

The Transient and the Permanent

Delivered at the [Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Harford County](#)

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Abstract

Unitarian Minister Theodore Parker delivered a ground-breaking sermon at an ordination, entitled “A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity.” A day to look at wisdom shared by one of our forebears.

They have piled their own rubbish against the temple of Truth... People didn't know what to do with the Rev. Theodore Parker, though thousands came to hear him preach. Born in Lexington, Massachusetts, Parker could read 20 languages by the age of 25. He was amongst the Transcendentalists, a new crop of Unitarian theologians who emphasized inner truth as a path to sacred knowledge and the lessons of nature as guidance to understanding the principles of creation. God could be known in many ways, according to Transcendentalists, and is immanent—present and available—in our daily lives.

Parker pushed the edges, even amongst Transcendentalists, by challenging the established authority of the Bible and of Jesus himself. He was also a fierce abolitionist, reported to have a revolver by his side while writing sermons ever ready to protect freed slaves. He was also a public advocate, one of the first male ministers, for the women's suffrage movement, and the first to invoke God as both Father and Mother. Parker died of tuberculosis at age 50.

The sermon that I will be referring to this morning is one of Parker's most famous writings. After delivering this treatise for the ordination

of Charles Shackford, fellow Unitarians, as well as most in mainstream Christianity, distanced themselves from him.

When he became pastor of Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society of Boston, he had to preach his own installation service for no colleagues wanted to be associated with his radical views. Thousands came to hear him preach, both because of his oratory and the message which brought the truth of being into the lives of his listeners.¹

This truth that Parker spoke of, is a truth that transcends fads and manipulation. It is a truth that flows eternally, which can be tapped if we open ourselves to it. He believed this is what Jesus was teaching. Referring to Jesus, who preached as he travelled without writing it down or insisting on ritual. Parker wrote:

He only bids his friends give freely the truth they had freely received... he knew that what is of God cannot fail... he sowed his seed in the heart and left it there, to be watered and warmed by the dew and the sun which heaven sends.²

In reading this I thought immediately of my ex-

¹Biographical information culled from www.uuworld.org/articles/parker-radical-theologian.

²Ibid. p. 137.

periences in interfaith work. I learned much about the presence of truth that could not be singly defined in my coalition work with Rev. Jill McCrory, a Baptist minister. In 2011, she and I co-founded a statewide advocacy organization in our efforts for marriage equality—nearly five years ago. A wide range of clergy and religious leaders gathered in Annapolis for prayer breakfasts and press conferences, for lobby days and testimonies in front of the legislature. We had a truth within, that of equality, an equality that we knew to be farther and wider than we could even imagine, not knowing all the ways creation manifests itself. But we knew, each in our own way, each from our own faith journey, that LGBTQ neighbors, loved ones and friends, should be afforded the same rights, the same respect, the same regard as any other citizen. Some of us had a far more perilous faith journey than others. Unitarian Universalists had been saying this since the 1980's; other denominations are still navigating the issue.

When we would get together to speak our understanding of the truth of equality of being, we spoke in prayer language, in praise of God, in referencing science, in embracing Creation, in heralding democracy, and even in quoting the Bible. We surely did not have the same image of God in mind, or the same passage to quote, or the same experience of liberative truth, but we rallied together in our approximate language and limited lives to claim a truth beyond our making.

I tell you, tears would roll down my face as I felt the connection, beneath the words, beyond the circumstance of the seed of truth sowed in the hearts of advocates, watered and warmed by a sense of love, that kingdom of heaven within.

Theodore Parker argued that theology... or what he called the dry leaves of theology—(great imagery!) have little to do with the substance of the ministry of Jesus or what he would call the word of God. Theologians and religious authorities can get caught up in our own experience of truth or need for power over truth, that we can

lose sight of the fact that ultimate truth is larger than any one of us.

