment, part of our heritage.

In May 1850, well before the Civil War, Theodore Parker, A Unitarian minister, spoke at an anti-slavery convention in Boston...speaking of democracy and freedom...these were his words:

“A democracy, is a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people.” Abraham Lincoln later used Parker’s words.

While predicting the success of the abolitionist movement Parker said: “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. later used Parker’s words.

Theodore Parker was born in Lexington, MA, August 24, 1810, the 11<sup>th</sup> child of a poor family. He died May 10<sup>th</sup> 1860, in Florence, Italy, where he had gone for treatment for tuberculosis. You can recognize his grave in Florence by the chalice sculpted atop the headstone. When Frederick Douglass first visited Florence, he came straight from the train station to visit Parkers’ grave.

In his brief 50 years, Parker made a significant impact on our faith. In 1830 he passed the exam for entrance to Harvard college, but had no funds to enroll...he was allowed to audit and received an honorary degree.

He then attended Harvard divinity school graduating in 1836. He served as pastor of the West Roxbury congregation.

In 1841 he joined the controversy within Unitarianism stirred by Emerson’s Divinity School Address given in 1838. The debate centered on the definition of Christianity

...the question posed was: does true Christianity rely on belief in Biblical miracles and orthodox church doctrine? In other words, does faith rest on experiences of the first century Christian community as put down in the Bible or does faith grow, as Emerson put it, from listening for the voice of God in one's own soul.

This intuitive kind of faith, was at the core of the Transcendentalist movement, and was intended to make one's faith relevant to one's own life and circumstance.

In 1841 Theodore Parker also gave a controversial sermon, titled, "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity". He argued that Christianity must rest not on the situational miracles attributed to Jesus, but on the permanent moral truths of Jesus' teachings. He argued against orthodoxy and for the listening to ones' own conscience. He followed the philosophy of John Locke, "Truth depends on evidence of our own senses."

His questions and his claims were so radical that he was forced to resign his pulpit and most of his colleagues shunned him professionally and personally. They nearly voted him out of Unitarian Fellowship.

His supporters founded a separate church...The 28<sup>th</sup> Congregational Society of Boston, founded in 1846...it grew to over 7000 members.

Among his congregants were: Louisa May Alcott, William Lloyd Garrison, Julia Ward Howe, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Over the next decade, Parker exhausted himself leading this huge congregation, preaching, writing and being active in movements for prison reform, temperance, women's education, and for the abolition of slavery. He personally helped fugitive slaves escape, (some of them sat in the pews of his church)...and he served on the secret committee that aided abolitionist, John Brown.

We, here today, are endowed with the light of Theodore Parker. His living was the answer to his question-what does it mean to be a Unitarian Christian...and our living is the answer to our questions...how do I live my liberal faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

This is a foundational principle of Unitarian Universalism, that it matters less what we believe than how we live. Deeds, not creeds!

Given the diversity of belief that we represent here today and every Sunday; is worship possible? Do we believe in miracles?

Do we see evidence of miracles? (Let me answer a question with a question) Does the sun come up every morning?

Do we listen for the voice of God in our own soul? (Let me answer with a question) Do we enter moments of silence with an open heart?

Do we try to live in ways that bring light into the world? Do we stand for justice and for peace in our world?

My answer to all the big and little questions of the morning...is YES! Do we see evidence of miracles? YES.

Do we listen for the voice of God in our own soul? YES

Do we try to live in ways that bring light into the world? YES

Is worship possible?

The dictionary says that worship is a feeling of adoring reverence or regard. When we enter this sanctuary....do we feel adoring reverence ....again, I answer, YES.

I call our hour on Sunday morning ....Celebration of Life! It is a time of reverence...a time of love, a time challenging us to bring light into a world in pain.

We could call it worship...We could call it a carrying of the light of our faith. We could say that we who gather together in liberal religious community are blessed by the light of our faith. Remembering Theodore Parker, we could say that we are endowed with light. Go forth and shine!

SO MAY IT BE/ AMEN

