

Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism

William Ellery Channing
Ralph Waldo Emerson
Theodore Parker

A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga
November 14, 2010

Good morning and welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere and I am the minister of this church. Let's begin with a hymn that I first learned in my home church, the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Syracuse New York. Number 40, "The Morning Hangs a Signal." Number 40.

HYMN 40, "The Morning Hangs a Signal"

GREETINGS

GEORGE. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. And thank you so much for helping to create a reverent atmosphere during *Connections*.

If you have a particular **joy or sorrow** or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

The coffeehouse comes back on November 19th at 7 pm. Poetry recitations, music, juggling, line dancing, martial arts, whatever you

got, bring it on. See Catherine Long for more information. You are invited to celebrate **Thanksgiving at the church**, on Thanksgiving Day of course, at 3 pm. Kate & Jeff prepare the turkey, stuffing and gravy, you bring a side dish or a dessert. Please put your name on the sign-up roster on the kitchen door.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin. The best way to find out what's happening around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

For music, Steve prepared selections by the American composer George Whitfield Chadwick, and he begins with one called "Making Kitty Dance."

PRELUDE: "Making Kitty Dance"

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

To light our chalice this morning, we have a responsive reading from Vincent B. Silliman, a Unitarian minister, poet, hymn composer and worship arts specialist, who served congregations in Iowa, New York and Maine. He died in 1979, after 62 years in the ministry. Your words are in italics.

Let religion be to us life and joy.

Let it be a voice of renewing challenge to the best we have and may be; let it be a call to generous action.

Let religion be to us a dissatisfaction with things that are, which bids us serve more eagerly the true and right.

Let it be the sorrow that opens for us the way of sympathy, understanding, and service to suffering humanity.

Let religion be to us the wonder and lure of that which is only partly known and understood:

An eye that glories in Nature's majesty, and a heart that rejoices in deeds of kindness and of courage.

Let religion be to us security and serenity because of its truth and beauty and because of the enduring worth and power of the loyalties which it engenders;

Let it be to us hope and purpose, and a discovering of opportunities to express our best through daily tasks.

Religion, uniting us with all that is admirable in human beings everywhere;

Holding before our eyes a prospect of the better life for humankind, which each may help to make actual.

STORY: Being Squirrelly

Anyone know what this is? A birdfeeder, right. I have a couple birdfeeders in my back yard. I love feeding the birds. I enjoy watching the birds scurry for food, especially on a cold, winter day.

But birds aren't the only critters who come round to my birdfeeders. There are the squirrels. The squirrels love my birdfeeders even more than I do. Why do squirrels love birdfeeders? That's right—because of the birdseed that they find there. Anyone who feeds birds knows that it is almost impossible to keep food in a birdfeeder only for the birds. The squirrels tend to eat it all.

So I bought this birdfeeder. It has a perch, right here that only a bird can sit on. Birds are very light, so they can fly. Squirrels are too heavy, and when they press down on the bar, it closes the holes where the bird seed is.

But squirrels have to eat, too, so I bought a squirrel feeder like this and I filled it with peanuts. The smart squirrels learned how to open the lid and take out a peanut in about three days; and the not-so-smart ones tried to chew a hole through the sides. It was made out of wood. I say was because the squirrels destroyed it. Chewed up the sides and tore the roof right off. So I bought another one like this. It's made of metal and the squirrels have not been able to tear it apart.

Many people who study animals think that squirrels are one of the ten smartest animals in the world. That makes them pretty smart, considering how many animals there are in the world. It doesn't matter where you hang a birdfeeder or how you hang it, sooner or later the squirrels will probably figure out a way to get to it. Squirrels are agile and dextrous and when they want some bird seed, they don't give up until they get some.

You see, even though they are small, squirrels use their little squirrel brains to figure out a way to solve the problems that get in their way. OK, it's big word time again. Squirrels have tenacity. Do you know what tenacity means? To be tenacious or to have tenacity means that you don't give up. It's not being stubborn because that implies you can't see anything else but your own way. Being tenacious means not giving up.

