



It was about a year ago this week that I took 25 of you to Boston, to the Boston area for our adult heritage pilgrimage. Who went with me? Look how many people made it back. That's like almost 50%. Like, this is good, good work. That's ministry, just saying. On the trip we learned a lot. We played some bells in the Arlington Street Church. We navigated the cobblestone streets mostly and we learned one vital, vital piece of Unitarian history. It's "Thoreau", not "Thoreau". Think God of Thunder then. I know this to be true because every time I said Thoreau in the bookstore that they have right by Walden Pond, alarm bells sounded in the bookstore and all the clerks descended upon me to correct my pronunciation. It's Thoreau and so I may or may not have intentionally continued mispronouncing it just to make the clerk do this over and over. I need more help than you can give me, it's sad. It wasn't that dramatic, but it wasn't far off.

I mentioned this because this is the next in our series of parts of our faith that we draw foundational knowledge from. We look at these thinkers who helped shape these foundations of our faith. Henry David Thoreau, born David Henry Thoreau because why not? He just switched his name when he was in college, was one of those thinkers. Now, he wasn't actually famous as an intellectual or speaker or really much of anything else in his actual life. He was of humble birth. He went on to mostly modest means in his life. He would be shocked, most people say, to find out that two centuries later we are still discussing his ideas today. There are miscellaneous things about him of course, that I could go on and on about, but the one I find the most charming is all around us where we are right now, because Thoreau invented the Number 2 pencil and in all of your pews there are Number 2 pencils that you can use to fill out your pledge card when... No, he wants pen, pen and ink and blood. And children, children to pledge.

It's a conspiracy theory, yes. Okay, enough. I'm preaching the sermon here, Daniel. All right. "Then preach it." He'd say. Okay. He was very close with his older brother. His older brother was his idol. After his older brother, John, proposed to a woman who turned John down, just to give you an idea how much he idolized John, he then proposed to that woman who also turned him down so they could go through it all together. But sadly very tragically, his brother John died after cutting himself shaving. He died of the infection. He got tetanus from that. Yeah. It was very sudden and it sent Thoreau into a period of tremendous grief, which one friend observed actually he believed was the real reason that Thoreau went to the woods, went to Walden Pond to remove himself in as many ways as he could from the company of others. But going to the pond, going to Walden was not the first time that Thoreau had been removed from the company of some of his fellows.

See, once walking back from a cobbler after dropping off some shoes to be mended, he was walking across the town square. It's a different time, cobblers and times squares. Anyway, he felt the long arm of the law on his shoulder and he was arrested for failure to pay his poll tax. Yeah, he spent a night in jail before a relative sprung him in the morning by paying the tax. But it was from this experience that came the genesis of his work, which is actually entitled *Resistance to Civil Government/On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*. That is where it came to be. So it's sadly shortened today as *Civil Disobedience*, but it bears notice how much more impressive that feeling of a duty for civil disobedience really is and this work was really a lecture that he would deliver in a time when going to lectures was part of the social entertainment of the day.

And as we heard in the reading, it is a call to resist the unjust governance of a people. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Yeah. In particular, Thoreau objects to the federal government that allows persons to be enslaved and to the others who profit by this. He also was opposed to his taxes being used for bloodshed in wars being fought in foreign lands. The more things change, the more they stay the same. This essay was written in a time when many in this nation, indeed the nation's moral center was being assailed constantly by the enactment and the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, one of the lowest points in this nation's short history. He also notes that militarism leading to the Mexican-American war, paying for the slaying of others was against his morals and so he withheld paying his federal income tax.

He was happy to pay his road tax and his school tax and many other taxes, but he carved out the federal tax so he would not be a participant in these institutions he did not like. I do not commend this to you all as an action, but I'm just saying. It wasn't long before this, he explains in his essay, that he went to the town clerk also and asked to be taken off the role of the local Unitarian church. Not because he disagreed with its teachings, but because he didn't think compulsory membership and taxes to support the church as a virtue of your birth, which is the way it worked then. It was just if you were born in that area, that was your church and you were Unitarian, so pay up. He didn't think that was the right way to decide such memberships or support such institutions.

Clearly he never had to go through a pledge season as a minister. The core message of *Resistance to Civil Government/ On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* is that civil governments as they existed then and as they exist today, may be able to control our physical bodies, but no government exists yet that

can govern the human heart. Each human is responsible for that task themselves. Sway as it might with the winds of change and fortune, the heart of every human is their own to guide and steer as they must. It is ungovernable. But what do you do? What do we do when the government and our heart are in conflict?

It might be this core question and the answer to it that make this piece of writing by our ancestor one of the most influential pieces of writing really in our history. It was Gandhi's Salt March in India that broke the yoke of British imperialist rule there. Gandhi directly cited Thoreau's work, calling Thoreau his, I quote, "teacher" in his labors to enact one of the most effective campaigns of disobedience to unjust rule in history. Dr. King's Montgomery Bus Boycott that lasted more than 300 days also was born from the teachings in Thoreau's work here. Some of the most famous examples of finding power in collective organizing of people against tyrannical government rule draw their inspiration from Thoreau's insistence that government is best, that governs least, and especially that governs the heart, but not at all. For surely a higher call, surely a divine inspiration should be in charge of those matters.

