

“The Changing Face of First Parish Liturgy”
A Homily by Dr. Lincoln Bloomfield
First Parish Unitarian Universalist
Cohasset, MA
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“In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the presence of God and the holy angels, we do give ourselves to God, whose name alone is Jehovah, father, son, and Holy Ghost”. Somewhat abbreviated, those are the words of the Covenant written by the Reverend Nehemiah Hobart on December 13, 1721 when the Cohasset church was organized. The Covenant was signed on to by 26 founding members. It may have been Cohasset’s first “parish”; but for sure it was not the First Parish Unitarian-Universalist to which we belong 286 years later.

In the 18th century and well into the 19th Congregationalism dominated the ecclesiastical and liturgical landscape of New England churches like this one. Our Unitarian revolution took place almost a century after the agreement here to the Covenant. In 1819 William Ellery Channing in his famous Baltimore speech pleaded for humanitarianism and tolerance rather than creed in religion, and Channing became known as the Apostle of Unitarianism.

It is not clear just how the Unitarian revolution hit First Parish in Cohasset. In fact, two years after Channing’s rather gentle Unitarian manifesto, the minister of this church, the Reverend Jacob Flint, boggled at threats to tradition, reminding his flock that “as a continuation and enlargement of the Christian society formed here a century ago ... your first reflection should be that you owe to the providence of God all the blessings related to the present and the future life ... and obedience to your father God and Redeemer” and arguing that “there can, among Christians, be no well-founded plea to neglect the authority of Jesus” – a clear pushback against the Channing manifesto, which Mr. Flint surely was aware of.

I prefer the narrative that, after reading Channing’s unsettling words, those 20 members of the congregation Rod told us about, outraged at the Unitarian heresy, stormed out of this Meeting House and marched across the Common to found a genuine Congregational church. Happily, the other half stayed behind and eventually got with the new and enlightened program.

But change takes time. Let’s fast-forward another century, and in a slightly more personal vein. In the Unitarian church I was taken to (dragged?) as a child I’m sure there were remnants of trinitarianism plus lots of theism and deism (one from the Greek, the other from the Romans, but not all that different). When Iri and I were married by a Unitarian minister 59½ years ago at the New Zealand Embassy in Washington, we made sure to write our own service, particularly since Iri had walked out of the Church of England at age 13 in a fit of liberal outrage.

When we first joined First Parish 53 years ago, the minister Roscoe E. Trueblood was a gentle poet of humane and open-minded disposition. His typical prayer might ask “As we seek for it and serve it may we find each day a new vision of thy truth”. But at the same time, the church service was still festooned with remnants of orthodoxy.

Every Sunday we all sang the Unitarian version of the doxology — praise God the love we all may share, praise God the beauty everywhere, praise God the hope of good to be, praise God the truth that makes us free. Not “Praise Father, Son, And Holy Ghost”: but pretty Godly. For many years we also continued to chant the bond of union which some would now like to revive — “In the love of truth and in the spirit of Jesus, we unite for the worship of God, and the service

of man.” Powerful words, although some would count three politically incorrect bits. We also sang over the money, intoning after the offering was brought up front and we all looked at it, that “all things come of thee O Lord and of thine own have we given thee.”

But a curious footnote: when we sang the familiar piece “This Little light of mine I’m going to let it shine” — what we sang then was “This little *liberal* light of mine I’m going to let it shine”. Does that mean we’re less liberal today? Or has there been a conservative mole burrowing in the bowels of 25 Beacon Street whence come our hymnals?

Over the decades there arose from time to time a great urge in First Parish to debate our religion. The hot issue was between those who wanted more mention of God and those who wanted less, along with those who wanted more Bible studies versus those who could care less. I am pleased that we have evolved to the point where we can effortlessly handle some of both positions — a little of God, a lot of God, some God, no God, all delicately proportioned — which I think our present minister does beautifully

It was in that balancing spirit, by the way, that until very recently someone wheeled out the silver from the vault and an evening communion service was held here. It obviously wasn’t the Sacrament of the Eucharist, but it was a UU approximation, which I can’t describe since I seem to have missed all those occasions.

Speaking of hymnals, neither was the music spared the tides of change. Both at UU headquarters and in our church a variety of revisers, some deft, some heavy-footed, set to work eliminating from hymns and anthems the bloodiest bits of orthodoxy (I mean literally bloody) along with gender bias which many found offensive.. For example, in choir we still sing that lovely little anthem “Balm in Gilead”. But instead of using the balm to “heal the sin-sick soul”. it now heals “the weary soul”.

Most alterations were a plus for the sensibilities of changing generations, and they were okay with me, although at Thanksgiving time I do sometimes hear Mike Bliss and me singing sotto voce that ‘we gather together to ask the Lords blessing while he chastens and hastens his will to make known so the wicked oppressing cease them from distressing.’ Everyone else of course loyally sings the bowdlerized text where we gather together to celebrate nature, fellowship, etcetera. which is probably much nicer, if inauthentic.

As you can see from this brisk gallop through the centuries, the battles in this house have placed on one side the modernizers many of whom are happy to leave behind orthodoxies involving hellfire, brimstone and damnation, along with a fearsome judgmental God. On the other side are brethren and sistern who value some ritual, and may even be with Mark Twain when he said “I’m all for progress, it’s change I can’t stand”. The good news is that both sides have available to them here a humane and intelligent faith of caring, concern, outreach, and devotion of our choosing.

Go in peace.