So, are you squirrelly? You ever hear someone being called a little bit "squirrelly." What that means is the person is seen to be a little odd or nutty. But being "squirrelly" can be a good thing—if, like the squirrels, we put to good use the brains to solve the problems that often get in our way, and if, like the squirrels, we are tenacious in problem solving and don't give up.

Thanks for listening to my story. You are free to go to your classes now. And be squirrelly, like this guy; be tenacious.

CHILDREN'S RECESSIONAL

OFFERTORY: "Now I Lay Me"

This is the part of the service called the offertory, wherein I usually lighten the mood with some humor in the hopes that it will lift your spirits enough that you will not feel bad in making a generous contribution to the church. It doesn't always work, but I keep trying. Before I do that, I want to ask you a question.

Do you know about the goods and services auction that is planned on December 11th? Will you attend?

This fund-raising endeavor needs you to donate goods or services that will be auctioned off for the benefit of the church. So you get to feel good two ways: You help the church and ultimately, you help the person who buys your donation. Right now, the chief auctioneer, Diane Reed, tells me that the auction catalog is mighty thin. So please pick up a form and fill it out and give it to her.

Right. Nuff sed. Back to the offertory.

Charles Steinmetz was a German-American mathematician and electrical engineer. He made ground-breaking discoveries in the understanding of electricity that enabled engineers to design better electric motors and. He died in 1923.

He was a dwarf and terribly deformed, but few people knew more about electricity than Herr Steinmetz. Henry Ford realized this and hired him to build some very large generators that would run the first auto plant in Dearborn, Michigan. Steinmetz put together vast, generators that made the Ford Motor Company run and run efficiently.

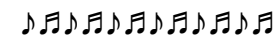
One day, without warning, the plant ground to a stop. Ford hired a

few mechanics but no one seemed to be able to find the problem. He finally pressed his friendship with Steinmetz and asked him to come and do a little repair work. Steinmetz fiddled around with this gauge, tinkered with that motor, tried this button, did a little wiring, tinkered with this switch, and threw the master switch. In a matter of a few hours everything was fixed and the motors were running again.

Within a few days, Steinmetz sent Ford a bill for \$10,000. Ford, though very wealthy, balked at paying such an exorbitant amount of money for what he thought was a little bit of work. And so he wrote a letter to his friend and he sent back the bill. "Charlie: It seems awfully steep, \$10,000, for tinkering around with a few motors." Steinmetz wrote a new bill and sent it back to Mr. Ford, "Henry: You're right. For tinkering around with motors, \$10; for knowing where to tinker, \$9,990."

Now we will tinker around with the morning offering for the support and ministry of this church. If you know where to tinker, please be generous when the plate comes your way. If you don't, just ask Daidee Springer.

If you have a pledge payment, please mark it as such. As always, the Wood-Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Bonny Sinclair will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and remember to be thankful for them.

Christina—and Jesse—please lead us in our Hymn of Thanksgiving.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the pro–democracy leader of Myanmar was freed from house arrest on Saturday. She had been detained for 15 of the past 21 years, and under house arrest for the last 7 years in the city once known as Rangoon in the country once known as Burma.

Repressive regimes around the world use the tactic of house arrest or detention to maintain their control without resorting to trial or force. This morning I am moved to pray for people who are arrested unlawfully and detained for political purposes. May their captors soon release them and allow them the freedom of movement that is a human right.

Thou, which are everywhere,
Many are your names.
May we always feel your presence,
May your wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul;
Lead us first to forgive the mistakes of others
Even as we hope our own mistakes will soon be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.
May we live purposefully and joyfully
in every moment, in every encounter,
now, and in the time to come.

During this time of silence let us hold close to our hearts those who are suffering and rejoice with those who are jubilant, but let us never

forget those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

RESPONSE

HERE

Here may no one be altogether a stranger,
no honesty of thought ignored,
no depth of feeling dismissed,
no life belittled, and no life shut out.

Here may clarity of mind and heart
be humbly treasured,
brought to bear toward word and person.

Here may fellowship be treasured most of all
and paths to sustain and renew it
be sought and found.

