"Thoreau as Spiritual Activist"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
December 3, 2017

200 years ago, on July 12, 1817, Henry David Thoreau was born 11 miles due north of us. As some of you know, I also live north of here...about 2 miles from where Thoreau was born. I enjoy telling people that my commute to work takes me by Walden Pond—a very fitting thing for a Unitarian Universalist minister! Because of where I live, it was impossible to miss the 200th celebrations of Thoreau this past summer. To get into the spirit, I picked up and read the superb new biography of Thoreau by Laura Dassow Wells. By the time I finished the book, Thoreau's life had become a new source of inspiration for me.

I suspect we all know something about Thoreau. We know of his sojourn at Walden Pond and the book of the same title. We've read his essay "Civil Disobedience" in high school. And, we know some of his quotes:

> *"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately."*
>
> *"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."*
>
> *"Under a government which imprisons any unjustly,*
> *the true place for a just man is also in prison."*

Or...as a bumper sticker reminds us: *"Simplify! Simplify!"*

As Unitarian Universalists, we like to claim Thoreau as one of 'ours'. At his birth in 1817, his family belonged to the First Parish in Concord. But, this was because it was the only church in town. When theological divisions between Unitarians and Trinitarians emerged in the 1820's, a young Thoreau watched as his aunts helped to found the Trinitarian church and his mother, Cynthia, wavered until siding with the Unitarians. Dassow Wells writes, "Henry's response was deep, even visceral: reject it all. The meetinghouse must be unbuilt, for the true church lived in no building and could be confined to no institution." (49) Thoreau would find his 'church' in the woods and on the pond. Indeed, as a young man of 23, he withdrew his membership from First Parish. Somewhat ironically, a framed copy of his resignation hangs at First Parish today. Even so, in the end, his funeral service was held at First Parish and Emerson, the onetime Unitarian minister, delivered his eulogy.

Given his rejection of First Parish and institutional religion, it might seem easy to consider Thoreau the patron saint of the "spiritual but not religious" approach we see today. But, I

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hesitate to say this. Thoreau was a deeply religious man—studying not only the Christian Bible, but also Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, as well as the sacred landscape of trees, mountains, and water. His challenge was not against all religion, but against a religion that confined itself to a building rather than permeating the experience of life.

If we go looking for Thoreau's religion only in his references to God, I think we miss how his wide experience of life spoke to his sense of what was sacred and right and good. For me, Thoreau is an inspirational, religious teacher not because he did (or didn't) attend church, but because of how he lived an integrated life—weaving together the spiritual and the social, the love of nature and the hope for a more just world.

I find this integration in the story of Thoreau's response to the Concord gala celebrating the 10th anniversary of the emancipation of the slaves in the British West Indies. This story weaves together his love of nature, his deep connection to a particular place, his commitment to a morally just society, and his relationship to establishment religion.

Firstly, nature. In her account, Dassow Walls tells us that Thoreau had been back in town for just an hour before he embroiled himself in a town controversy. For the prior number of weeks, he had been walking and wandering across the state. He walked to Mount Monadnock where he spent the night on the summit. Then he walked to western Massachusetts to Mount Greylock. Meeting up with a friend, they wandered some more—before heading east to Concord.

"Concord is my Rome," quipped Thoreau. If there were to be only one take away from Dassow Walls' book, it would be that Concord was not merely backdrop to Thoreau's life, but an integral character in his story. He was born in Concord and buried in Concord—spending the vast majority of his life there in between. When Emerson would travel to Europe...it was Thoreau who stayed in Emerson's Concord home to help with his family. From his father's pencil shop to his aunt's boarding house to Henry's own work as a teacher and a surveyor, the Thoreau family was a part of the town. And, in an era without television or social media, Thoreau played an ongoing role in the local entertainment and enrichment through his involvement with the town Lyceum. Indeed, of all the famous authors Concord celebrates—Emerson, the Hawthornes, the Alcotts—only Thoreau had been born in Concord. Though he would wander the rivers and woods of New England on significant trips, Concord was home.

And so, when he wandered into the streets of Concord that day in 1844, the personalities, the politics, and the possibilities were familiar to him. Nearly two decades before the outbreak of the Civil War, a group of women in Concord had joined the fight against

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slavery. These women, including Thoreau's aunts and mothers, were calling for 'disunion'—rejecting a government that would be in relationship with slaveholders. For the town fathers, including the minister of First Parish, this was too radical.

