

Servant of Truth and Love

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

from the writing of Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Joy Atkinson:

The womb of stars embraces us; remnants of their fiery furnaces pulse through our veins. We are of the stars, the dust of the explosions cast across space. We are of the earth: we breathe and live in the breath of ancient plants and beasts. Their cells nourish the soil; we build our communities on their harvest of gifts. Our fingers trace the curves carved in clay and stone by forebears unknown to us. We are a part of the great circle of humanity gathered around the fire, the hearth, the altar. May we recall in gratitude all that has given us birth.

from words near the conclusion of a Discourse by our fifth minister, Rev. Calvin Lincoln, on the occasion of the re-opening for worship of our Meeting House after major repair and restoration in 1869:

Here may the unthinking be awakened, the inquirer for truth be blessed with a divine illumination: here may the mourner receive strength and comfort from the ever present friend of the afflicted, and here may all who are seeking a divine life, be helped forward in the pathway to Heaven. And while these walls shall stand, may there never be wanting within them a congregation of earnest worshippers, hungering to be fed with the bread from Heaven, nor a voice to proclaim to them the unsearchable riches of the gospel of Christ.

Sermon

Calvin Lincoln, our fifth minister, served from 1855 until 1881 – twenty-six years. As it happens, I’ve just completed my twenty-sixth year as Old Ship’s minister – so have now surpassed Calvin Lincoln’s length of service.

He is not to be blamed for the relative brevity of his ministry however. This was his second settlement. He was 55 when he arrived at Old Ship, and he died of a stroke at age 81, still our minister. A month earlier he had offered a prayer on the occasion celebrating the two-hundredth anniversary of our Meeting House, and just a few days before his death had offered prayers for the recovery of President Garfield, who laying dying from an assassin’s bullet.

And when I say “relative brevity” of his ministry, I do mean relative brevity. Of his four predecessors only one, Henry Ware, had served for a briefer length of time, leaving this pulpit after eighteen years to become the Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard.

Lincoln’s other predecessors had served for forty-three, thirty-eight, sixty-nine, and sixty-five years. Such long ministries are now largely a thing of the past, which is in many ways understandable, yet also in many ways a shame. There is a depth of relationship that grows – and can only grow – with the years, decades, generations, as minister and congregants share life passages, trials, troubles, joys, sorrow. It is a depth that cannot be quickly replicated.

As for Calvin Lincoln. He served for many years as an associate with and then followed Joseph Richardson when Richardson died. Richardson’s own ministry had begun with great controversy in both the town and the congregation, controversy which led among other things to the founding of what we now know as New North Church.

And not incidentally, for it illuminates something of his character, during his 65 year ministry here, Richardson found the time to serve terms in the Massachusetts statehouse as well as one term in the United States Congress.

In any case, regarding the very long and gradual transition from Richardson to Lincoln, Rev. Edward Augustus Horton (who had served for three years as an associate of Calvin Lincoln’s), returned to Old Ship in January of 1882, just a few months after Lincoln’s death, to speak on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the opening of this Meeting House for public worship, and put it quite simply: “After Richardson, the man of fiery action, came Lincoln, the saint...”

Horton continued, including the words which gave me today’s title and theme:

Calvin Lincoln needs no eulogy or description from me at this time and in this pulpit. He was a part of your homes, the life of this place. The young loved his benignant face, the aged cherished his kindly hand, the troubled were soothed by his gentle accents, and all men turned respectfully to the light of his character. Calvin Lincoln had from nature the gift of serene and spiritual traits. The honor to him is that he was generous in their employment, - never thinking selfishly of his own happiness, but from first to last a servant of God’s truth and love!

We have two photos of Lincoln, one taken in middle age, and one in old age. They are, each in their way, both beautiful pictures of, by Horton’s account, a beautiful man – even saintly, as Horton said. And though there is a certain sadness around his eyes, I would suggest it contradicts nothing about Lincoln’s character, for it seems to be the sadness of anyone who has seen truly into the nature of life, the human condition, seen with open eyes both the joy and the sorrow of our lives. I expect Calvin Lincoln was such a person.

Well, I will return to that phrase describing Lincoln as “a servant of God’s truth and love,” but first let me share a bit more from the Discourse which gave us this morning’s second reading. I think it will shed some light on the theological or spiritual

grounding for Lincoln's life, character, and ministry – maybe shed a little light on our lives too.

As you heard, this was a Discourse given on the occasion of the re-opening of our Meeting House following the major restoration in 1869, work that transformed the interior of this old House into something like a Victorian church, with curved bench pews, carpets, wallpaper – and a brand new organ, the first ever in this place.

Given the occasion, Lincoln began by noting how dramatically different the newly created interior was as compared with its appearance when erected almost two hundred years earlier by our Puritan forebears. For this Meeting House was at its inception both smaller and much simpler, with plain backless benches – and certainly no cushions and likewise no heat.

