

THOMAS STARR KING

A Sermon Delivered on December 7, 2003
at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts
by the Rev. Ken Sawyer

Here it is December, when, because of a birth this month, many, many years ago, we may recall a life of special meaning to us religious people who seek inspiration and encouragement in our own dedication to the quest for life on earth more holy, kind, and free. So today I would have us remember ... Thomas Starr King.

True, before the month is out we will remember as well another fellow, from longer ago though much more widely remembered, another prophet in his time like King was in the mid nineteenth century.

I should confess that a part of why I, a Unitarian Universalist minister, tell his story is that he is among the most celebrated of our number. Mighty mountains are named after him in New Hampshire and California. His statue stands in Golden Gate Park. Schools are named after him across the country. And perhaps most impressively, one of the two statues representing the state of California in the Congressional Hall of Statues in Washington is of Thomas Starr King.

But his religious views are not irrelevant to his story, and by themselves are worthy of note. So before passing on to his great adventures on the west coast, let's return him to the Hollis Street Church in Boston and note some of the most striking emphases of his ministry.

King served the Hollis Street Church for eleven years, beginning at the age of 24, after several years following in his father's footsteps as minister of the Universalist Church in Charlestown. Several things were notable about the call. There was his youth, and his lack of any college or seminary training, since he had had to go to work at 15 upon his father's death. He would later refer to himself as "a graduate of the Charlestown Navy Yard," where he served as bookkeeper. But all the while he kept on reading and studying, attending lectures at Harvard and local churches, and pretty soon no less than Theodore Parker was using him as a stand-in guest preacher.

Then came a small Universalist church, then the Charlestown church, and then Hollis Street. The call to Hollis Street was also notable for the difficulty of the task King undertook, since the church had declined badly as a result of internal division over the slavery issue. This was 1848. But the most remarkable thing was that Hollis Street Church was Unitarian, back when that was an entirely different denomination than the Universalists. King was a pioneer in bridging the gap; his remarks upon the differences between the two are classic:

"The number is increasing among the Unitarians who feel and say that the two bodies (Unitarians and Universalists) are called by Providence to serve the same glorious ends. People often ask what the precise difference is between the two parties. I heard a gentleman say once that the distance between the two parties was the distance between two parlors of a house that were separated by folding doors. Both rooms are under the same roof. One-half the folding door has been thrown open; let the other half be rolled back, that the company may be one, or that there may be free passage. A friend of mine

asked me, not long ago ... whether I am a Universalist or a Unitarian. I said to him, as I say here, that both parties have essentially the same mission and objects, that they ought to be indissolubly united.... You have heard, perhaps, of the dispute between the Universalist and the Unitarian laymen as to the theological difference between the two parties, and of how the Universalist summed it up. ‘the Universalists believe that God is too good to damn us forever, and the Unitarians believe that you are too good to be damned.’”

Starr King was a smashing success at Hollis Street, for he was a great preacher, and he extended his notoriety and his income by tours throughout the east, as far west as St. Louis. His church flourished, but the heavy labors poorly affected his 120-pound body. His usual relaxation involved walking in the mountains, and his one published book was a collection of newspaper pieces he wrote about the White Mountains. But finally the burden was insupportable, and he had need of respite. Rejecting calls from larger churches in other cities, he chose to accept a call to the young church in San Francisco as a way of easing his workload. This would not be the result.

But before sending him off to the west coast, let’s finish sketching in the passions of his preaching. There was his universality, his openness to the multitude of Christian witnesses and to the validity of other faiths. There was never the slightest touch of exclusiveness about his message. This followed from an understanding of religion as a matter of moral concern. He made much of Christianity and its greatness, but precisely because he understood Christianity in the broadest sense, as that impetus toward moral, loving action, that drive toward social justice, that he took to be the heart of the gospel of Jesus.

He said, “Wherever a bloody law is expunged from the statute-book of a people, the finger of Jesus has passed in mercy across its code; wherever sounds a rebuke of slavery, a condemnation of war, a plea for the poor, an appeal for an unpopular cause, -- in whatever accents, speech, or emphasis we listen to the music of the common brotherhood [brother-and-sisterhood, we might say], it is the onward, swelling chorus, reverberating through the arches and corridors of centuries, to accompany and sustain that perfect melody that arose eighteen hundred years ago in Palestine, like incense from the heart of Christ.”

His commitment was never doctrinal. “The most prominent argument for Christianity,” he wrote, “is the practical one, -- what it has done, what it is doing, for [humanity.]” Christianity, that is to say, is valid by virtue of the moral concern it engenders. He did not hold the skeptic wrong or sinful or damned; rather, he posed to the skeptic the practical injunction, “Produce your truth, your morality, your type of character that shall be seen to be higher than Christianity, that we too may have it.”

The final judge of any faith is the lives it produces, the commitment it elicits to love and justice and the alleviation of suffering. “Church order is not religion,” he wrote, “sacraments are not religion, conclusions about the Trinity and defenses of the Divine Unity are not religion. These are bark and roots and fibre and twigs. Religion is fruit.” It is what you do.

