

# How Did We Get Here?

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Unitarian Universalist  
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## Readings

Our first reading includes a few brief passages from an early sermon by Rev. Peter Hobart, the first minister of our First Parish in Hingham (now of course also known as the Old Ship Church). Hobart's biblical text for the sermon was verse seven of the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of Matthew: "What went ye out into the wilderness to see?"

How fitting to us are the words addressed by the Master (Jesus) to those who went in search for John, the Baptist. Similarly, He might ask *us*, What came ye out into *this* wilderness to see and to do?

Why leave our friends and neighbors of Boston, Salem, or those of other plantations already settled and affording the comforts which this, our new-found habitation, ill presents? Each has his answer...

Here, when we shall have erected our homes on the sites chosen by lots lately dispensed, will arise a plantation suitable for the destinies of a people who were yeomen in the land they have left beyond the sea. As we sow so shall we reap. Others of our faith and kin hearing of the good works we perpetrate here will come to make common cause with us.

Friendly intercourse with the red people, whom you early comers have dealt with so amicably, will work only for good...

We must be a community of Christian folk, law-abiding, non-disputatious, working for common good, united in purpose.

God may be worshipped as our consciences dictate, with none to say nay...

Therefore, beloved in the Lord, let us gird on the whole armour of God for the work before us, asking grace for each day, strength to support that grace in our heart, mind and body.

**Responsive Reading** - by Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, president, Unitarian Universalist Association; and Rev. Erika Hewitt

Leader: We know that hurt moves through the world, perpetrated by action, inaction, and indifference. Our values call us to live in the reality of the heartbreak of our world, remembering that:

Congregation: “No one is outside the circle of love.”

L: We who are Unitarian Universalist not only affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person; we also affirm the inherent wholeness of every being—despite apparent brokenness.

Congregation: “No one is outside the circle of love.”

L: We know that things break, or break down: promises, friendship, sobriety, hope, communication. This breaking happens because our human hearts and our very institutions are frail and imperfect. We make mistakes. Life is messy.

Congregation: “No one is outside the circle of love.”

L: With compassion as our guide, we seek the well-being of all people. We seek to dismantle systems of oppression that undermine our collective humanity. We believe that we’re here to guide one another toward Love.

Congregation: “No one is outside the circle of love.”

L: No matter how fractured we are or once were, we can make whole people of ourselves. We are whole at our core, because of the great, unnameable, sometimes inconceivable Love in which we live.

Congregation: “No one is outside the circle of love.”

**Sermon**

“How Did We Get Here?” is a pretty broad topic, depending on who the “we” is and where the “here” is.

Well, this morning I’m being pretty literal. The “we” is us, meaning this congregation, this First Parish Old Ship Church. And by “how did *we* get *here*,” I mean how did this congregation, which began in 1635 as a Puritan congregation eventually become Unitarian and in 1961, when the two denominations merged, Unitarian Universalist?

Here’s what did *not* happen. Unitarians did not suddenly one day steal the congregation from the Puritans.

What *did* happen was a sort of evolution over time.

This morning all I have time to do is to sketch this evolution. And then say a little about why I think it matters, matters that we somehow got from there (Puritan) to here (Unitarian Universalist) all the while remaining one First Parish congregation worshipping now in only our second meeting house.

The first thing I want to say about this evolution is that it seems to me that the seeds of our liberal Unitarian Universalism were actually planted quite early, even in those words we heard from Peter Hobart a short while ago.

Imagine the scene as best we can.

Not at all Hingham as we know it today. But rather a few dozen families gathered in a relatively small cleared area right around here, most of the simple homes not yet built, with old growth forest and Wompanoag settlements stretching out around them.

Imagine, too, what these families had left behind. Some had been living in Charlestown for a couple of years, a somewhat more settled community, but all except for a few very small children would have had memories of quite settled and civilized (by their lights) England. And though from the perspective of those who had lived in this land for hundreds if not thousands of years, this was not “wilderness”, it did appear so to these new arrivals.

