

“THREE FREDS”

A sermon delivered at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts,
By the Rev. Ken Sawyer
On March 9, 2003

I want to talk this morning about three Freds. They remind me of things about this religious community that I treasure, although only one of the three Freds was or is himself a Unitarian Universalist.

Two of them were already on my mind as I was thinking about the sermon that Erin and I gave last week about the possible invasion of Iraq, though there wasn't time to mention either then. When a third Fred came to mind though, for unrelated reasons, I decided I had a sermon, though not one about Iraq, or at least not much or necessarily so. One thing churches learned in the '60s was that ministers and priests are welcome to express themselves on a controversial subject as their consciences dictate, but not week after week. I will refer to it a little, though, for instance to note that some of you may have been surprised, even skeptical, at the idea that Erin and I welcome and appreciate hearing points of view contrary to our own. We do.

It's not just that if we're going to get along as a community, we want everyone to feel heard. It's even more important and more personal than that. We need each other. I need you. We all need each other.

Let me tell you about Fred. Fred #1 this morning is the late Fred Donald, who was the chair of the board at the first church I served, up in northern Maine. Fred had been chair of the board for 35 years, and he remained chair after I was gone.

Fred loved the church, which he had been raised in; his job as chief loan officer at a bank in town; his family; and his camp out on B Stream. A camp in northern Maine is a cabin in the woods, and many men have one. Fred had been a widower for some years, and he spent a lot of time out at his camp on B Stream, where a pond had formed behind a beaver dam. You had to walk into the camp, a good half mile. Fred always brought seeds, and chickadees would eat them out of his hand.

Sometimes Fred would have other men back to the camp, like one year when it came time to plan the church canvass. A canvass is the annual attempt by a congregation to raise enough money in pledges from its members and friends to maintain the church in good financial health for the upcoming year, just like we're about to do here at First Parish. Back then in Maine, the several men in charge of such matters hiked in one late afternoon, along with me, Fred feeding the chickadees as we went, the birds not minding the additional members of the party. We got to the camp, Fred made a fire in the stove for warmth, we dined on steaks cooked over a wood fire, and settled down with scotch and cigars to make the canvass preparations. This was thirty years ago.

But mostly, Fred went to his camp by himself. He liked that: the quiet, the isolation, the beavers, the birds. He liked that a lot ... for three or four days. And then he had to get back into town. And here, as he told me, is why:

Fred was very political, which is to say, he thought about, and cared about, issues a lot. He liked to discuss issues and to argue for his own points of view. The trouble was, he went on doing that in his mind as he sat by himself in the camp on B Stream, and he found

that as the days went by, the arguments of his opponents in his mind became increasingly ill-considered and ignorant and his own views became increasingly cogent and convincing to the extent that he would find himself increasingly outraged and upset.

And Fred, bless his heart, would know that it was time to get back into town where people who disagreed with him did so for much better reasons than he had imagined, and his own arguments didn't always come across so wise out loud.

I haven't mentioned what Fred's political outlook happened to be. In case you're curious, Fred thought of himself as a very conservative Republican, and he was, although some of his views differed from the party's current platform. Theologically he was a declared follower of the old school of Scottish skeptics, and would have been disturbed by the piety of the party today. And he was a true believer in the virtues of strict capitalism. In fact, he thought a church either served a market and deserved to grow, or it deserved to die. One of capitalism's virtues, he thought, is that people succeed or fail on their own merit and effort. It encourages personal self-improvement. He would have been unhappy with his party's current attempt to eliminate the estate tax, which to him should be heavy enough that every person has to make it (or not) on his or her own.

A bright person, he thought about and cared about such matters. A bright person, he knew enough to come in from the camp on B Stream when his arguments were so persuasive to himself, that his opponents seemed certainly stupid.

I have treasured that about Fred and about the religious movement he was devoted to, which is ours. I can get caught up in some political or social issue or other, and before you know it, hard as I try to give the other side its best defense, I've overwhelmed it with my own internal ethical logic. Like Fred, I need real people, real opponents, people like Fred, people whose points of view are more substantial than I might assign them. I need a community. I need you. We all need each other, for our own individual growth, for the challenge and humility and balance we can gain, and for the good of the church as a whole and its ability to be a place that nurtures conscience, justice, and thoughtfulness. Which is part of why I get so enthused about the chance to pledge that's coming up.

Fred #2 is Fred Salvucci. Some of you will remember him as the Secretary of Transportation for the Commonwealth. Indeed, you may have worked with him. I did so myself, though before that, back around 1970, before I began my ministry, when I worked for the City of Boston in the Office of Public Service, which oversaw the little city hall program, now long gone. Back then, there were about a dozen small satellite city halls in Boston's neighborhoods. Fred Salvucci was the manager of the office in East Boston, a predominantly Italian section of the city best known as the site of Logan Airport, which is operated by the Massachusetts Port Authority.

As almost always, the Port Authority was thinking of adding new runways, which didn't please East Boston residents, many of whom were already upset at the times and flight patterns of existing flights and the noise they created. These residents felt that they were not being considered in the planning, and that their voices were being ignored. A rumor began circulating that some of those residents were prepared to start firing high-powered rifles at incoming and departing planes. Not surprisingly, given the rumors' sensational and scary nature, the press gave them a lot of attention.

