

## **“To Become More Fitting Temples”**

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### **Readings**

#### **“Choose to Bless the World”**

Rev. Rebecca Parker, Unitarian Universalist minister and former president of Starr King School for Religious Leadership

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—  
can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind's power,  
the strength of the hands,  
the reaches of the heart,  
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting.

Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,  
bind up wounds,  
welcome the stranger,  
praise what is sacred,  
do the work of justice  
or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door,  
hoard bread,  
abandon the poor,  
obscure what is holy,  
comply with injustice  
or withhold love.

You must answer this question:  
What will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will,  
a moving forward into the world  
with the intention to do good.

It is an act of recognition,  
a confession of surprise,  
a grateful acknowledgment  
that in the midst of a broken world  
unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.

There is an embrace of kindness  
that encompasses all life, even yours.

And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil  
there moves a holy disturbance,  
a benevolent rage,  
a revolutionary love,  
protesting, urging, insisting  
that which is sacred will not be defiled.

Those who bless the world live their life  
as a gesture of thanks  
for this beauty  
and this rage.

The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude  
to search for the sources  
of power and grace;  
native wisdom, healing, and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into community,  
the endeavor shared,  
the heritage passed on,  
the companionship of struggle,  
the importance of keeping faith,

the life of ritual and praise,  
the comfort of human friendship,  
the company of earth  
the chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.  
Together—that is another possibility, waiting.

from “Discourse Delivered to the First Parish in Hingham  
September 8, 1869 on Re-opening Their Meeting-House“  
by Rev. Calvin Lincoln:

Have we not a right to expect that those who have so earnestly desired to improve this temple made with hands will, by a new dedication to the service of God and the cause of Christ, become more fitting temples for the indwelling of the human spirit?

A question of graver import now demands our consideration. Is our present ecclesiastical position true to the principles, on which this church as a living branch of the living vine, was first established? That our church in its theology has departed somewhat widely from the opinions held by its Puritan founders, there can be no question. Still I believe that while we have discarded opinions which they accepted as true, and adopted explanations of doctrines which they would have rejected as false, we are loyal to principles which they distinctly avowed and announced as fundamental.

## Sermon

Imagine the scene. Right here... but we would barely recognize where we were. Here's why.

September 8, 1869.

Many months earlier the parish had embarked on a restoration of this Meeting House that had become also a major renovation and redecorating. The Meeting House had been built almost two hundred years earlier with no significant foundation or basement; so the wooden floor had begun to weaken and rot. Something needed to be done.

Well, they went all in. Took out all the box pews, dug a basement, jacked up the building onto a stone foundation... and then... turned the inside into a Victorian Church. If you haven't seen the photographs from that era, you can check one out in the museum room. When they were finished, not only was the building more structurally sound, but you might say it had been transformed from a 17<sup>th</sup> century Meeting House into a 19<sup>th</sup> century church: curved bench pews, yellow print wallpaper, woodwork painted white, pulpit stained dark mahogany. And the dropped ceiling first installed a century earlier, covering those beams, remained.

So on September 8, 1869, the Meeting House / church was ready for worship again. Rev. Calvin Lincoln, who had been our minister for about fourteen years, mounted the pulpit and began his Discourse – from which we heard a bit earlier this morning.

He began by recounting some of the history of this old house up until that point. He evoked for the congregation the time only fifty years after the arrival of the Hingham settlers when they raised these walls and beams. We cringe at some of his words, when he put it this way: “Somewhat less than fifty years had elapsed since their homes were the homes of a savage race...” So we have to work to be sympathetic to his perspective, remembering that he was after all a man of his time, both for good and for ill.

In any case, Lincoln proceeded to describe changes in the Meeting House between the time it was first built and their own time almost two centuries later. In words to which we could still assent, he said:

Ascribing less of sacredness to the house than to the uses for which it was erected and by which it was sanctified; our fathers at an early period, cheerfully consented to important changes.

That said, Lincoln went on to describe, among other changes, the two additions and the substitution of box pews for the original plain backless benches.

Then, bringing his Discourse close to the occasion at which he was speaking, Lincoln noted of the decision to save the Meeting House by digging the basement and adding the foundation, that these were measures that all deemed essential. But the proposals for all those other “Victorian” features, including “more comfortable pews” was not without controversy:

Such extensive alterations when first proposed, were regarded by numbers in the parish, especially among its older members, with strong disfavor.

Lincoln outlined the arguments on both sides – the nostalgia some had for how the building had always been (at least for them) on the one hand, and on the other the view

that carried the day, that even those who first built this house and then succeeding generations “were not slow in complying with the requirements of the time in which they lived.”

Lincoln concluded this part of his Discourse by noting with gratitude, the “happy omen” that in the end the people of the parish were of one mind when it came to this “work of such magnitude.”