Parker sets up a comparison in this famous counter cultural sermon. He calls the transient element of Christianity the thought, folly, uncertain wisdom, and theological notions. He names the permanent the eternal truth of God or the great law of nature.³ This is something that he believed could be expressed through other religions and other prophets. In this way, Christians need not insist on one way of being and expressing the eternal truth, but use the religious traditions and the musings and teachings in the Bible as a way toward liberative understanding, toward a truth that sets one free. I wonder what Parker might say of the myriad of truths that are argued these days, as we can each create a bubble of reality by choosing the sources and channels of communication we find most appealing. We see so clearly these days the many gridlocks of truth telling: creationism and evolution, gun control and 2nd amendment revisionists, climate change and defiance of science, immigration supporters and isolationists, gender non-conformity and preservation of the sexes... we whirl around in seeking ground that will make sense of the world, that will put our lives on the right trajectory, on a path toward health or safety or longevity.

Well, we haven't changed much in our need to hold onto our truths. "Now it has sometimes happened," Parker wrote in 1841, "that a man took his philosophy of Nature at second hand, and then attempted to make his observations conform to his theory... Thus some philosophers refused to look at the Moon through Galileo's telescope, for, according to their theory of vision, such an instrument would not aid the sight."⁴

When I decided to go to Seminary, I was shy to tell people because it was a big change—a huge shift, and my circle of friends did not go to church. So I spoke to a friend from the Soup Kitchen, the place that inspired me to seek church services and see what the sense of love I

³Ibid. p. 140.

⁴Ibid. p. 143.

felt in serving others was all about. Much to my surprise, the friend who I thought would be most encouraging did his level best to discourage me because Seminary would ruin me, discerning my faith would lead me astray. My friends who were not church goers were a bit baffled at first, but trusted the truth that was emerging and trusted my tentative venture onto a new path. In short, they trusted me and my inner truth. It became clear that my religious friend had limited views of what should and could be believed. Anything that might challenge that belief was suspect.

The transient fleeting truth in this interchange came from the one who claimed permanent knowledge. And the permanent, the love and trust in mystery and life, came from those who did not presume one way of being.

An important reminder, says Parker, is that often authority is taken for truth and not truth for authority. We let someone tell us what is true rather than find the truth in our experience or intuition.

One of the more controversial parts of his sermon, that caused many to distance themselves from him, was Parker's critique of Christianity resting on the personal authority of Jesus. "It seems difficult to conceive any reason," he wrote, "why moral and religious truths should rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer, any more than the truths of science on that of him who makes them known first or most clearly..." the authority of Jesus, he goes on to say, "as of all teachers, one would naturally think must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority."⁵ Parker described Jesus as the organ through which the Infinite spoke,⁶ a model of human excellence to which we all could aspire.

He referenced the history of debate as to the substance of Jesus, pointing out that the truth should not depend on our perspective of the one who spoke it. This is in line with the historical lament of Unitarians and Universalists that

after the Nicene creed, Christianity shifted from a religion **of** Jesus to a religion **about** Jesus. Once worshipping Jesus became the focus, the inner authority of truth each of us is born with became secondary to applying loyalty to truth determined by an outside source. That outside source, of course, was then a powerful vehicle for manipulation and control.

The other challenge that made Parker unpopular in this sermon was that the words in the Bible are not infallible, that they are approximations and attempts at truth from a variety of people over centuries of time.

There are qualities of truth that we can measure for ourselves. The seven principles in UUism have some tools for discernment. Is their inherent dignity in the belief? Does it honor individual responsibility toward truth? Would it function as part of the interdependent web of existence in which we are a part? And does it have a sense about it that goes beyond our control—a wholeness that guides us toward health?

For Parker, a test of truth was the Christian demand: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind—thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." This guidance, Parker says "does not demand all men to think alike, but to think uprightly, and get as near as possible at truth; not all men to live alike," he said, "but to live holy, and get as near as possible to a life perfectly divine... for Christianity," he offers, "is not a system of doctrines, but rather a method of attaining oneness with God."⁷

And however we orient our lives, this journey toward oneness calls for humility, engagement with others, an eye toward justice and mutuality and an understanding that within each of us is the treasure of wisdom we seek, watered and warmed by the dew and the sun and our experiences of one another, which heaven sends.

So may it be. Amen. ■

⁵Ibid. p. 151.

⁶Ibid. p. 152.

⁷Ibid. p. 160-161.

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