

“A Reasonable Faith”

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Let me start with a question:

How many of you have ever heard someone say,
“In this church you can believe anything you want”?

Well, that is true in a way.

It is certainly true that if you want to join this church,
no one will ever require you to affirm any particular statement of belief.

Unitarian Universalist congregations
don't have any kind of creedal test for membership.

We simply ask you to decide if you feel you belong here.

This is fairly unusual for a church
(though it's not completely unique)¹,

and it's really important to us.

We are very strongly committed to preserving our freedom of belief.

And that in itself, that commitment to religious freedom,
is a strong belief.

It's a belief that comes from somewhere—

specifically, from our Unitarian ancestors
going back at least 200 years in this country alone—
and it has powerfully shaped who we are today.

Here at church, we're about to begin an adult religious education class
called “Classics of Unitarian Universalist Theology.”

I've chosen nine texts—mostly sermons or book extracts—
that spell out the key ideas that Unitarians and Universalists
have affirmed in the past, and how they've changed over time,
and how these ideas from the past are still guiding us today.

All of you are invited to sign up and join the class
and really get into this stuff.

¹ For example, the Quaker tradition is also non-creedal.

Meanwhile, about twice a month over the next few months,
I'll be preaching on each of these texts,
to share with you why I think they're so exciting
and important for understanding ourselves.
They remind us that this church,
and the Unitarian Universalist movement as a whole,
is not a place where anything goes.
This is a church with a history
and a strong tradition of theology which is exciting and compelling,
which guides us as we live our lives as religious people.

So what do I mean by theology?
This is a word that comes from the Greek.
It literally means "talking about the Gods."
And today, when religious liberals say "theology,"
we mean all the ways we as human beings
try to answer the really big questions:

How did we come to be here?
What are we supposed to be doing with our lives?
What should our society be like?
Why do we have to die, and what happens when we do?
What does it all mean?

This is theology.
Unitarian Universalists today have inherited a whole lot of answers
to those big questions.
We have a history and a theological tradition that we rely on,
as an institution and in our personal lives,
so much so that often we don't even notice it.
We take it for granted because it's all around us,
like the air we breathe.

But it's there for us.
From the early Universalists who believed in universal salvation,

we have inherited a conviction that we're all in this together,
that all people, all humankind, share a common destiny.
From the Transcendentalists who shook up their fellow Unitarians
in the middle of the 19th century—
we're talking Emerson and Thoreau,
and lots of others we still read
in English classes and philosophy classes—
from them we inherit a curiosity about all the religions of the world,
and a deep spiritual connection to the natural world.

Then we'll be looking at a whole series of waves
that hit us in the 20th century—
the Social Gospel movement of the early 20th century,
which taught us that living a faithful life
meant first and foremost working for social justice;
the Humanist revolution
that showed us we could be profoundly religious
without believing in the God of the Bible;
and the process theology movement that introduced us to a God
who suffers along with us,
a God who might be able to speak to a generation
that had lived through the Holocaust.

I'll be telling you a lot more about all this in the next few months.
We begin today at the beginning of our story in America,
with a man who did more than anyone else in his generation
to give birth to a new religion based on freedom of belief
and respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person.
His name was William Ellery Channing,
and the religion he helped call into being was Unitarianism.

Channing started his career as a minister
at a time when churches all over New England
were racked with very serious disagreements over matters of belief.
Around the year 1805, in almost every church,

splinter groups were starting to form.
There were conservatives who stuck with the older Calvinist theology.
They believed human beings were hopelessly sinful.
They believed in a violent God who chose a few people to save
and condemned the rest to eternal punishment.
And there were religious liberals
who rebelled against the traditional mindset.
They believed human beings were actually pretty decent
and could work for their own salvation.
They believed God loved everybody and wanted people to succeed.
And they questioned the doctrine of the Trinity;
they still saw Jesus as their savior
but didn't believe he was on the same level with God.