Here may growth of spirit be our purpose;
such understanding as shall lead us
to new ways in which to live our lives.

SERMON: 3 Prophets of Religious Liberalism

This morning I want to tell you the story of three prophets of liberal religion, William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker. I won't present much biographical information about these men, but I will set the scene for the time they came to be regarded as prophets and I will give you a sense of what they said.

What they have in common is that they rendered their prophecy in a speech, two at the ordinations of their colleagues and one in front of

the graduating class at Harvard. In each case, their words provoked controversy. In each case, their words set Unitarians on a new path. In each case, their words were influential far beyond the Unitarian religious circles in which their audiences moved. In each case, their words influence us today.

What prompts me to bring this story to you is the fact that y'all flunked the Unitarian Universalist Religious Knowledge Quiz that I sprung on you a few weeks ago. You did about as well as the general population the part of the quiz that focused on religion in America. But you bombed when I asked you about "Unitarian Christianity," which is a speech by William Ellery Channing, that he delivered in May 1819.

Let me set the scene for you: By 1819, an argument had been brewing among the ministers and divines of New England since at least 1750. Ostensibly, the argument was about the doctrine of the Trinity. The orthodox clung tenaciously to the doctrine; their opponents, calling themselves "liberal Christians," attacked it as irrational and unscriptural. The issue divided ministers and even churches, with the result that a portion of several congregations separated and began their own churches.

You should understand that we are speaking about the churches in New England that descended from the Puritans, not the Methodists or the Presbyterians or the Lutherans or the Baptists. Those denominations were not represented in any great numbers north of Pennsylvania. The vast majority of churches, and the strain from which our church descends, belonged to the Standing Order of Congregational Churches in New England, which was originally established by the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the early 17th century. Actually, they were state-supported until 1835.

So here we are in 1819, with about 40% of the churches being orthodox Trinitarian and the rest being liberal and Unitarian. There has been a pamphlet war going on for about fifty years, with one side

printing broadsides and sermons and the other side responding with outrage and more pamphlets. William Ellery Channing was the minister at the Federal Street Church in Boston, an elder statesman in the liberal camp and the most respected minister and theologian in Boston. He was invited to present a sermon at the ordination of Jared Sparks in Baltimore on May fifth. And he took the opportunity to draw a line in the sand. He codified the position of the liberals and for the first time, he picked up the name "Unitarian," and wore it proudly. In those days calling someone a "unitarian" was like calling someone jerk today. Actually it was worse than jerk.

He claimed first that it was important to use our brains when reading the bible.

CHANNING. We profess not to know a book, which demands a more frequent exercise of reason than the Bible. We indeed grant, that the use of reason in religion is accompanied with danger. But we look back on the history of the church, and wonder whether the renunciation of it be not still more dangerous. The worst errors, after all, spring up in that church, which proscribes reason, and demands from its members implicit faith.

MINISTER. There are four pillars that support human thought in religious matters: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. The liberals in Channing's day had swung more toward the pillar of reason and away from tradition when reading the Bible. Channing said that was OK, because we get our brains from God.

CHANNING. Say what we may, God has given us a rational nature, and will call us to account for it. We may let it sleep, but we do so at our peril. Revelation is addressed to us as rational beings. We may wish, in our sloth, that God had given us a system, demand of comparing, limiting, and inferring. But such a system would be at variance with the whole character of our present existence; and it is the part of wisdom to take revelation as it is given to us.

MINISTER. The liberals were also influenced by the current biblical scholarship coming from Europe, especially Germany. It had recently been determined that the first five books of the Old Testament were indeed written by different people, not by Moses, and Channing brought this new biblical scholarship into his remarks.

CHANNING. Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books. We believe that God, when he speaks, conforms to the established rules of speaking and writing. In other words, we believe that God never contradicts, in one part of scripture, what he teaches in another; and never contradicts, in revelation, what he teaches in his works and providence.

MINISTER. Channing suggested something that seems today seems common sense to us: That we must interpret scripture in the context of its creation.