This led to public arguments over whether the Port Authority should back down and negotiate with the residents of East Boston, thereby (it was said) giving in to the threats. Fred Salvucci saw the issue differently.

Fred is still alive, and if he should hear of this sermon and say I've misrepresented him, I will apologize profusely. But what I remember him saying in the central office at city hall at that time has stayed with me ever since. He said, in any population there is a percentage of people who have the potential to commit acts of horrible mayhem. Now I know, some would argue that we all have that potential, and maybe so, but in some extreme, remote way. Fred was referring to people in whom the possibility of drastic action is potent enough that they might open fire on planes that upset them.

As I recall, he tossed out 10% as a figure. But even if you prefer a much smaller number, like 1%, there are such people in any population. Fred's point was that these people typically don't act on their destructive impulses because the surrounding society would disapprove. Though they may feel mad enough to shoot at a plane, they don't because if it were known that one did so, one's mother would be humiliated, one's brother's fiancée would put the wedding on hold, the guys at the neighborhood bar would stop talking and all but glare when one walked in.

So for him it wasn't capitulation but just good sense to make sure the residents of East Boston received enough attention and respect that they didn't give up hope, give up their sense of being part of a society in whose civilized values they had cause to feel invested.

The Port Authority might still build new runways and the neighbors get hopping mad, but not so mad as to let the restraining force of social norms collapse.

I know, there's more to life than that. Destructive people are also deterred by the chance of being caught. Civilized values are also maintained by police.

But I think Fred's viewpoint is also true, and it comes back to me in a variety of settings, as, for instance, in thinking about how best we might protect ourselves nationally from the threat of terrorism. To the degree that that threat originates in Islamic settings among that ten or one percent of the potentially monstrous, it would seem important that the rest of those societies believe in the social norms that help deter such evildoing. As has been said, if radical Islam is to be defeated, it will require the commitment of moderate Islam.

This is not my argument against the invasion. Such as it was, I made that case last week, along with Erin. As we said then, we could be wrong. It may be that the proposed military action is necessary and worth undertaking. It may be that it is foolish to imagine that al Qaeda will be hindered in the least in their endeavors by the feelings of the governments and residents of the countries in which they operate.

I just want the idea out there, and maybe it does apply, to some degree. I think so. It comes to mind when I think of the Palestinians and Israelis as well. But mostly I wanted to suggest that in some general way, civilization depends on the vast majority of people who are basically good folks believing they are members of that civilization, are valued, and have a stake in the social norms that allow that civilization to exist, whether we're talking about the whole world, combinations of nations, our country, our communities, our families, or our cherished congregation.

In every setting, from the global to the most local, things can go badly wrong when people get to feeling left out, or for any other reason let down the level of civil behavior. I like it that as a church we do as well as we do now at constraining potential disturbances of destructive sorts by the expectations we have of each other and of ourselves, that together we try to be a community where there are norms like freedom, forgiveness, and forbearance, standards of behavior like decency, responsibility, love, respect, and care. Which is another part of why I get so enthused about the chance to pledge that's coming up.

And then there's the third Fred, one who will come as no surprise to anyone who has glimpsed at the insert in the order of service, where you'll see the words to two of the favorite songs written by Fred Rogers, longtime star of the children's TV program, "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood."

I once gave a sermon about my being, for the most part, a nice person, and the benefits but also the drawbacks in such a personality. Well, when it comes to niceness, my candle can't compare to the lighthouse of niceness that Fred Rogers was, and I cannot think of one drawback to it (except that some children found him too sweet for their taste). Everyone who knew him or met him or worked with him said he was just as nice as he seemed on TV.

In the little time that remains, I'd like to share a few of his own words, more of which you can find and enjoy on his website. He wrote there,

"Have you had people who have touched you — not moved you in order to manipulate you — but touched you inside-to-inside? Take a minute to think of at least one person who helped you to become who you are inside today. Someone who was interested in you for who you really are...someone you feel really accepted the essence of your being. Just one minute...one minute to think of those who have made a real difference in your life."

You see, I think Fred Rogers is just that person for many people today, and thanks to reruns on TV, he will go on having that wonderful power. It makes me wonder, how many of us could still be that person, could still provide that help for others in the days and years ahead.

"As human beings," he wrote, "our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has—or ever will have—something inside that is unique to all time. It's our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression."

We need communities where we can hope to be our own most singular selves, which value our uniqueness now and in the unfolding of our futures ... just as we need places for our own individual growth, for the challenge and humility and balance we can gain ... places that nurture conscience, justice, and thoughtfulness ... places where there are norms like freedom, forgiveness, and forbearance, and standards of behavior like decency, responsibility, love, respect, and care.

Which is asking a lot, and here at First Parish, we may not always pull it off in every detail. But we try, and to remarkable degree, we succeed, thanks to all of you.

Which leaves me yet again enthused – as I hope you are feeling, too – enthused about the chance to pledge, to support the First Parish, because here we embody the religious values of three Freds, and because here, arriving from our various towns, together we make a neighborhood for ourselves.