But for Lincoln that day, his brief architectural reflection was meant to serve as preface and context for Lincoln to consider more significant matters of theology and belief. To that end he asked a question:

Is our present ecclesiastical position true to the principles, on which this church as a living branch of the living vine, was first established?

He began his answer:

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.

What were those fundamental principles? Rev. Lincoln affirmed that they were rooted in following the teaching of Jesus Christ “as the Son of God, the representative of divine perfections, the revealer of the divine will, and being such, as their Lord and Savior.”

Now, this may not sound like our primary language today here at Old Ship and among Unitarian Universalists generally, but Lincoln was quick to make clear that this was no creed, not something you must believe as such, but rather meant as a guide to living, a guide which in its language and our understanding of that language will change with the times and will change as each individual “studies with diligence” engaging “freely to search for truth.”

In this spirit Calvin affirmed “the worth of the individual soul” acknowledged “the rights of the individual” all leading, he said, to “constantly increasing means of knowledge.”

In other words, though rooted in Christian doctrine quite broadly understood, Calvin Lincoln was espousing the kind of freedom of thought in matters of religion, along with the importance of character development for each individual, that remain quite familiar to us to this day.

Think of it: Just as Calvin Lincoln found commonality of purpose and principle with our Puritan founders, so can we identify commonality of purpose and principle... and even to a significant extent, though not altogether, language, with Lincoln and his generation. We are not isolated in time, inventing something brand new in our generation; rather, we are part of a lineage, a lineage which enriches us and which we can choose to pass along to generations to come.

Some of Calvin Lincoln's concluding words in this Discourse are printed at the top of your program this morning, words with which he sought – in this very spirit – to “consecrate anew” this Meeting House “to the worship of the one living and true God”.... to the cause of Christ... to the unfolding of his truth and the enforcements of His precepts...” And you heard more of his conclusion in the reading, as Lincoln affirmed in traditional and Christian language his hope that this place would always be a place for “illumination” and “comfort” for “earnest worshippers...”

You see, we need not pretend that in the 19th century our congregation did not still consider itself Christian through and through. But liberal Christian, Unitarian Christian, preaching from the Gospels the unity of God, the dignity of each individual soul and the free search for truth.

Our theological and spiritual horizons have, as we might put it, broadened over the past century: We now engage in the free search for truth not only drawing from the Gospels and Christianity, but also inspired by traditions including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, Humanism – not to mention through the grandeur of all we learn from the scientific search, as echoed in the first reading this morning. But we at the same time do indeed share underlying principles and purposes with all who have gone before in this place, within this congregation.

Okay then: to return to the phrase Edward Augustus Horton employed in describing Calvin Lincoln: “He was... from first to last a servant of God's truth and love!”

Could we not, using the freedom of our own search, recall that many affirm that God's other name is Love? Could we not, with Gandhi and others, understand God as Truth?

(And after all, all language about God is, as I reminded us last week, metaphor, not so much naming, as pointing us *toward* a reality that transcends or sustains or threads its way through our lives, through this world.)

Be all this as it may, what does it tell us about Calvin Lincoln that he was said to be a servant of God's truth and love? What might it teach us as to what values or realities we choose to serve in our time?

Well, these words simply return us to character, do they not? We know someone is a servant of truth if she is honest in her relationships and dealings. We know someone is a servant of truth if she has what we call integrity, if we see that she lives according to the principles she espouses.

And we know someone is a servant of love if we see that he is kind to his neighbors, if we see that he reaches out to those who are oppressed or poor or different in some way from most others, if he seeks peaceful ways of resolving conflict.

In short, whatever language we might choose to use, do we not all wish to be servants of truth and love? And is this not more important than any theological or linguistic differences and quibbles?

I follow – we all do here in this ancient house – generations of those who have ministered here, not only the ordained leaders of our congregation (our founder Peter Hobart, his successor John Norton, the inestimable Ebenezer Gay, sometimes known as the “father of American Unitarianism,” the professorial Henry Ware, the fiery Joseph Richardson, the saint Calvin Lincoln, and all those since along with all those who served and ministered from the pews.

It is a great legacy, which we can only humbly strive to follow, strive simply put to be servants of truth and love within our great and honorable tradition of religious freedom... and, as I suggested earlier, strive to pass it along.

Call it Unitarian. Call it Universalist. Now, since consolidation in 1961, call it Unitarian Universalist. In some ways, it doesn't matter what we call it as long as we strive to live it – know us by our fruits.

In other ways, though, it matters quite a bit to be part of and held by a tradition and a larger community and institutions from which we can draw strength and inspiration in these times... in all times.

To conclude, then, I will loosely paraphrase – or translate for our time – Calvin Lincoln's closing sentence from that Discourse long ago:

While these walls shall stand, may there never be wanting within them a congregation of earnest worshippers, hungering seekers for the truth, endeavoring for that truth to become known through the love of our hearts and the work of our hands.

In other words, may there never be wanting here servants of truth and love.

May it always be so.