CHANNING. We find that the different portions of the Bible refer to the times when they were written, to states of society, to modes of thinking, to feelings and usages which have passed away. We find, too, that some of these books are strongly marked by the character of their respective writers, that the Holy Spirit did not so guide the Apostles as to suspend the peculiarities of their minds, and that a knowledge of their feelings, and of the influences under which they were placed, is one of the preparations for understanding their writings.

With these views of the Bible, we feel it our bounden duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually, to compare, to infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit, to seek in the nature of the subject, and the aim of the writer, his true meaning; and, in general, to make use of what is known, for explaining what is difficult, and for discovering new truths.

MINISTER. Channing then went on to the doctrine of the Trinity, which the liberals could not accept on tradition alone.

CHANNING. We believe in the doctrine of God's unity, or that there is one God, and one only. The doctrine of the Trinity, were it true, must, from its difficulty and importance, have been laid down with great clearness and stated with all possible precision. But where does this statement appear? From the many passages which treat of God, we ask for one—one only—in which we are told, that he is a threefold being, or that he is three persons, or that he is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

MINISTER. If you deny the Trinity, it follows that you cannot accept that Jesus was both divine and human, and Channing blasted the idea that Jesus had a dual nature.

CHANNING. We believe in the unity of Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus is one mind, one soul, one being, as truly one as we are, and equally distinct from the one God. According to the doctrine of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, consists of two souls, two minds; the one divine, the other human; the one weak, the other almighty; the one ignorant, the other omniscient. Now we maintain, that this is to make him two beings.

MINISTER. And since Channing had already stated that God was a unity, it follows that Jesus cannot be God, and so, using his brain again, Channing infers that Jesus must be human.

CHANNING. We believe, then, that Christ is one mind, one being, and, I add, a being distinct from the one God. That Christ is not the one God, not the same being with the Father, is a necessary inference from our former point, in which we saw that the doctrine of three persons in God is a fiction.

MINISTER. Channing took about 90 minutes to deliver the 13000 words in his sermon, and because he was outdoors and because of his

squeaky voice, no one past the third row heard what he said. But his remarks were quickly printed and they were read by many people and were distributed widely, exceeded only by the distribution of *Common Sense*, by Tom Paine.

It's not hard to see how Channing's thoughts have influenced us today. It may be a little more difficult to understand how the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson influence us today. In July of 1838, Emerson was invited to address the graduating class of the Harvard Divinity School, and he took the opportunity to attack the church, its ministers and the state of religion generally. His remarks are known and "The Divinity School Address."

Emerson was the leading light of a group of Unitarians we know as "Transcendentalists." The name refers to their stated desire to transcend the physical forms of religion and directly connect with the divine. Their meetings dabbled in religion, science, culture, and most often, literature. In the groups were many influential writers and ministers who would influence the young American literature movement.

Emerson was concerned that the church and religion was getting too formalized, too much in the head and not enough in the heart. Note the poetical language in this passage and the accent on emotions.

EMERSON. A more secret, sweet, and overpowering beauty appears to man when his heart and mind open to the sentiment of virtue. He knows the sense of that grand word, though his analysis fails entirely to render account of it. When in innocency, or when by intellectual perception, he attains to say, — "I love the Right; Truth is beautiful within and without, forevermore. Virtue, I am thine: save me: use me: thee will I serve, day and night, in great, in small, that I may be not virtuous, but virtue." — then is the end of the creation answered, and God is well pleased.

MINISTER. One of Emerson's points was that people could intuit

God. There was no need of ministers, churches, or even scripture. He said we could have a direct, unmediated relationship with God. And we could intuit that relationship merely from our human nature. That was a revolutionary thought.

EMERSON. The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance. Thus; in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire. He who does a good deed, is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed, is by the action itself contracted. He who puts off impurity, thereby puts on purity. If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice. If a man dissemble, deceive, he deceives himself, and goes out of acquaintance with his own being. A man in the view of absolute goodness, adores, with total humility. Every step so downward, is a step upward. The man who renounces himself, comes to himself.