So you had these two very different groups
trying to stay together in the same churches.
A lot of them managed to stay very friendly with each other,
but one guy, a traditional Calvinist minister named Jedidiah Morse,
did not like this situation at all.
He believed very strongly in the older, conservative theology,
and he believed his calling was to purify the churches
by completely getting rid of the new liberal ideas.
So he picked a fight.
He started issuing really nasty pamphlets,
accusing the liberals of heresy
and suggesting they shouldn't be considered real Christians at all.
He called them a shocking word meant to be an insult: *Unitarians!*
And in his mind he was right.
He truly believed that eternal salvation depended on accepting
the traditional doctrines of the church.

For years the liberals tried to take the high road and stay out of it.
They didn't want the churches to split.
But gradually both sides realized that they'd just grown too far apart.
The liberals were committed to the principle of freedom of belief.

They truly believed everyone had the sacred right to follow their conscience in matters of religion. So you had the liberals defending freedom of belief, and the conservatives defending the necessity of strict adherence to doctrine, and the gap just got too wide to bridge.

In 1815, a few conservatives, led by Jedidiah Morse, stepped up their attacks.

One of Morse's parishioners published an article calling on conservatives to stop worshipping and taking communion with their liberal neighbors.

Now the liberals felt so backed into a corner, they felt they *had* to defend themselves.

William Ellery Channing, one of the best-known ministers in Boston, became their spokesman.

He wrote pamphlets and preached sermons defending the liberal approach to religion.

And on May 5, 1819, at the ordination of his colleague Jared Sparks in Baltimore, Maryland,

he preached a sermon called "Unitarian Christianity" that did two things:

It declared, first of all, that Unitarianism *existed*.

The liberals hadn't wanted to create separate churches.

But now that conservatives were forcing it on them, they would accept it.

They would take that insulting label, "Unitarian," and claim it as their own—

a new denomination, a distinctive way of being Christian that was worthy of respect and honor.

Second, Channing's sermon spelled out clearly and elegantly what these Unitarian Christians believed—

what was unique about their way of understanding God.

This was our manifesto, our founding document,
our religious Declaration of Independence
spelling out who we were and what we were for.
And people listened.

Channing's sermon was published almost immediately
and went through four editions in a matter of months.
It went on to become almost the most widely read pamphlet
in American history,

second only to Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*.²

Can you imagine—a sermon by a Unitarian minister,
the most famous publication of the decade, if not the century,
sold out in every bookstore,

talked about by everyone who cared about books?

This is our history; this belongs to us!

So what did Channing have to say that captivated so many people?

In response to a conservative religious culture
that was very suspicious of human reason,
a culture that said it was blasphemy to study the Bible
from any kind of critical or historical or scholarly perspective,
Channing said simply,

...the Bible is a book written for men,
in the language of men,
and...its meaning is to be sought in the same manner
as that of other books.³

He said, we need to use our powers of reason
to understand *any* book, and the Bible is no exception.
He also said, not every teaching in the Bible is relevant for today.
Some parts of the Bible, he said,

² Conrad Wright, Introduction to *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing-Emerson-Parker* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 13.

³ William Ellery Channing, *Unitarian Christianity*, in Conrad Wright, ed., *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing-Emerson-Parker* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 49.

...refer...to states of society, to modes of thinking,
to controversies in the church,
to feelings and usages which have passed away,
and without the knowledge of which
we are constantly in danger of extending to all times, and places,
what was of temporary and local application.⁴

Does this sound familiar?

Channing is saying, some of the rules and teachings in the Bible
were meant for their time and place,
and we don't need to be bound to them today.

In Channing's day this wasn't just academic.

The debates about slavery and abolition were heating up,
and the pro-slavery side was quoting Biblical passages right and left
to support their views.⁵

Today the issues have changed,
but are we not having the very same arguments today,
when we talk about the rights of women,
or the meaning of marriage?

Channing told us
religion isn't about mindlessly following every word in the Bible;
it's about using our brain and our heart to discern the *spirit* of the text.
And we are still listening.

In Channing's case, using his reason also led him
to some theological conclusions that were pretty far out for his day.
Now, Channing believed in the sacred authority of the Bible.
He said,

Whatever doctrines seem to us
to be clearly taught in the Scriptures,
we receive without reserve or exception.

⁴ Channing, *Unitarian Christianity*, p. 51.

