Whenever we welcome new folks into the church, I like to take the opportunity to tell a little history – a little about where we come from and welcome you into the stream of religious life which we occupy. This morning, I am focusing on our Unitarian ancestors. Next time we welcome new members into this church, I’ll focus on the Universalist side of our family. The Unitarians and the Universalists are two distinct branches of what we now call Unitarian Universalism, not really forming a single distinct religion until a little over a half century ago.

The reading shared this morning is about one of those moments in history when American Unitarianism emerged to be something new. It existed before but was called something else and looked quite different. This was the moment in which when the liberal branch of the congregational church gained authority and eventually took on the name Unitarian, when Henry Ware became the Hollis professor of divinity at Harvard College, thus able to influence the theology of ministers educated there.

There were earlier moments of Unitarian controversy – other points in history in which one could claim that something new called Unitarianism was emerging – in fact the council of Nicea in 325 of the common era could be seen as one – Arius arguing that Jesus was more than human, but not equal to god and Athanasius who held that Jesus was co-equal with God. The Arian position lost and the church began focusing on creed over covenant, eventually resulting in what you may know as the Athanasian creed (from Athanasius) and the Nicene creed (from Nicea). Arianism has roughly been equated with Unitarianism – defined generally as those who believed in the Unity of God and the humanity of Jesus – those who held the position that God was not a duality or a trinity, but rather a unity, and that Jesus was mostly a human prophet.

Mostly becomes an important distinction later one. That decision in favor of Athanasius was debated and then re-asserted itself in 381 and was henceforth considered the orthodox position. The arian and Unitarian beliefs then, by default, were the heretical ones. (This term Arian, a-r-i-a-n has nothing to do with the term Aryan a-r-y-a-n, the belief in a master race that came centuries later.)

All this comes into play in America 1200 years later – it is why in Concord, MA the church on the main square, is called First Parish in Concord: Unitarian Universalist (gathered in 1636), and the church out its back door – a block off the main square, on Walden Street, is called Trinitarian Congregational Church, Concord, established 1826. Tri-Con for short. First Parish and Tri-Con.

1805 is when Henry Ware became Hollis Professor of Divinity, largely responsible for the education of future ministers for the Massachusetts Congregational Churches. Tri-Con breaks off from First Parish and is established in 1826, when Ezra Ripley was leading First Parish having graduated from said Harvard.

I want to unpack that sentence from the reading where David Bumbaugh said that “Ware was known to be an Arian, but stoutly denied the evangelical charge that he was a Unitarian.” (Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History by David E. Bumbaugh, p. 107) I think the distinction there, as in much of the debate over the years in Christianity, is a question of degrees – Arians and Unitarians agreed that Jesus was not the same as God, but disagreed slightly as to how much more than human he could have been.
Henry Ware wouldn’t admit to being a Unitarian, but by 1826 Tri-Con was established in Concord to declare itself Trinitarian in contrast to the confirmed Unitarianism of First Parish. In between William Ellery Channing had preached the sermon in 1819 called Unitarian Christianity that finally had liberals owning up to the charge of Unitarian and taking on the name with pride instead of embarrassment.

About 10 years ago I found myself in Concord and considering this history and our truly radical roots. I had never been there before. I was in Concord to study First Parish itself – a church of 800 members in a town of 16,000 residents; making 1 of every 20 residents UU. And though the information I learned about the church was interesting, informative, and wonderful, it was the history of Concord and the Unitarians that really captured my imagination. This was heightened by the fact that I was there November 4, 2008 and I knew it was going to be an election of historic proportion, as indeed it was.

I stood in the house of the Rev. William Emerson Sr., minister of First Parish and grandfather of the more famous Ralph Waldo Emerson. I looked out the window of the Old Manse – Emerson’s home, to see the Old North Bridge in Concord where the shot heard ‘round the world was fired – that phrase coming from his grandson’s Concord Hymn 1837.

"By the rude bridge that arched the flood, Their flag to April's breeze unfurled, Here once the embattled farmers stood And fired the shot heard round the world."

Of course, today in 2018 the phrase that comes to mind is “I am not throwing away my shot. I am young, scrappy and hungry, just like my country and I’m not throwing away my shot.” Sung by the fictional version of the historical Alexander Hamilton. But however you have learned about the American Revolution, it is a different experience to walk that land in Concord and look out the window of William Emerson’s home.

Emerson Sr. was chaplain of the Continental Army and the Massachusetts Provincial Congress. Though alive April 19, 1775, where he reportedly saw the first musket shot of the war from that window, he died in 1776.

The American revolution, the disestablishment of the state church, the transcendentalist movement in America. Our ancestors were there. Whether your ancestors were slaves or indentured servants, native American or immigrant – the ancestors of your Unitarian faith tradition were there.

When I was in Concord in 2008, we were given a special tour because I was with a group of Unitarian ministers, and people in Concord know what that means. The caretakers of the Old Manse gave us a special tour that included the attic, where slaves and seminary students slept; unpaid workers and students in debt.

