

Documents

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BANNED IN BOSTON!

Lake County Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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A first-person sermon portraying UU Hero Theodore Parker
By the Rev. Lloyd H. Dunham

There was a time when I was not allowed in any pulpit in Boston!

Unwelcomed!

Forbidden!

Banned in Boston!

All because they thought I was preaching and teaching heresy!

It was tough being Unitarians or Universalists in years gone by.

I wish you could appreciate the price many of us paid

for this liberal faith!

But that is getting ahead of my story.

My name is Theodore Parker.

I am a country boy,

born August 24, 1810

in Lexington, Massachusetts

to a farming family.

I was the last of eleven children born to my parents,

John and Hannah Parker.

I was the fourth generation Parker to live in Lexington.

Our family had been there for over 100 years.

I started school when I was six,

walking a mile or so down the road to the school house.

In the warm months we had a woman teacher

but in the winter,

when the big boys came back from the fields,

we had a man teacher, to keep order.

It was a cold hard walk in the middle of winter snow.

Because of the demands of the farm,

my schooling ended when I was sixteen.

As my brothers and sisters grew older and moved away to marry

and make homes of their own,

and as my father aged,

the farm work fell to me and to our hired helper.

My mother died when I was only thirteen.

I remember how she would read the Bible to me

and try to explain its meaning.

BANNED IN BOSTON!

I preferred hearing stories of my great-grandfather Nathaniel,
when he was captured by the Indians.¹

My grandfather was Captain John Parker
who commanded the Lexington Minute Men on April 19, 1775
as the British redcoats came marching down Concord Road.
It was there that the American Revolution began.
My dad never let us forget that momentous event about his dad.

My mother had wanted me to go to college to become a minister
but there was no money for books or tuition.

Farming was not profitable
so I started teaching school.

I earned a lot more teaching than I did on the farm.
During this time I attended First Parish Church in Watertown
where the pastor was the Rev. Convers Francis, a liberal.
He was an inspiration to me –

and a major help in my education.

It was there in Watertown that I met a lot of important people.
Mr. Francis was generous in loaning me books for my studies.
I borrowed books from friends, teachers and ministers.
I was anxious to learn all I could
and I was lucky in being able to master most of what I studied.

In my boarding house was a young woman by the name of Lydia Cabot
who later became my bride.

In 1830, when I was twenty,
I walked over to Cambridge

and passed my exams at Harvard College.
They allowed me to enroll as a non-resident student.
Part of the arrangement was no tuition and no degree.
Some years later I was offered a degree
if I would pay tuition for the studies I had done.
I declined.

When I was thirty they granted me an honorary Master of Arts.

In 1834 I left teaching to enter Harvard Divinity School
to prepare for the ministry.
By that time Harvard had become Unitarian.
I was fortunate to have saved money for seminary

¹ Scott, Clinton Lee; *These Live Tomorrow*, pp. 115-123. Much that follows us from this book.

BANNED IN BOSTON!

I tried to make my preaching very practical.
One of my sermons was on "The Duties of a Milkman".
I started my preaching around Boston
and on Cape Cod.
Finally I was called to the Spring Street Church in West Roxbury.
That was in April 1837.
Lydia and I were married
and shortly after that I was ordained.
I was officially launching my career
in which I became,
according to one historian,
"the most feared and best hated preacher in America".³

Because the needs of my parish were not great,
I had time at West Roxbury
to do a lot more studying and writing.
I also put my many language skills to work
in translating foreign books on theology and church history.

About four years later in 1841,
I was invited to preach at a friend's ordination
in South Boston.
I preached my convictions in a sermon that I called
"The Transient and Permanent in Christianity".
It became known as my
"South Boston Sermon".
My colleagues accused me
of rocking the very foundations of Unitarianism!
In that sermon
I questioned doctrines, creeds, miracles and revelations.
I claimed that the Bible is full of contradictions and mistakes.
I honored those teachings of Jesus
which served the needs of people in practical living.
I said I believed in the mercy of God
and therefore had to reject Calvinist theology
as cruel and unreasonable.
I thought it was all pretty basic
but my fellow clergy were greatly offended.
In that same service
the minister giving the ordination prayer,

³ Scott, p. 120

BANNED IN BOSTON!

asked God to protect the candidate
from the heresy that I had just preached!

Some claimed I was not a real Unitarian.

They were shocked, angry and afraid,
saying I had "removed Christ,
the Bible
and the Church

from Christianity!"

While only one person left as I gave that sermon,
others attacked me in magazines

and often left the room whenever I entered.

They refused to even discuss my ideas.

The orthodox clergy were even worse.

They gave up on me

and simply prayed that I would be silenced
by an act of God.

During the uproar over that sermon

I was denied privileges in the Unitarian pulpits of Boston.

