

THE ONE AND THE MANY

A sermon preached by Dr. John H. Nichols to the First Parish of Wayland on
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As we grow older we learn that people are much more complicated than we thought. Those whom we admired when we were eight or ten often turned out to have feet of clay. Eventually we discover that they were not entirely admirable though they accomplished a great deal for which we are in their debt. Men and women who accomplish great things sometimes have dark sides to their character as well.

Consider, for example, the Puritans. In grade school textbooks we saw them heading off to worship in drab clothing and pointed hats. We got the false impression they were a rather joyless lot, but we were also told that they came to this country to have religious freedom joylessly. We learned that the Puritans had suffered under the yoke of oppression, and they risked everything they had for this freedom.

Viewing the world through the lens of a child's innocence, we first took the Puritans search for religious freedom to mean they wanted a country where they could worship freely alongside Catholics and Jews and Quakers and Pagans. But when, in high school, we made our second trip through American history we discovered that such was not the case. The Puritans did want to worship freely, but they also wanted to worship in a colony where everyone believed exactly what they did. Accordingly, they banished dissenters from their community, and they executed those who resisted banishment.

Does this close the book on the Puritans? When we were ten we believed they were freedom fighters. But when we were sixteen, we decided that they were just another crop of oppressors. Being men and women who lived in the Seventeenth Century, they did not possess the enlightened ideas of the Twenty first Century or even of the Eighteenth Century. As always, with every people and with every individual there is more to the story.

The Puritans left England, in part, because they believed that God spoke directly to every individual who was open to the Truth, and they were not about to cooperate with the politics of a country ruled by another powerful church. The idea that God speaks to each of us and we ought to be listening might sound like fanaticism to some but it became the foundation of American democracy. In several generations people came to believe that if we were important enough for God to speak to us, then perhaps we were important enough to have our own ideas about government and politics and even about God.

In other words, this stiff necked, difficult Puritan people --

people who would probably not be welcome at a UU potluck laid the foundations for the Unitarian movement in this country as well as the New England town meeting and for American democracy.

So, let us keep in mind the precious but frequently unrecognized gifts of difficult people, as we move further back in time to another set of difficult people. I want to consider the story of Hanukkah and the Maccabees...

For most of its history Jerusalem was – as one of my colleagues has said – “a small jewel in somebody else’s big crown.” The land of the Jews was essentially a chattel state that was passed around among various clients of the Greek civilization that had been created two centuries before by Alexander the Great.

The Greek and Jewish cultures mingled comfortably for many generations in the land of the Jews. Well-educated upper class Jews were attracted both to the mysticism and the skepticism that their Greek neighbors had brought to the conversation. Like many people today, they thought that it was wrong to believe in fixed or lasting truths. They thought life was an open market place of competing philosophies and that the sophisticated person would learn to pick and choose from the banquet table of differing religions but never become too attached to any one of them.

Among other things the Hellenistic ruling class brought with them the classic Greek appreciation for the human body. They built a gymnasium where men customarily exercised naked. They built it right under the walls of the Temple in Jerusalem. This sort of public nudity was an offense to classic Judaism, and for the conquerors to have built it next to the holiest spot in Israel was a way of saying, “We are the future, and we aren’t particularly concerned how much that troubles you.”

In fact, many of the young wealthy Jewish men were also exercising naked in the gymnasium. The leadership families – the Jewish elite – were being drawn to the easy going, undemanding, sophisticated ways of their Greek landlords. As Rabbi Irving Greenberg puts it in his classic book, the Jewish “Traditions of separation and distinctiveness seemed increasingly parochial, old fashioned and embarrassing to well to do Jews.” Actually were it not for the revolt that is about to happen, the Jewish faith and traditions would have disappeared entirely – having been slowly absorbed into Hellenistic culture.

What precipitated the Maccabean rebellion was a change of leaders in the Hellenistic Empire. Under the new leadership, the Jews were not merely regarded as the pious but as harmless relics of a dead tradition. They were directly insulted. Their Temple was taken over and consecrated to the worship of Zeus.

Once again, it is important to remember there were many Jews who were finally willing to go along with this. They preferred the sophisticated cynicism of the Seleucid Empire to the old fashioned, embarrassing fundamentalist rigidity of more traditional Jews.

The revolt against the Greek influence was begun by families from the Jewish laboring classes who had been watching with quiet despair as those they had looked to for Jewish leadership became increasingly Hellenized and indifferent to the loss of their own religion. These worker families were the Maccabees. To make a long story very much shorter, the Maccabees took to the hills and gathered strength in numbers. At a time when the bulk of the Syrian armies were occupied elsewhere they descended on Jerusalem, and they took it back.