We can, then, perhaps begin also to imagine the worries, the fears of these folks; many perhaps wondering if they had made the right decision to leave the material comforts of England.

Knowing all this, and perhaps sharing some of these same feelings, maybe even misgivings, their pastor, Peter Hobart, offered a sermon decidedly not heavy on theology. Instead, wisely focused on the qualities of character and moral fiber that the men and women of new Hingham would need to develop and strengthen in order to survive and eventually thrive in this, for them, new land.

They would need to be physically and mentally strong to be sure. At the outset of his talk, in words not included in the reading, Hobart asserted that there “must be one strong, harmonious thread which is to be wound into a fabric whose warp and woof will build manhood and womanhood comparable with that sturdiness which has made our neighboring colony, Plymouth, the bone and sinew of today’s New England.”

But then, as we heard earlier, Hobart went on to put at least equal emphasis on moral qualities. He highlighted the need for friendly relations with the indigenous peoples. Then he spoke of the need for “sobriety of living; steadfast adherence to the faith in the God of our fathers and prayerful petition for guidance along that faith” that would help them to be, as we heard, “law-abiding, non-disputatious” folk, “working for common good, united in purpose.”

As for how they would worship? Hobart offered an affirmation that rings true these centuries later: “...as our consciences dictate, with none to say nay.”

You might say that this sermon of Peter Hobart’s, as his family, his community, his congregation, stood face to face with monumental challenges, was what today we

could call a pep talk. Not unlike the sort of talk a coach or team captain might give before a big game against a formidable opponent.

Though in this case the “opponent” was not another community, not even the Wompanoag people (not yet...), but was in the form of the huge challenges they faced simply to make a life in this new (again, new for them) land.

So, as I said, Hobart wisely eschewed talk of theology, talk of the nature of God or the nature of sin and salvation. Instead, as we’ve heard, he focused on what we might name the qualities of mind, body, and spirit, that would be necessary in the months and years to come.

This is by no means to say that Hobart and the Puritans in general did not take their Christian faith seriously. They most assuredly did. But their congregations were gathered according to covenant, not creed. They assumed Christian faith, but their statements of covenant affirmed not a set of creeds and beliefs, but rather affirmed the spirit with which they agreed to walk together. Though Hobart’s sermon was not formally the covenant of the new congregation (so far as I know, we do not have a copy of our original covenant), even so, his words affirming the intention to be “non-disputatious” folks “working for the common good” are certainly in the spirit of covenant – and further are additional words we could easily affirm all these centuries later.

I would suggest, then, that this journey of the centuries has been, as by now may be clear, less about evolving beliefs than it has been about the evolving realization that beliefs are less important than values, creeds less important than deeds, and eventually that even our identity as “Christian” is less important than the identity of our character.

And the seeds for this evolving realization were indeed, I would affirm, planted along with the first crops of corn and beans, planted by Peter Hobart along with the men and women of this little band of settlers.

Now, this said, shared *beliefs* did evolve along the way as well.

The Puritans, Hobart among them, most certainly considered themselves Christian through and through as I’ve just said. This means that among other things they believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God and the source of their salvation. Further, these early Puritans shared the Calvinist theology that affirmed the doctrine of the elect, that only some were destined for salvation, eternal life with God in heaven, and that only God knew who these few were, and that our behavior in this life made little or no difference as to whether or not we would be saved in the next.

Yet it was only two generations later that the likes of our own Rev. Ebenezer Gay, our third minister, known by some historians as the “father of American Unitarianism,” was teaching what amounted to “salvation by character” – that how we lived (not what we believed) could lead us to heaven.

And so this evolution of belief went, not only here in our First Parish in Hingham, but in many of the other New England first parish churches. Sometimes leading to entire congregations becoming theologically Unitarian congregations, as ours did, and sometimes in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century dividing between the liberal, soon to be known by

name as Unitarian, and the conservative or orthodox, soon to be known as Congregationalist.

