

“347 YEARS OF WORKING TOGETHER: THREE WAYS OF DESCRIBING FIRST PARISH HISTORY”

The First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts
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The Rev. Ken Sawyer

It's amazing what people can do, working together, a fact that will no doubt be in evidence this afternoon. And it's amazing what individuals can do, like those who organized today's work day, Todd Leib and Bill Morrison in particular.

It was a combination at work in this congregation from its earliest days, from the group of colonists from Watertown who petitioned to settle here, arriving in 1638. They had to organize the division of land and the roles that needed to be filled for the settlement to survive and prosper. And they needed to come together as a religious community.

They no doubt started having religious services in their homes right away, not only on Sunday morning but at times during the week as well, as had been the Puritan custom in England, where they had all been living no more than a decade before. By 1640 they were ready to declare themselves a church and settle Edmund Brown as their called minister.

Those of you who are new here may have wondered why we – like other congregations rooted in the old Puritan Congregational Standing Order, the various First Parishes – say we were “gathered” in 1640, rather than founded or established. It recognizes that the church here – meaning not the building but the covenanted congregation – was created not from the outside but as an independent act of a particular group of people, who by the act of covenanting together in 1640 gathered themselves into a church.

By 1643 they were able to build their first meeting house. It, like the second and third, was located in what is now North Cemetery on the road to Sudbury center. At the time, Sudbury and Wayland were one town, called Sudbury. Eventually there would be a second church to serve the town on the west side of the river, right where the Sudbury church still is, and then two separate towns, with our side becoming East Sudbury, later Wayland.

And here we are still, 367 years later, in our fifth meeting house, dating from 1815. Erin spoke last week about change being one thing that can be counted on. When I spoke to the First Parish Future Planning Committee this week, as an example I noted that this was simply the town church for most of its lifetime. It wasn't until 1828 that the Trinitarian minority decided to pull out and form their own church. Liz LeBaron found a note in the archives this week that noted that this happened after the dissidents held a series of meetings next door in what was then the Green Store, now Kirkside, with the leading evangelical preacher of the day, Henry Ward Beecher's famous father Lyman, to whom I referred in my last sermon.

In any case, five years later the Commonwealth of Massachusetts became the last place in the country to disestablish – which meant the town no longer owned the meeting house (which we were given) nor paid the minister’s salary, as had been the case for most of the life of this congregation. Not that disestablishment was complete – when I arrived here, the town still plowed the church parking lots, and the clock in our steeple still belongs to the town, as does the clock in the Methodist Church steeple.

In any case, fifty years later this congregation totaled twenty-two people and hadn’t taken in a new member in twenty-five years. Then came the railroad and the town and church made a comeback. Still, as late as 1950 we shared a minister with the Sudbury Unitarian Church. Then came Route 128, suburbanization, and boom years, once we bounced back from a rough patch during the McCarthy era of the early ‘50s.

And here we are still, and about as large and vibrant as we have ever been, and getting more so all the time. It’s amazing what people can do, working together.

In my last sermon, I said that since it was my first of a new church year, one might expect me to say, “What a fine congregation and fine religion we have here -- it’s going to be a great year” – which is exactly what I said again at the end of the sermon, after having gone off in a whole new direction for the subsequent twenty minutes, hoping to avoid predictability.

But that meant that twice I averred that ours is a fine religion, our Unitarian Universalism. That idea no doubt surprises few of you, because here you are here. Even if you are really new, you could hardly be surprised to think that the congregation likes its own religion. Extremely rare is the minister who begins a new church year by welcoming congregants back to their so-so religion. “Welcome Back to Our Church: Hey, It Could Be Even Worse” – that’s just not the sermon with which to kick off the year.

But I can imagine a few folks discomfited or confused by the notion that what we have here is a religion. As a word, “religion” or “being religious” doesn’t always come with positive connotations or at least ones that would apply to us. I’ll tell you a true story:

My predecessor’s predecessor, Ken LaFleur, filled this pulpit in the latter ‘60s, and ably. Very ably, as some of you here can testify, giving wonderful sermons with great aplomb. Having read some, and having heard them spoken of, I doubt there was often anything about them that was not somewhere in the mainstream of our UU religion.

When I arrived some years later, there was a middle-aged fellow in the church who said that years before his father, who lived in a near-by town, went church-shopping for the family; attended worship here; and afterwards went home to tell his wife that there was a church for them.

Why? Because, he declared glowingly, “The minister isn’t religious at all!”

This was not only sufficient to bring them into First Parish, but when Ken took up a new call in Hingham, the couple moved there to continue as his parishioners. At least that’s what their son told me.

Bless their hearts, but I don’t think man’s observation was quite right, though he may have made it with appropriate inflection so it was clear he meant that Ken wasn’t overly pious as a person or theological in his preaching.

But being a member here is indeed a way of being religious, in the positive sense. Ours is a religion, and always has been, even if the content of that religion has evolved enormously over time.