But as impressive as all that may be, King would not be the historical figure he is if he had gone from Boston to Cincinnati. But he went to San Francisco instead and became, as one article called him, “The Preacher Who Saved California’s Soul.”

Once again in California his church began to flourish, and again he took joy in the mountains. But whatever relaxation he may have hoped for was not to last long, for as the election of 1860 approached, King could not help but turn his lecture tours and pulpit addresses into calls for the election of Lincoln. Because if Christianity is a matter of social concern, a witness to the divine call to justice and righteousness, the practitioner can do no less than throw whatever weight he or she can muster into the effort to eradicate slavery.

Only 7 of the 53 newspapers in the state favored Lincoln. The population was largely composed of people of southern Democratic background. Threats were made against King's life, he was burned in effigy, but he persisted, and not just among the growing ranks of his parishioners but in the mining camps, even in Virginia City, the citadel of secession.

Because the Democratic vote split between Douglas and Breckenridge, Lincoln actually won in California. But the Democrats won nearly all the state offices, and the more serious battle was yet to be waged. With Lincoln as president-elect, there was strong feeling for California becoming a separate country. When the Confederacy was established, the issue was redrawn: which side would California join?

Starr King entered the fray with greater vigor than ever. Of the two leaders of the anti-slavery forces before his arrival, one had been killed in a duel and the other had moved to Oregon. Leadership of the effort to keep California in the Union fell to Starr King. Attacks on him became sharper than ever. The editor of the paper in the mining town of Sonora called King a "clerical charlatan, hypocrite and double-distilled humbug ... a fair representation of the rabid, fanatical, Godless school of Boston political preachers."

The task set King was immense. Most Californians were, as I said, of southern origin. Many others were northerners but also Democrats, from the Douglas wing. But King's talents and energies were likewise immense. I cannot resist quoting a bit. "On Washington's Birthday, 1861, [King] spoke for 2 ½ hours to an auditorium holding over 1,000 people on how people should remember George Washington by preserving the Union that Washington created. Afterward, King recalled, 'Mrs. [John C.] Fremont was out and told me she hadn't been so stirred in years. A son of old Vanderbilt, a lieutenant in the army, stayed to be introduced and tell me his joy. I pitched into Secession, Concession and Calhoun, right and left, and made the Southerners applaud. I pledged California to a Northern Republic and to "a flag that should have no treacherous threads of cotton in its warp," and the audience came down in thunder. At the close it was announced that I would repeat it the next night, and they gave me three rounds of cheers.'"

In what is described as "his most powerful talk," dealing with his hero, Daniel Webster, he said, "Rebellion sins against the Mississippi; it sins against the coast line; it sins against the ballot box; it sins against oaths of allegiance; it sins against public and beneficent peace; and it sins, worse of all, against the cornerstone of American progress and history and home – the worth of the laborer and the rights of man. It strikes for barbarism against civilization."

I could go on forever. Great stuff. At one point he gathered 40,000 people to a rally in San Francisco. As the 1861 elections for governor approached, he barnstormed the state with the Republican candidate for governor [Leland Stanford] and with Bret

Harte, both parishioners of his. And the Republican won. Almost unbelievably, California had been won to the Union cause.

That is the first half of King's religion-in-action on the coast. That battle won, he threw himself into the effort to raise money for the U. S. Sanitary Commission, later to be called the American Red Cross, which had just been founded by Unitarian minister Henry Bellows to provide medical care to the war-wounded. He is credited with having raised over one and a quarter million dollars, more than a fourth of all contributions in the nation.

He was also active in forwarding the interests of blacks and the Chinese in San Francisco. In the words of Edward Everett Hale, "here is a heart as large as the world, so that you can not make it understand that it should hold back from any service to be rendered to any human cause."

His final monumental task was a new building to house the ever-growing First Church congregation in San Francisco, and this, too, was accomplished. But despite his attempts to rejuvenate himself among the California peaks, his health was more and more fragile; and in March of 1864, at the age of 39, he died of pneumonia contracted on top of a case of diphtheria he had been trying to ignore.

Lives like Starr King's have special meaning to many people, and the mourning was nationwide, cutting across boundaries of denomination and region. Twenty thousand came to pay final tribute. Bret Harte and John Greenleaf Whittier wrote poems to his memory, Whittier calling him "priest of Freedom." Senator Hiram Johnson said that King had "earned for himself the immortal epitaph, 'He saved his State for the Union.'"

Starr King also established Unitarianism on the west coast with a prominence and vitality it has never lost, and our UU seminary in Berkeley bears his name. He was devoted to his family, he loved nature, he had a fine sense of humor and an earnest dedication to his highest ideals.

It's good to remember lives like Thomas Starr King's. They have special meaning to us religious people who go on seeking inspiration and encouragement in our own dedication to the quest for life on earth more holy, kind, and free.