Further, as matters of belief became less important, an openness developed to the truths affirmed in traditions other than Christian, both among Unitarians as well as among Universalists with whom the Unitarians would eventually, finally merge in 1961.

So here *we* are, with a statement of covenant (\*printed in your order of worship – see below) that has little to do with belief and everything to do with the spirit with which we strive together to live. It is a spirit also reflected in our Unitarian Universalist principles referenced in our covenant, principles which affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning and spiritual development, the quest for justice and peace and community, and all in the context of the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.

Additionally, in our religious and spiritual lives we are offered sources of truth and meaning in the form of our own experiences of transcendence and wonder, the wisdom of all the world's religious traditions, along with the guidance of reason and the discoveries of science.

All of which implies, as an early Universalist once affirmed, that we do not have to believe alike in order to love alike.

And all of which suggests that there may not actually be very much that separates the *spirit* of Rev. Peter Hobart's sermon from the spirit of the this morning's second reading, words of the new president of our Unitarian Universalist Association, Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, affirming that "No one is outside the circle of love."

Amen.

Before I conclude, here is another story from Peter Hobart's ministry that reinforces my point. It is a story some of you have heard before.

During the early years of his ministry, the accepted teaching and practice of the Puritan churches was that only children of two baptized members of a Puritan congregation could themselves be baptized.

Well, a day came in 1641, when the child Hannah Burton was brought to Peter Hobart for baptism. Her mother was a baptized member of the congregation, but her father was a member of the Church of England. So, Puritan doctrine taught that little Hannah could not be baptized. And at first Hobart refused. But not long after comes an entry in Hobart's journal: "Baptized Hannah Burton."

Peter Hobart had extended the circle of love. To us today Hobart's decision to baptize Hannah Burton would seem to be what we would call a no-brainer. But that was not so for Hobart. Yet less than a generation later, the Puritan congregations more broadly accepted what came to be known as the halfway covenant, formally allowing such baptisms. Hobart had been ahead of his time – another seed planted, growing into the affirmation we shared today that no one is outside the circle of love.

Well then, finally – for this morning – a few words as to why this matters, this journey from the Puritans *there* to our Unitarian Universalist *here*.

It seems to me that it matters in this world riven by divisions based on religious belief that there is our religious tradition (and gratefully ours is not the only such tradition) that affirms an openness to other traditions and faiths.

It matters that in this world filled with too many corrupt leaders devoid of decent character... it matters that there are faith traditions such as ours that affirm that the quality of our character is more important than any professed belief.

It matters that in our nation, at this time when the circles of who is in and who is out are being redrawn by some with ever shrinking circumference – whether because of immigration status or skin color or gender identity or sexual orientation or pre-existing medical condition – it matters that there are faith traditions such as ours that do indeed affirm that no one is outside the circle of love.

It matters that in our nation with its ever-widening political divide, that there are those within traditions such as ours who affirm that even fellow citizens whose opinions or political affiliations are other than ours, even those with opinions many of us find odious, are still not outside the circle of love.

And finally, I expect it matters to each of us within these walls, within our tradition (it certainly matters to me) that there is this community of faith which, no matter what our individual beliefs may be, is present for us, present to support, comfort, and inspire us whether in times of ease or in times of challenge or suffering, whether personal or shared.

It matters.

Thank you Peter Hobart, thank you Ebenezer Gay, thanks to the innumerable women and men who have grown and sustained our faith over the centuries, so that we can be here today, worshipping freely and learning to love more fully.

So may it long be.

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### **Current Covenant of First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)**

As a congregation committed to Unitarian Universalist Principles, we join with one another in the spirit of respect, reverence, humility, and love:

To seek the truth freely,  
To nurture spiritual growth and ethical commitment,  
To care for one another,  
And, seeking justice, peace, and ecological sustainability, to serve life.