We took our turns walking into the long narrow room called an oratory where students practiced giving their sermons to blank walls. After William Emerson Sr. the house was occupied by the Ripleys, Alcotts and the Hawthornes. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote his essay Nature in the room that looks out on the Old North Bridge. Nathanial Hawthorne wrote Mosses from an Old Manse while living there.

There are etchings on the windows which I could read with my own eyes:

*Man's accidents are God's purposes. Sophia A. Hawthorne 1843*

*Nath Hawthorne This is his study*

*The smallest twig leans clear against the sky*
Composed by my wife and written with her diamond

Inscribed by my husband at sunset, April 3 1843. In the Gold light.

SAH

It seems radical even today, to me, to write a message on a window in your home with a diamond – did they know even then how famous they were to be, and how we would be talking about them more than 150 years later?

The Emergence of Unitarianism. Was it the Arian Controversy of 325 or the appointment of Henry Ware in 1803 or the preaching of Channing’s 1819 sermon, Unitarian Christianity? Was it the emergence of the Transcendentalists of the Hedge Club, or the isolation of one Henry David Thoreau in a cabin built by his hands in the woods around Walden Pond?

I finally got to walk around Walden Pond after many years of preaching about Thoreau. It’s larger than I expected, though easy to get around...

I walked around Walden Pond with the minister of our Toronto Church, First Unitarian, the Rev. Shawn Newton – and he and I shared our dreams and hopes our shared religious faith and movement. It was easy in that place, along the shore of Walden Pond, to see ourselves as receivers of this amazing legacy of Unitarians who welcomed the new. Me, a woman, Shawn, an openly gay man – ministers in full standing, assuming our rightful place among the dead white men of Concord.

And these new members who enter the church today, now become receivers along with the rest of us of this legacy of controversy and change and revolution.

However, what an interesting moment in history to step into this religious stream. Ten years ago we were celebrating the election of Barack Obama, whose African ancestors, had they been on American soil, would have been confined to the attic with the seminary students – and unlike the seminary students – they would have been forced to work to keep the household running for others. We thought we had finally heeded the direction of their vision and accomplished what they could not in their time. We felt we had finally inherited the repercussions of the revolution William Emerson witnessed.

We felt we had achieved civil rights – okay, some of us thought we had achieved civil rights – others of us knew better – but most of us thought Bonnie and her generation had won the critical battles they had fought and that our future was different than how it has turned out. What I want to remind you today and every Sunday, is that the story is not over.

That a new generation has to fight for those rights and more, is not unexpected – it is the way of the world. Balance was our theme last month. The pendulum swings one way, and then the other – the fact that the world is so chaotic at this moment in time could be seen as a sign that we are evolving – we humans are a highly complex system that interacts with our environment – and after periods of chaos, we self-organize at a higher level of functioning. Or, I should say, we can self-organize at a higher level of functioning. We can learn and we can change and we can improve. Something new can emerge from this chaos, and I believe that is what we are seeing with the Black Lives Matter movement, and #Metoo, and Enough is Enough – a new level of organizing has begun and our work is to nurture its emergence and not thwart its development.
Unitarianism didn’t emerge from a single event in history, but was an ongoing challenge to let new things emerge along the way. Basic to our liberal religion is that we renew it constantly. We welcome new prophets and new ideas, new feelings, and new ways. We dare to shake things up, and sometimes, we are successful in the revolution.

If ever the world needed a turning around, it is now. I’m sure our ancestors said the same, and they were also right.

Every time we admit new members into the church, I am humbled by the possibilities they bring to us – the ways in which we will be changed by their presence among us, and the ways in which we may affect them.

We congregate and re-form ourselves each Sunday we worship together, and we become something different each time we admit new members to join with us in congregational life.

This congregation adopted a new covenant last June, and so these folks who have joined the church this year have had that covenant to review and discuss and adopt. When they signed the membership book, we talked about the promises they are making to the church and the promises the church makes to them. We talked about how community – any community – is imperfect and that they will be disappointed at some point in this church community. If we all got our way, it wouldn’t be a group effort, would it? There are compromises we make to work with one another, and preferences we give up for the greater good of the community. But most of us risk those disappointments because we value the greater purpose of building beloved community. Because we, like the founders of this country, are idealists and have a vision – and understand that diversity makes us stronger. (I won’t say that all the founders understood this, but enough of them did that it laid the groundwork) And yet it is hard work. It can be hard to welcome new prophets and new ideas, new feelings, and new ways.

We have many prophets in our faith – from Jesus to Thoreau to Susan Frederick-Gray. Emerson tells us all in his Divinity School Address to dare to love God without mediator or veil. And by so doing, we all become prophets with visions of our own.

I’m honored we’ve been joined by ten new members this morning, and eager to incorporate their vision and prophecy with ours as we do nothing less than our ancestors did and change the world as we know it. Welcome to Something New, and welcome to this church.

Benediction

If it feels like the world is falling apart this week, remember that disorder can precede the emergence of a better way. I’ve got a new name and a new life, we sing and learn from the African American spiritual. From our Unitarian ancestors may we all learn to become prophets with visions of our own.