When the women had invited Frederick Douglass to speak earlier that year, there were strong dissenters. And now, Douglass was back to speak again...alongside the local celebrity, Emerson. Before that day, Emerson had also not taken a strong, public stand against slavery. Yet, a problem remained...where would they speak? They were shut out of the both churches, the Trinitarian and the Unitarian. Although an outdoor space had been offered...it was raining. The courthouse was available...but there was no twitter, not even a phone tree to communicate the gathering to the town. What they did have was the bell of First Parish. But, first they would have to get past the church sexton—the caretaker of the building. The sexton certainly would have known the minister was opposed to the event. He wasn't going to ring the bell and no one really wanted to cross him.

And then Thoreau arrives in town, assesses the situation, and walks right up past the crowd and the sexton . . . and rings the bell.

By this point in his life, Thoreau has already resigned his membership at First Parish. He seemed to already be clear about where his religious loyalties lay—and they were not with the institutional church of First Parish. You might say that he had just returned from his church, or, at least, from a weeks long devotional endeavor of experiencing the divine within woods and rivers, mountains and meadows. I see this flow from wilderness wanderings to civil action as significant. Rather than the mere happenstance of chronology, this combination of a long walk in the woods and bold action in support of what he saw as *right* marks Thoreau as what I'm calling a spiritual activist.

I'm not the only one to use this phrase, spiritual activist, but neither is it a phrase that I'm using in direct reference to a particular author or speaker. The idea of a spiritual activist emerged for me from my reflections on Thoreau as portrayed in Dassow Walls book. In her pages, Thoreau emerges as a person in a particular time and place seeking to live fully with integrity. Activism was not an item on the to-do list of good things . . . it was a matter of doing the right thing as circumstances demanded it. On that day, circumstances demanded that he ring that bell to call the town to confront the moral wrong of slavery.
Although to us Thoreau looms large with a nationally known name in the canon of American thought, he was also simply a man in relationship to a group of people—family, friends, neighbors—with whom he sought to live out his conscience. Of course, Thoreau also loved his solitude and spent a part of every day walking and writing in his journal. Always attentive to the world around him, he needed time and space to both notice the

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world and to reflect upon its meaning. I see his daily attentiveness to life as a tapestry of delight and knowledge as his religion.

Of course, his great text *Walden* recounts his extended experiment of living alone and paying close attention to his world. And yet, he is sometimes criticized as a kind of hypocrite for pretending he was alone, but then walking back to town along the train tracks to dine with his family. Earlier this week, I walked out to his house site on Walden and then to the tracks that still run to Concord. They *are* close—they'd even be visible from the road we drive on past Walden except for a slope of trees. Rather than dismiss this proximity to Concord as a betrayal of his project, I see this as an expression of the integrated life he led. His inner, spiritual search and experience were connected with the particularities of his natural and social environments. They didn't need to be distinct; they couldn't be.

As a child, preachers would denounce those who had a 'Sunday-only' religious life. They implored us to practices of daily prayer, scripture reading, and moral choices. I took this seriously—especially as a teenager. However, it felt like a call to follow a bunch of rules that had been externally prescribed as what I *should* do. I suspect that I'm not the only one here that found their way to Unitarian Universalism because it felt free from such prescriptions. Instead we are part of the free religious tradition—called to follow our conscience rather than the rules of dogma.

And here is where Thoreau can shape our religious lives today. Because even as he boldly lived out his conscience, he did so in community and in relationship to a particular place. In the story of anti-slavery abolition, he may have pulled the bell...but the women, including his family, organized the event. And his friend, mentor, and sometimes critic Emerson was the keynote, not himself. Thoreau would go on to publish Emerson's speech—indicating his role as 'an agent for the Society.' In other words, he worked locally with his friend, family, and town allies to promote national change on behalf of millions he did not personally know. And, his public actions were grounded in his daily spiritual practices of walking, of reflecting, of staying awake and alert to the world around and within himself.

We are gathered here today in the very kind of Meetinghouse and institution that Thoreau denounced. However, I think we can blend *both* Thoreau's sense of a religion that cannot be contained by walls *and* the importance of being in community. I think Thoreau was right—that this one hour, this one place can never contain the fullness of the spiritual experience of being alive, of living rightly in the world. But, I think Thoreau was wrong to outright reject it. Because at its best, religious community can be the place that calls us to our conscience and builds relationships that enable joint action.

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There is so much in our world today that is wrong. Rather than see activism as something we may or may not have time to do, what if we instead committed to staying alert to the world and allowing our actions to flow from our conscience, our values, our sense of what matters not only for our own individual lives, but for our local and national communities as well. Like the divisive years preceding the Civil War, we too are living in a divisive time in which some of our convictions may be unpopular or seem too radical. My hope for us is that we follow our conscience and choose to ring the bell.

So may it be.
Amen.

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