

“Inheriting Freedom”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

March 12, 2017

Imagine a Sunday morning here more than a century ago. The Civil War has recently begun after the decades long tension finally erupted into open battle. An older woman, in her early 60's, slips into a pew. The Meetinghouse windows are clear. Only 50 years old, the silica has not yet flowed into the soft rippled patterns we see today.ⁱ The minister, Rev. Edmund Hamilton Sears, stands here in this pulpit as he has for a better part of two decades. A friend of the Rev. Sears, the woman approves of his strong stance against slavery. Half of her lifetime ago, she had published a bold anti-slavery book, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*.

In 1833, the book's publication cost her much. She lost the editorial job that had helped to sustain her and her husband for more than a decade. She lost readers for the various other books for women and children for which she had grown famous. Nonetheless, as she later explained, the powerful abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, “got hold of the strings of my conscience, and pulled me into Reforms. . . . Old dreams vanished, old associates departed, and all things became new.”

This willingness to get involved in pressing issues of justice persisted throughout her life. She had just spent the winter living in Medford. Nearer the action of Boston activism, she dove into the work, writing, “When there is anti-slavery work to be done, I feel as young as twenty.”

The service concludes. Perhaps she pauses to speak with Rev. Sears about the War or to some of the other women about the work of gathering supplies for the slaves who were fleeing to Union lines for safety. Then, I imagine that she made her way across the lawn and over the Post Road and over the rail tracks to Boston. Continuing along the road towards Sudbury, she would pass by the Old Burial Ground where one day she will be buried beside her husband.

Returning home, she may have tended first to household needs, but I suspect at some point she found herself at her desk . . . writing. She had spent her lifetime writing. Books and pamphlets, stories and correspondence. Her writing was both the sustenance for her family—she was one of the first women to make a living as a professional writer—and her writing was often the vehicle for her activism. In the years before the war, her letter to John Brown praising him for his raid on Harper's Ferry arsenal was published in the *New York Tribune* to great acclaim and condemnation.

Her pen would not rest until the end. Just two years before her death, she would publish, *Aspirations of the World*, a book of inspirational quotations from the world's religions. After a lifetime of a restless religious search, she had found community in the Free Religious Association—a group of Unitarians who eschewed the boundaries of even a liberal

Christianity. Influenced by the Transcendentalists, the group valued a personal search for meaning and a direct experience of the divine that resisted the boundaries of any one religion. Yet, living in Wayland in those Civil War years and beyond, the woman, Lydia Maria Child, would make sometimes make her way here to this place.

In her lifetime, Lydia Maria Child was an author and an abolitionist, as well as an advocate for women's rights and for the safety and dignity of Native Americans. She lived her life as an activist. Her very first youthful novel, *Hoboken*, told a story of interracial marriage between a white woman and a Native American. From the beginning, she rejected race prejudice. She saw human dignity. For Child, her activism was rooted less in lofty principles of equality or freedom, but in an open-hearted recognition of the human story of suffering experienced by those facing prejudice and discrimination for the color of their skin, their gender, or the money they did not have.

A clue to her motivation for activism can be found in a letter to her friend. She writes that stories for children "should be written with a view to bring the moral emotions into *activity*; such emotions as tenderness towards the ages, kindness towards animals, compassion for the poor and suffering, brotherly feeling towards all races of men, and all religions." (quoted, p 56)

For Child, moral action emerged from an emotionally attuned experience of life. Ethical action wasn't about following the rules to appease a powerful God. Ethical action was about feeling something was wrong and then doing something about it.

Although Child never joined a Unitarian congregation, she spent her life surrounded by Unitarian ministers, thinkers, and activists. Her words linking moral emotion to action resonate with the Unitarian emphasis on "deeds not creeds." Such a view counsels that human life matters more than being theologically correct. In the Unitarian framework, theological freedom emerges both to break free of religious claims that do not stand up to reason, and to free religion from the defense of dogma in order to serve the needs of people.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are inheritors of this tradition of religious freedom. A tradition that frees us to search for our own understanding of what we believe about God, the Bible, and more. And, a tradition that frees us *for* the work of fighting for human dignity and a more just society.

This shift in religious emphasis away from right interpretation of scripture and correct knowledge of God created great controversy for good reason. Underlying the shift is a major change in how we perceive the moral capacity of humanity—a shift we can see in Lydia Maria Child's life.

Born in 1802, Child was raised by a Calvinist father. In such a view, there was nothing humanity could do to make themselves or the world better other than throwing themselves

on the mercy of God. Any efforts towards improvement were God's spirit moving in a person. Sin had robbed us of our own capacity to do good.