⁵ Thanks to my colleague the Rev. Tom Schade for this reminder.

But, in the spirit of the Protestant tradition,
he reserved the right to go back to the Bible
and challenge any church teachings that weren't Biblically based.
He claimed the freedom of belief which is still so precious to us today.

The two doctrinal biggies, for Channing and the other liberals,
were the traditional doctrine of the Trinity
and the Calvinist vision of what God was like.

First of all, the Trinity just made no sense to Channing.
For all his brilliance, he was a practical kind of guy.
He didn't have a lot of patience with mystical spiritual ideas
that couldn't be explained in very plain language
that ordinary people could understand.

And he just didn't get the idea
of a three-personed God who was somehow one person,
or a Jesus who was both human and divine.

More importantly to him,
he couldn't find any of this in the Bible either.

He had enough courage to say,
I can't find the Trinity in the Bible,
I don't get it either way,
and I don't believe in it.

Instead, he affirmed God was one,
and Jesus was a human being—
in his mind, the greatest man who had ever lived,
but still a man.

He wasn't the first to say it—
this view of Jesus stretches all the way back to the earliest Christians—
but it hadn't been popular for a very long time,
and Channing made it respectable again.

That was and is a gift to us.

And Channing challenged the Calvinist idea that God was angry at us,

that almost everybody would be damned forever for our sin.
He said, no, God is like a loving parent. He said,

We look upon this world as a place of education,
in which [God] is training men...for union with himself,
and for a sublime and ever-growing virtue in heaven.⁶

He said, God loved us and wanted us to do well,
and gave us Jesus as a teacher, to show us how to live.
These days that sounds pretty mainstream, almost bland.
But in his time, it was electrifying.
For people who had been raised
to walk in terrible fear of hellfire and damnation,
the simple promise that they were loved and valued by their creator
was like that proverbial gentle rain from Heaven.
It mattered.
And Channing's vision spread so widely that today it's old hat.
But it was a lifesaver then.

Channing showed people a new way of being Christian.
In the old way, you had to have a dramatic conversion experience
to be sure you were saved.
The revival movements that swept through the country every few years
encouraged people to get wildly emotional,
to feel the depths of their depravity,
to weep and shake and fall down and cry out,
to invite God to come in and transform you in a life-changing instant.
For some people, that happened,
and it was incredibly meaningful to them.

But Channing said, this isn't the only way.
He said real piety needs to be built up over time.
He said, the real sign of a religious person
isn't all that flashy exterior stuff,

⁶ Channing, *Unitarian Christianity*, p. 72.

but rather their heart and their conscience
and their efforts day in, day out,
how they live their life *every* day,
trying to help their neighbors,
trying to be just and fair,
trying to do the right thing even when it's not easy.
Maybe that's not as exciting, but it's *real*.
Channing's way of being religious is like Aesop's famous tortoise.
The hare may be flashy, dashing all around,
but the plain old tortoise keeps on going and gets there in the end.

Channing says,

We rather suspect loud profession,
for we have observed, that deep feeling is generally noiseless,
and least seeks display.⁷

And this makes me smile
because it is still so much a part of Unitarian Universalist culture.
We tend to be a little suspicious of public displays of emotion
in our religious life.
We tend to apologize if we get a little teary in church one day.
Laughing is fine,
but clapping is a bit dubious unless it's a *very* special occasion,
and God help us if we were to get up and dance in the sanctuary!
This is our history too.
It's not just random; we've been this way for a very long time.
And of all the gifts we've received from those early Unitarians,
this is the one that I think has started to pinch the most.
I see our movement as ready for a little more soul on the outside,
a little stretching, a little flash and dash, a little wildness even....
Luckily we've got models for that too.
That part's to be continued, when we get to Emerson!

⁷ Channing, *Unitarian Christianity*, p. 82.

For today, I say, thanks be to Channing
and all those whose consciences compelled them
to bring a new religion into being—
who gave us their faith in the human mind, in human goodness,
and in the goodness of this world.
May we sing out praises for their journey, pilgrims in their time,
and face our own future with conviction and delight.

Amen and blessed be.