Now remember I said earlier that the Maccabees were fundamentalist Jews. They were very orthodox. They believed there was only one way for Jews to worship God properly, and they were fighting for the right to worship in that way. In other words, they did not want religious freedom, as you and I understand it. Like the Puritans they wanted to live in a world where theirs was the only way to worship God. So when they entered Jerusalem they first liberated the Temple of all of its Pagan trappings, and then next they dealt rather forcefully with their fellow Jews who had been cooperating with the Syrians. They forcibly circumcised many young men whose parents had neglected to observe this mark of Judaism.

As I said earlier, history is messy and complicated, and it doesn't usually leave us with clear-cut heroes and heroines. Thus, over the course of many retellings the Maccabees became heroic freedom fighters as if they would have agreed with Thomas Jefferson who defended the rights of all men and women to worship freely. Such was not the case. They were more like our Puritans. Actually, when we come to think about it, the real story is more impressive although it requires a bit more understanding.

Think about this for a minute. The Maccabees may have been and probably were rigid and disagreeable people, but what they did through their revolt had the effect of preserving the Jewish tradition. Many Jewish historians are clear that had the Maccabean rebellion not happened, it is entirely possible that most traces of the Jewish religious and cultural traditions would have been swallowed up into the Hellenic Civilization and then into the Roman Empire. This raises the question what would we have lost if the difficult, rigid, crusty, unbending Maccabeans had not prevailed?

We would have lost the Jewish tradition entirely. This means, among other things, that we would have lost the notion of Justice. The idea of Social Justice suggests that some rights are inherent in the nature of things, and some protections are inherent in the nature of things.

Social Justice in the Jewish tradition envisions a universal standard of fairness. For those who are not able to compete for wealth and power, justice in the Jewish tradition envisions a high standard of generosity toward the poor. Had the Maccabees lost, these ideas might well have floated around but they would have been notions, never commitments for those of us raised in the West. To the extent that we are committed to justice, we can thank the Maccabees for preserving the Jewish heritage.

I think it is also fair to say that without the Maccabean victory we would not have Christianity. Jesus wouldn't have been born into the Jewish tradition, because there wouldn't have been one, and he wouldn't have transmitted the essence of his own Jewish teachings to those who followed him. Among those teachings was the idea that each individual is created in the image of God, carries the blessing of God and is capable of understanding the wisdom of God. That idea, as I said earlier, became the foundation of democracy. Therefore the Maccabean revolt did actually lead indirectly to the establishment of religious freedom although it was certainly never their intent to do so.

The Maccabean rebellion was not about religious freedom. It was about the insistence of a stubborn people on defending rather than trading away one central religious idea: the sovereignty of God and God's expectations of us. Because of that insistence our world went one way and not another – and as a consequence we do enjoy a larger measure of freedom with more justice than most peoples could ever have imagined.

The tradition is that when the Maccabees retook the Temple they wanted to cleanse it of all foreign influences by burning consecrated oil in the sacred lamps of the Temple. As tradition further has it, there did not appear to be enough oil to burn for more than one day, but miraculously the lamps burned for eight days until a new supply of oil could be gotten through enemy lines. Hence there are eight candles lit, one for each day that Hanukkah is celebrated.

These candles celebrate both the miracle of the oil and the fact of the survival of Jewish ideas and Jewish people despite centuries of attempts to extinguish them. The miracle may not be that the oil lasted for eight days but that the Maccabees felt they had any reason at all to be hopeful for their cause in the face of the Greek empire. It is the miracle of hope against all reasonable odds that has sustained so many lost causes until they won.

I would not have the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah be anything other than what it is. But if I were to frame a ceremony that would explain the celebration to gentiles I would do it this way. I would light the first candle for the Maccabees, who risked everything they had and took on an empire in order to defend their religious beliefs and practices. I would light the second candle for Judaism, whose miraculous survival has preserved some of the most important ideas of Western civilization.

I would light the third candle for the mystery of creation, which reminds us that we were not intended for slavery – either that imposed by others or that imposed by ourselves upon ourselves. I would light the fourth candle for social justice, a central idea of the Jewish tradition kept alive by the Maccabean rebellion. I would like the fifth candle for compassion. Like justice, it is not just an interesting notion. We must make it a personal commitment.

I would light the sixth candle for democracy, an outgrowth of the Jewish belief that each of us has a covenant with God to use our freedom wisely and well. I would light the seventh candle for religious freedom, which is an outgrowth of democracy that allows us to appreciate that many beautiful and varied sources of the human heritage.

Finally I would light the last candle for difficult people. We all have difficult people – like the Maccabees and the Puritans – in our lives. They take stubborn, uncompromising stands and place themselves directly in the way of what we consider progress. Sometimes, we conclude that we need to move around them, and we do, but sometimes they hold on just long enough to help us to see the situation differently – perhaps even to remind us of commitments we had neglected.

I would light one last candle for difficult people not because I want to encourage those who consistently offer only thoughtless resistance to change or to dignify people who are chronic antagonists with no positive commitments of their own. I would light that one last candle to remind myself and others – as the Maccabees and Puritans have reminded us – that those who stand alone on principle may be offering us a second or a third chance to take a long look at our own principles.