You might recognize a similar viewpoint in those who say, "People are just self-interested and corrupt. You have to assume everyone is out for themselves." Such a view of humanity eschews altruistic cooperation and instead focuses on taking care of oneself and one's own. It also invests in protection against the corrupt impulses of others. You can't trust who is out there. You must protect oneself. Or, trust that God will take care of you. In fact, only God matters because only God is good. Take care of yourself. Honor God. That's the best you can expect in a world full of corrupt and self-serving people.

Lydia Maria Child rejected Calvinism and its dark view of humanity. She instead allied herself with the emerging liberal religious faith in human capacity. Liberal religion claims that the human mind, heart, and will has not been entirely corrupted. Rather, we remain free with the capacity—and the responsibility—to choose our actions. As Unitarian Universalists, we are the inheritors of this tradition of freedom. Freedom *for* the pursuit of goodness and truth. Freedom *for* improving ourselves and our world.

I know that sometimes our UU tradition is described as a freedom *from* beliefs. "You can believe anything you want!" And while we do advocate freedom *from* a required list of religious beliefs, this freedom of religion is a freedom *for* a purpose. As our covenant declares, we gather for the purpose of searching for meaning, caring for each other, and working together for a better world. And, we engage this purpose with an open mind that invites conversation and listening as well as with a loving heart that doesn't lose sight of the precious humanity of the people with whom we interact.

We may not be a tradition that hands down a set of claims to believe or rules to follow, but we are a tradition that invites us into a freedom *for* the purpose of taking responsibility for our own spiritual journey as well as our moral actions. As our covenant guides our community at First Parish, the seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism guides our purpose as a national association of congregations. These seven Principles are not the UU 10 Commandments. There are not rules telling us how to act. Rather they are an expression of the values that we hold in common across more than a thousand congregations. Even more, they are the articulation of a tradition that spans two centuries of people who believe that as humans we have the intellectual and moral capacity to work towards being better people and making the world a better place.

This year our stewardship campaign celebrates this heritage by calling us to "Live our Unitarian Universalist Values." We can live our values in so many ways. We open our minds when we listen to a sermon, a new song, or in conversation in coffee hour. We bring our loving heart to joys and sorrows or when we respond in compassion to injustice—such as standing up for our Muslim neighbors. We search for meaning in small groups and in our Spiritual and Ethical Exploration classes. We care for each other with notes and meals for those who are sick as well as by simply asking, "How are you?" to another. And we work together for a better world when we sit around the table at a social action or S.A.N.E.

meeting as well as when we head to the Urban Ministries for workday. All “five fingers” of our covenant are the promises we make to each other on what belonging to this community means. These are the promises that we support with our time, our money, and our actions.

In every generation, from Lydia Maria Child’s to our own, this place has stood as a community committed to these purposes. While the language of our covenant may have changed, the underlying purposes remain: to seek after religious meaning and experience through worship, education, and shared exploration; to care for each other through our celebrations of joy and in our times of grief and struggle; and to work together to help our larger community move a bit closer to being a just and loving world. Each generation is a steward of this mission—called to continue this work in their own time and for the next generation. To this end, we ask each of you as the members and friends of First Parish to give to this year’s annual stewardship campaign until it feels good that you too are a part of this work.

Also, this year, we invite you to help create a new project, the Lydia Maria Child Fund. The vision of this Fund is to enable us to more boldly live out our UU values. It is a resource to strengthen our covenantal promise to work together for a better world. As with Child’s intention for her writing to inspire action, the goal of the Fund is to move our sympathies into *action* and activism. As I learned in our Social Action Conversations in January, there are many issues that you find compelling and important. This Fund is an opportunity to take action on these issues of economic inequality, environmental justice, women’s rights, the strength of our democracy, and many more issues. The Fund is designed to be flexible and supportive of a range of projects and ideas. It is a Fund that we want to *spend* by supporting your ideas in the coming years. And it is a Fund that needs your financial support. We are very grateful to an anonymous donor who has offered to match your contributions to the Fund up to \$100,000. So, this is an opportunity for us to be *bold* in our action. Together our resources of money and time and energy and imagination can indeed help support action for change. I know that you have many more questions about the Lydia Maria Child Fund. Don’t worry, immediately following the Postlude we’ll have a Q&A session here in the sanctuary with Bill and Ross, our Stewardship co-chairs.

For now, I end by again reminding us that we are inheritors of religious tradition that promotes freedom of belief and freedom *for* moral action. With our time, our money, our energy, and our hands, let us be good stewards of this freedom for the purpose of promoting a more loving and just world for all.

So may it be.
Amen.

ⁱ After the sermon’s initial delivery, a member devoted to the history and care of the building alerted me that despite rumors of glass flowing, the wavy appearance is due to the manufacture of the glass. In the spirit of “search for truth and meaning”, I add this correction and a source <http://www.thefoa.org/tech/glass.htm>. --Stephanie