Yeah. A century after Thoreau launched his work on the world though, the political philosopher, an expert in lived, experienced, and escaped from authoritarianism, Hannah Arendt wrote her own essay and entitled it Civil Disobedience because why mess with a good thing? Among the many brilliant things Arendt said and wrote in her life, perhaps the most important is this, "Nobody has a right to obey." Obedience to a direction, to a thought, to a civil government, to a movement, to a tyrant is always, always, always a choice. As alluring and as comforting a safety may feel, as much as going along to get along may seem wise, all of these are still options. They are all still choices. And it was the imprisonment of Thoreau that helped her to see this as she wrote raft after raft of warning against the insidiousness of totalitarianism that simply waits for good persons to do nothing. No one, no one has the right to obey.

One of the most important pillars of a society that might stand against authoritarianism according to Arendt, after a century of knowledge and experience, are what she called voluntary membership organizations. Places where we choose to belong, where force of a civil government means participating or being part of something we don't like, it is in our associations with others where we can actually be free. Arendt says this, "Undeniable is that the phenomenon of voluntary association has been neglected and that the notion of civil disobedience has only recently received the attention it deserves. In contrast to the conscientious objector, the civil disobedient is a member of a group and this group, whether we like it or not, is formed in accordance with the same spirit that has informed voluntary associations."

Thoreau, a solitary person grieving the loss of his sweet brother in a cabin by a pond was a conscientious objector, one person. It was this objector's thoughts though passed through the fire of life that Gandhi, that King, that Arendt, and so many more all held in realizing the real power of that idea, that power is in the human lives given to this great task of demonstrating the absurdity of a law, of a policy, of an executive order, of a prejudice of any other ignorant debasement of humanity, of theirs and ours to bring about more, much, much, so much more than just a change in the law, to

bring about a change in hearts. To be governed not in our bodies by a threat, but to be self-governed in our hearts by freedom, and yes, by revolutionary love.

When Thoreau's brother died, it was from tetanus as I said, and one of the symptoms of tetanus was a spasming muscles in your jaw called lockjaw. And after this symptom, after the progression of his illness, Henry's brother died in his arms. He held John as he died and after the death, Henry developed himself the same symptoms his brother had, as he'd witnessed his brother having over the past years. He had no infection, mind you, no physical one, only the symptoms that took hold in Henry like they had in his brother. They abated eventually, but I think sometimes, in fact, I feel in my gut sometimes that I understand part of what Henry was feeling when his life's companion left him and felt what his brother felt. The more I witness, the more I see in the past year of this bland and blunt hatred of people in this nation, simply for whom they are, for what they believe, how they look, or whom they love, I feel sympathy myself, not just empathy but sympathy.

I see the look in people's eyes who are experiencing this hatred. I see their bodies take on this feeling and have to carry it as a burden, how it is absorbed and I feel part of what they feel and I believe, I truly believe for all of us that this is actually one of the greatest gifts of our humanity as a people to hold, to hold and to touch the pain of others and to feel it as a way of honoring it, by not deflecting, not differentiating, not defending against it, but really taking it in for a second, a moment, a time, and to feel what it feels like to know the pain that our neighbor must be going through. I guarantee you, the people sitting next to you right now are going through a lot more than you probably could ever imagine.

Thoreau at his core in his belief was a transcendentalist and transcendentalism teaches that it is by direct experience with others and with nature and in relying on and trusting what you find in that experience, that humans are at their very best and that's where truth is found. June Jordan speaks her truth in her poem that I love. "I will no longer lightly walk behind a one of you who fear me, be afraid." And she ends, "I live like a lover who drops her dime into the phone just as the subway shakes into the station, wasting her message, canceling the question of her call, fulminating or forgetful, but late and always after the fact that could save or condemn me." She says, "I must become the action of my fate."

This is also a transcendentalist statement if I ever heard one, "I must become the action of my fate." Through the last two centuries like a siren blaring through the night, resistance to an unjust civil authority, calls and calls and calls again on that phone. Look at your neighbor, hold your sibling, it calls. Look at this earth's children and tell me that this is right. Tell me that this is the best that we can do. And a century later, after Arendt, one of the finest minds on totalitarianism, she tells us, warns us that it is in our voluntary institutions where we will find our place of refuge and strength, where individual minds and hearts are held and cared for. Conscientiously not controlled and forced bodily to do things into the unconscionable. It is institutions like that. It is institutions like this one. We have this blessed place that will be, that must be a menace to the enemies of freedom, a menace to the enemies of dignity, and a menace to the enemies of a saving and gracious love that we all need and how?

Congregation:

Amen.

Speaker 2:

Be ungovernable in your heart, people. Let it be a wild place alive with imagination and freedom that our divine nature grants to all of us. Be ungovernable by others in your heart. Let it hold and love what it must hold and love, friends, and pray with all you've got to keep that love alive. Be ungovernable by others for it is yours. It is wholly your heart. It is good, it is worthy, and there is no other like it and there never will be. Be ungovernable. Be unruly. Rise up, be brave, and find your inner F you, stands for free you. When someone says F you, they're trying to free you from something.

That's right, believe me. And it is in the spirit of being ungovernable that we join together ourselves to build upon the work laid so boldly before us by those in this faith who would not bend a knee, by those in this faith who broke tyranny's yoke, and those in this faith whose paths we walk still though we find our own way through, we have got to become the action of our own fate. In sympathy with our siblings whose very lives and whose very freedom depend on the work of those faithful to the future. Only a free heart can dream. Be ungovernable, friends. And in so being, be blessed. May it ever be so, blessed be and amen.