If religion requires a fixed, immutable set of dogmas and prescribed rituals, we do not make the cut, nor would we want to. That's part of what our religion believes. Because we do have beliefs, but not dogma, just as we have practices, even rituals, but not of the rigid, changeless sort. (Hey, this year we're even changing Christmas Eve – as in fact we have before, about every ten years, even though it can seem like a ritual cast in stone.)

Back then in 1640, we would even have qualified as a religion by the narrowest of definitions, as we had those fixed dogmas and rituals. The Sudbury covenant of 1640 was signed by Calvinists, people fiercely devoted to a theology involving sin and salvation, the Lordship of Jesus, eternal punishment and reward, and more.

But as those loosened and then drifted away, I say we were still a religion, albeit an evolving one, by a better, broader definition, because we went on trying in generation after generation to meet the human need for what religion has to offer, in religion's good aspect.

I am not going to dwell on it today, but as we know, religion has its other aspect, its potential sanctification of presumption, stupidity, harsh judgment, cruelty, and violence.

But it also can be a place and an aspect of our lives that foster community, kindness, humility, curiosity, openness, reason, acceptance, gratitude, caring, service, freedom, peace, order, decency, understanding, wisdom, beauty, forgiveness, mercy, and love -- all the better sides of human nature.

Ever since 1640, through all the changes in theology and practice, this church has always offered as best it knew how a home for that quest, a common effort to have and be that kind of religion. It's amazing what people can do, working together.

I think the history of First Parish can be told as one long story of which we can be proud. I think that story embodies a continuing commitment to values that we can celebrate. And at the same time I think it tells a commendable story of growth and enlargement, as those values have found fuller expression through the ages.

There are several ways of telling the tale. Let me try two. My colleague Jack Mendelsohn once wrote, "We of this congregation are who we are because we choose to take our stand with a legacy, a spirit, that pulls for the positive possibilities in the human endowment. We want to amplify our capacity to counsel with each other, to make better sense of the world, to be useful, and beneath all to keep our hearts open to human affection. We want to ally ourselves with others who are consciously striving, in a faithful religious community, to explore and experience the heights and depths within the human frame, one that fosters the fuller use of our hearts and minds."

"Pulling for the positive" – in nearly every age that this congregation has lived through, in all the changes of theology and language, we have ever tended to be on the side of things that were pulling for the positive.

This may be hard to see in the midst of the earliest renditions of our message, but doesn't the very fact of their presence here, as courageous riskers for a more consecrated

life, testify to their hope-making spirit? Even in the bombast of the most Calvinist of my predecessors, Israel Loring, we can see seeds of a respect for human capability, at least for reason, seeds that will take deep root with his successor, William Cooke, who began to move the church beyond the negative doctrines of predestination and native depravity in the mid eighteenth century.

We have ever since preferred to picture a positive future that could still be made, for ourselves and for the world, preferred to imagine that the freedom and responsibility for what is to come is at least to some degree in our own hands, preferred to set ourselves on the side of hope. I like to think it is not because we are naïve or stupid, or at least not too often. I think we know that life is dire, life can be tragic, life will not be made perfect, life resists even its improvement. But our message has ever been the one that still urges us toward improvement, that hopes to strengthen us in the struggle, that seeks to console us in the losses and to renew the buoyancy of our spirits.

That's us, and this too: a growing breadth. Again, it is a way of telling our story that speaks both of continuity and of progress. We have long been a liberal people, insofar as the age was opening to the understanding that a community of faith could gather in worship and in mutual support without conformity of belief.

Now here you've really got to strain in that first century to see the seeds if what you look at is the ministers. But the people of the town were a feisty bunch, and when Edmund Brown and his ecclesiastical colleagues got together in 1648 to define for the colony what churches should all agree to believe in and practice, Sudbury's representative voted against it.

With William Cooke, the tolerance of the church's message makes it to the pulpit and becomes preeminent. It was not in what he rejected that Cooke made his mark, but in what he allowed open for individual choice.

In the centuries that followed, the church's toleration was tested again and again. Need one accept the Bible as literally true to belong here? Need one even see it as especially inspired? Can one not hope to draw inspiration from other religious sources, indeed, directly from life itself? Need one consider Jesus to be God's only-begotten son? Or even God's special mediator? Or even central? Or even important? Can one be religious and not believe in god? Is one welcome here if a leftist or a right-winger or gay or single or a child?

In dealing with Transcendentalists and free religionists and religious humanists, we have sometimes had to struggle, to endure a bit of the pain that comes with stretching; but we have always been one place that would work through the pain on behalf of some enduring commitment to try to understand and to welcome the outsider, the dissident, the heretic, the stranger.

These are issues that define our deepest convictions, upon which we make our choices to set ourselves here and not somewhere else in finding a religious home. We choose to set ourselves in this home, this legacy and spirit, that we might take a stand on behalf of human difference and freedom, compassion and caring, and that we might draw strength and wisdom from a tradition that believes there is something positive in us all and tries to help us find it and live it out more powerfully and fully.

It's amazing what people can do – what this congregation has done and does still – working together.