Two major Unitarian publications

would no longer accept my articles.

I was banned in Boston – by Unitarians – of all people!

Many of my colleagues could accept Channing's Unitarianism

but not mine!

I joined with Ralph Waldo Emerson

in forming the Hedge's Club

for discussion.

It later was called the Transcendentalist Club.

We were the extreme liberals of the time

and were still subject to hostility

by our conservative Christian brothers.

With controversy still raging

over my South Boston sermon

I resigned from the West Roxbury church

and became minister of a church that my friends had gathered.

It was called the 28th Congregational Society of Boston.

In spite of the name,

we were Unitarian!

Newspapers and other preachers remained hostile.

We met in the Melodeon Theater

and later, because of the crowds,

had to move to the Music Hall.

BANNED IN BOSTON!

In your time
it is the home of the Boston Symphony.
We would pack in 3000 people on a Sunday,
the largest congregation in New England.
In my congregation were Louisa May Alcott,
William Lloyd Garrison,
Julia Ward Howe
and Elizabeth Cady Stanton!
The church grew to 7000!

I was a small man and not very imposing in the pulpit.
I didn't have an oratorical style when I preached
but I was able to enlist concern around important social issues:
low wages,
bad housing,
inadequate schools,
a press that was controlled by advertisers.
Speaking of low wages,
I think we were faced with the same problem as you are today:
"the moral and mental destitution of the rich
and the physical destitution of the poor".
I also worked at other social issues:
greater freedom for women,
temperance,
prison reform,
and against capital punishment.

My most passionate issue was slavery.
For me it was much more than a political issue.
These folks were being denied the freedom
that God intended for all people.
The law said we had to return slaves who had escaped.
I had such escaped slaves in my church.
I refused to obey the Fugitive Slave Law.
I even hid some of them in our home.
I was indicted
and almost sent to jail,
for my part in the "underground railroad".

I was only nine
when William Ellery Channing gave his great Baltimore sermon
back in 1819.
But this was a new day!
My friend Ralph Waldo Emerson and I were a new generation,

BANNED IN BOSTON!

We were urging the young people to take over the churches
to move them beyond the aristocratic smugness
of the older generation.
not like these old time Unitarians.

I had been preaching for twelve years
when my health became bad.
My hostile colleagues were glad about that,
praying that I would be stopped.
They called me "an infidel"!

I decided to get away for a while
to rest and recuperate in Italy
near my friends Elizabeth and Robert Browning.
But there was no improvement.
I was fifty years old
when I died in Florence, Italy on May 10, 1860,
apparently from tuberculosis.
That disease had claimed most of my family by the time I was 27.
My grave stone honored me
as I had never been honored in life
as it read,
"The Great American Preacher".

I had been strongly influenced by the German scholars
whose books I translated.
I attempted to turn Unitarians away from orthodox traditions
telling my congregations that the Bible
and religion
and the church
were of value only as they served the needs of humanity.

The Boston Unitarian leadership was opposed to me
until I died.
But the younger ministers
seemed to admire my attacks on traditional ideas
and appreciated my work for a free faith and free pulpit.
In your century the Unitarian Universalists call me a model prophetic minister,
a canonical figure.
I wish they could have seen it that way when I was living!

It is tough being a Unitarian Universalist –
and that's not new.
Our European ancestors in this pluralistic faith

BANNED IN BOSTON!

Unitarians in Poland and Transylvania had their adversaries.
were often threatened.
You aren't often threatened but it is still tough being a UU.
A lot of religious groups make it easy
by telling you what to think and what to believe.
But that denies your own search for meaning.
You have the freedom and the responsibility
to think for yourselves.
That is not easy in a church where
several faith paths are honored.

So I challenge you to work at your faith.
And stand firm when others call you wrong
for what your heart and mind says is true.
Be willing to engage others in the search for truth and justice.
Honor your experience and your reason
as they serve your spiritual needs!

President Lincoln used words of mine at Gettysburg
when he spoke of the government of the people,
by the people
and for the people.
Your modern hero Martin Luther King, Jr.
also made famous words of mine
when he said,
"I do not pretend to understand the moral universe,
the arc is a long one....
And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice."⁴
I am honored that your President recently had both quotations
made into the carpet of his office in Washington.
How surprised he would be to find
that the author of those words was **banned in Boston!**

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Resources:

Huerto, Kenn; citing Theodore Parker's sermon *The Transient & Permanent in Christianity (1841)*.

Scott, Clinton Lee; *These Live Tomorrow*, Skinner House, Boston, 1980

⁴ Wikipedia on Theodore Parker

BANNED IN BOSTON!

Wikipedia, *Theodore Parker*

Unitarian Universalist Historical Society, by Dean Grodzins, *Theodore Parker*