This is of course is what we hope for our parish in our time as we face the “magnitude” of the work necessary in relation to our Parish House. We have been, and I know we still are, of two minds, two perspectives, two strongly held schools of thought as to whether to sell the Parish House and build on this side of Main Street, or to stay and undertake the work and fundraising necessary to make the Parish House suitable and financially and ecologically sustainable, for at least a generation to come. Yes, we voted to take the Parish House off the market and begin repairs – but we were not of one mind in this vote.

So, we need to keep talking with – not at – each other. And as I wrote in the newsletter last week:

We cannot with anything close to certainty predict the future or completely control future outcomes, but we *can* control our present actions. And these actions will help shape the future: as we work together for shared goals, as we speak to and listen to one another with respect, and as we remember that even when we differ concerning particular courses of action, we do indeed share deep and enduring values.

Well, this was precisely the territory into which Calvin Lincoln moved in the latter and arguably more important part of his Discourse on that September Sunday one hundred and fifty years ago. He said as we heard earlier in the reading:

Have we not a right to expect that those who have so earnestly desired to improve this temple made with hands will, by a new dedication to the service of God and the cause of Christ, become more fitting temples for the indwelling of the human spirit?

Then he went on to note, as we also heard, that though the professed doctrines and practices of the founders of our First Parish had changed markedly since the gathering of our congregation in 1635, he believed that we were still “true to the principles, on which this church as a living branch of the living vine, was first established.”

Perhaps needless to say, our doctrines and practices have, to put it mildly, continued to evolve in the century and a half since Calvin Lincoln’s Discourse. But I would affirm that, at the same time, we continue to remain true to the essential principles that have guided this congregation for all of its existence: principles – and here I echo in close paraphrase more of Lincoln’s words with which I am confident we agree – principles having to do with freedom in the search for truth, with sympathy for the oppressed, with holding fast to the good.

All this said, the passage in Calvin Lincoln’s 1869 Discourse that for me is the most evocative is the passage which included the words that became my sermon title for today: “To become more fitting temples for the indwelling of the human spirit.”

I want to say some more about this. Among other things, I think this is language, however archaic it might sound to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, that is unifying in our time of divided feelings and opinions.

What did Lincoln mean? And what do I mean?

Well, however else we might understand these words, I think they are about stewardship on the most profound level.

In other words, to begin with and most fundamentally, stewardship of our own individual lives and gifts. Note that he said “more fitting temples” – plural.

As we heard in Rebecca Parker’s words, words we share here from time to time:

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—  
can be used to bless or curse the world.

So it seems to me that working to become a “more fitting temple for the indwelling of the human spirit” begins with each of us discovering and naming our gifts. Gifts certainly include talents and skills. But of equal or more importance, our gifts have to do with character, with who we have become by virtue of our life experience – experience which may well include wounds and scars, griefs and losses.... in other words everything... all of which we can turn to gifts of understanding, of a desire to help another, of a passion to change the world – manifestations of our beautiful indwelling spirit.

Further, this work also includes our growing into an awareness that we are not only separate individuals, but are part and parcel of one another, of the fabric of all life.

Recall that Rebecca Parker wrote that the choice to bless the world with our gifts...

will draw you into community,  
the endeavor shared,  
the heritage passed on,  
the companionship of struggle,  
the importance of keeping faith,

the life of ritual and praise,  
the comfort of human friendship,  
the company of earth  
the chorus of life welcoming you.

Stewardship is, in other words, shared, because, as Parker concludes:

None of us alone can save the world.  
Together—that is another possibility, waiting.

All this said, though, more frequently and habitually we may think of stewardship in a congregation has having do with care of our finances and our buildings. Well, every level, if you will, of stewardship is connected to all the others.

As for stewardship of our buildings – Meeting House and Parish House. Yes, the care of our buildings is for the sake of supporting all of our other ministries: nourishing the spirit (that beautiful indwelling spirit), nurturing community, educating heart and mind, serving others... yet it is also of value in and of itself. Care for our buildings and budgets is hard work. This means it is work that must by its nature be shared. Which

means in turn, that it offers us wonderful opportunities to work together, each of us with our own individual gifts to share, as we to grow our gifts, including our ability to hear and respect perspectives other than our own and in this spirit to seek solutions that in the end all can live with.

Further, these are growing gifts we can bring to the rest of our lives, as we bless the world each day, in each encounter, within each shared task in our families, in our work, in our activism and citizenship.

After all, if we can't learn to see the beautiful indwelling spirit within each of us here (in ourselves and in each other), in this community of love, then what hope can we have for our nation, for the world?

But if we can learn to see the beautiful indwelling spirit within each of us here, then we will be able all the better to see the essential spirit within every being everywhere – and all the better to be able to give life to the possibility in this world we share of more love, more justice, more peace, more harmony with the earth which sustains all life.

In this spirit may we continue in the work that has been given us to do.

May it be so.