MINISTER. Emerson faulted the church for focusing on Jesus and not on his teachings. He would have liked the distinction we hear today about "the religion of Jesus" and "the religion about Jesus."

EMERSON. Historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion. As it appears to us, and as it has appeared for ages, it is not the doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual. It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus.

MINISTER. This next passage is one that nearly all Unitarian Universalist ministers know. Emerson criticized his own minister as being unfeeling, remote and wrapped up in the trappings of ministry. It was not known until years later that Emerson referred to Barzillai Frost, the minister of his church in Concord, where Emerson attended services when he was at home. Frost was, at best, a mediocre preacher, and he disappointed Emerson, who took it out on the

ministry in general.

EMERSON. I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say, “I would go to church no more.” A snow storm was falling around us. The snow storm was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow.

He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it.

The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine. This man had ploughed, and planted, and talked, and bought, and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches; his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all. Not a line did he draw out of real history. The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life—life passed through the fire of thought.

MINISTER. That is the line that haunts many ministers today, myself included. The true preacher deals out to the people his life—life passed though the fire of thought. I struggle with that each week. Emerson set the bar pretty high.

Emerson advised the graduates to rely on themselves first.

EMERSON. Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil. Friends enough you shall find who will hold up to your emulation, Wesleys and Oberlins, Saints and Prophets. Thank God for these good men, but say, “I also am a man.” Imitation cannot go above its model. The

imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity.

MINISTER. In the end, Emerson could not countenance building a new church, so he advised the new ministers to improve what they had.

EMERSON. I confess, all attempts to establish a church with new rites and forms, seem to me vain. Faith makes us, and not we it, and faith makes its own forms. Rather let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing. For, if once you are alive, you shall find they shall become plastic and new. The remedy to their deformity is, first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul.

MINISTER. The effect of the address was to challenge the assumptions concerning the supernatural origins of Christianity and the reliability of the testimony on which it rested. Emerson’s legacy can be seen in the New Age movement today, and, I believe, in the Unity Church. For us, his influence is the individualism we see in Unitarian Universalist culture. Our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every human individual is rooted in Emerson’s theology.

Theodore Parker was a firebrand. He was the minister at the church in West Roxbury, outside of Boston. He had a habit of shooting his mouth off and irritating people, even though what he said was either the truth or, if phrased more delicately and spoken more gently, agreeable to most people. He was an ardent abolitionist, and this put him on the wrong side of the fence for those who espoused a more gradual transition to freedom for slaves. It is said that he wrote his sermons with a pistol in the drawer of his desk in case he had to defend his extreme views.

His mouth and what came out of it ostracized him from most of his colleagues. Hardly anyone would exchange pulpits with him. That was increasingly the case after he preached at the ordination of

Charles Shackford in Boston in 1841. Like Emerson, he chose to criticize the church and the current practice of Christianity in a public fashion.

Where Channing said we should use our brains in religious matters, Emerson suggested a better method is to rely on intuition. Parker suggested that we don't need Christianity because the truth at the heart of it would have occurred to human beings even if Jesus had never been born. The title of his sermon is "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity."

PARKER. Looking at the Word of Jesus, at real Christianity, the pure religion he taught, nothing appears more fixed and certain. But looking at the history of what men call Christianity, nothing seems more uncertain and perishable. While true religion is always the same thing, in each century and every land, the Christianity of the Pulpit, which is the religion taught; the Christianity of the People, which is the religion that is accepted and lived out; has never been the same thing in any two centuries or lands, except only in name.

But how do we know that our Christianity shall not share the same fate? Is there that difference between the nineteenth century, and some seventeen that have gone before it, to warrant the belief that our notion of Christianity shall last forever? How do we know there is not a perishing element in what we call Christianity? Jesus tells us, *his* Word is the word of God, and so shall never pass away. But who tells us, that *our* word shall never pass away? that *our notion* of his Word shall stand forever?

MINISTER. Like Emerson, he makes a distinction between the form of religion and the message of it, or its teachings.

PARKER. Let us look at this matter a little more closely. In actual Christianity there seems to be two elements, the one transient, the other permanent. The one is the thought, the folly, the uncertain wisdom, the theological notions, the impiety of man; the other, the

eternal truth of God.

It must be confessed, though with sorrow, that transient things form a great part of what is commonly taught as Religion. 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. Religious forms may be useful and beautiful. In our present state some forms are perhaps necessary. But they are only the accident of Christianity; not its substance. They are the robe, not the angel.

MINISTER. Within the transient, Parker includes the doctrines, which anyone else might think belong to the permanent. Doctrines change every other century, he says, and yet people go to war over them.

PARKER. Anyone who traces the history of what is called Christianity, will see that nothing changes more from age to age than the doctrines taught as Christian, and insisted on as essential for personal salvation. What is falsehood in one province passes for truth in another. The heresy of one age is the orthodox belief of the next. Men are burned for professing what men are burned for denying.

These doctrines respecting the scriptures have often changed, and are but fleeting. Yet men lay much stress on them. Some cling to these notions as if they were Christianity itself. It is about these and similar points that theological battles are fought from age to age. Men sometimes use worst the choicest treasure God bestows. This is especially true of the use men make of the Bible. Some men have subordinated Reason, Conscience, and Religion to this.

MINISTER. Parker believed that Christianity comes directly from God, and Jesus was only a messenger.

PARKER. Christianity itself, that pure Religion, which exists eternal in the constitution of the soul and the mind of God, is always the same. The Word that was before Abraham, in the very beginning,

will not change, for that word is Truth. From this Jesus subtracted nothing; to this he added nothing. This truth we owe to God; the revelation thereof to Jesus.

Christianity is a simple thing; very simple. It is absolute, pure Morality; absolute, pure Religion; the love of man; the love of God acting without let or hindrance. The whole extent of Christianity is well summed up in the command, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Is there anything therein that can perish? No, the very opponents of Christianity have rarely found fault with the teachings of Jesus.

Forms and opinions change and perish; but the Word of God cannot fail.

MINISTER. The implication behind Parker’s words is that what we call Christianity is pure religion, probably intuited, as Emerson suggests, and not the church or its forms and doctrines. All that is unnecessary, according to Parker. What’s needed is an open heart, a critical mind and courage.

PARKER. Real Christianity is the growth and perfect action of the Holy Spirit God puts into the sons of men. It makes us outgrow any form, or any system of doctrines we have devised, and approach still closer to the truth. It would make the Bible our servant, not our master. It would make us revere the holy words spoken by “godly men of old,” but revere still more the word of God spoken through Conscience, Reason, and Faith, as the holiest of all.

MINISTER. Parker made clear the implication of Emerson, that Christianity was but one expression of eternal truth and that same truth was rooted in the human soul. The Christian claim to uniqueness could no longer be sustained. We can see his legacy today right up here in this sculpture with symbols of the world’s great religions.

So what do we make of these guys, these three prophets? Channing’s arguments are mainstream today. We might say that he won his battles with the orthodox.

Emerson’s reliance on the intuition, we know today, can lead one astray as easily as it can lead one to the divine. And Parker’s idea of Absolute Religion, as if dispensed from a divine faucet, is not a useful concept given what we know about human beings today.

Conrad Wright is an historian on the faculty of Harvard Divinity School. His area of expertise is the history of American liberal Christianity. He had this to say about Channing, Emerson and Parker: “Through the work of all three men, there runs the assertion that we must not be content with inherited religious forms and doctrines, or satisfied with a traditional definition of our powers and potentialities. New light may still break forth, and we are not now what we yet may be.”

Please join me now in singing Hymn 34, “Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire.”

HYMN 34, “Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire”

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

BENEDICTION

For a benediction, I ask you to join me in a passage from the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Your words are in italics.

We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken.

The whole human family is bathed with an element of love like a fine ether.

How many persons we meet in houses, whom we scarcely speak to,
whom yet we honor and who honor us!

*How many we see in the street, or sit with in church, whom though
silently, we warmly rejoice to be with!*

Read the language of these wandering eye-beams.

The heart knoweth.

POSTLUDE: "*Tabasco March*"