



ANCESTORS OF OUR FAITH SERIES

THE TRANSIENT AND THE PERMANENT

OCTOBER 12 | REV. DR. DANIEL KANTER

I noted that the hymn is inspired by our Transylvanian Unitarian family, the roots of which of our faith go back to that part of Europe, and today is part two in the series that points to some key parts of where we came from and who we are, and today is about the ideas that Theodore Parker. Theodore Parker was a radical abolitionist and a Unitarian minister. He was a transcendentalist in the early 1800s in Boston, and he thought church should be flexible, focused on mission and less on ritual, and he preached to over 2,000 people every Sunday. Now, that was a time before Hulu subscriptions and all manner of distractions, football. Yeah, but Parker was pretty amazing and in his time he preached a sermon series that would change the direction of our faith. He called the transient and the permanent in Christianity, and we need to know about this.

Parker was a teacher by the time he was age 14. He was a Harvard grad, a Harvard Divinity School grad by 26. By then he had learned Latin, Greek, German, Spanish, French, Hebrew, Kaldi, Syriac, Arabic, Coptic, and Ethiopic if you're competing for how many languages you know. He was a teaching assistant at Harvard Divinity School in Hebrew, and he was there when Ralph Waldo Emerson gave his famous sermon, the Divinity School Address, which challenged the established Unitarian Church of the day saying that the divine is present in all people and that individual intuition, not scripture or dogma, is the true path to God. That day that Emerson spoke in the dusty small wooden chapel in the Divinity School where I have been many times and where some of you have been on the built Boston pilgrimage, Emerson said things like, "Ministers these days just don't preach like they ever lived a day in their life, that they don't pass their lives through the fire of thought with passion."

Emerson established transcendentalism in that sermon and Theodore Parker witnessed it. Parker went on to serve in Roxbury, Massachusetts. He pushed life through the fire of thought and

thousands came to hear him. By the end of his short career, he preached in a non-affiliated religious meeting in a theater in Boston, rented by his followers who needed him to lead worship for them. The reason it wasn't in a Unitarian church, because he was outcast by the Unitarians, which is pretty hard to do if you think about it. Now, Parker led with his theology. He said that the miracles of Jesus were not at all because they broke with natural law set in motion by God. Why would God intervene and break those laws to get people just to believe in Jesus? This didn't make sense to him. He said that God intervened in the spiritual world, not the natural world.

God intervened in your heart speaking directly to you, not through scriptures. He said that God is part of our mind and consciousness, not an alien presence living in the clouds, but rather something we are born with. Now, none of that got him kicked out of the Unitarian Church. By the way. What got him kicked out of the Unitarian Church was that he challenged the importance of the Bible and he challenged the importance of Christianity. Two things essential to Unitarians in the early 1800s, I would say he broke open our faith with his thoughts and we never looked back. For Parker, the goal of religious life was not to wear a name badge that said you were a Unitarian, but rather to live up to God's love and to do justice in the world. In his famous sermon on the transient and the permanent, he declared that the transient in religion is how we express religion.

While the permanent is the thing that moves within us that proves what is true, the capacity to hear and feel God and have an intuitive grasp of morality. Thank you. Parker broke minds when he preached that Christianity itself is transient, one of many ways religion points to the permanent truth. He wrecked homes when he preached that Jesus was transient, indeed a revelation but not the only revelation. He said, "God could raise up more Christ at any time and probably had and could even greater Christ's in the future." He blew bonnets and top hats off of heads when he preached. The Bible itself was a fallible human collection of contradictory stories and myths rather than a divine, mysterious, miraculous revelation, arguing that its true value lay in its human authored religious significance and the permanent spiritual truths it contained. Heretic was the label given to him by crusty [inaudible 00:06:36] up and down Beacon Street and crusty Unitarians from Boston to Concord.

To us we listened to that and we might say, "What else is new?" But for that time, he was rewriting our faith's direction so that we could sit 200 years later comfortably in a sanctuary and nod our heads and say, "What else is new?" He put his career on the line for these heresies because he knew that the whole trajectory of our faith was a heresy, was aimed at challenging orthodoxies, orthodoxies that boxed people in and divided people from one another. He knew that our faith was never designed to agree with a majority, but rather to point out how faith and life and our lives can and should develop and change.

And that to prop up a religion for religion's sake is just not the way of the heretic. Thank you and for our purposes today, as we return home to the core idea that flashes through history to our ears today, what I need you to hear is that what is being worshiped today by many Christians, the world over is transient. The permanent teachings of Jesus and that the only permanent thing of Christianity that is really worth our while is a very simple lesson that Parker pointed out when he said embedded in

Christian thought before there was the word Christian before there were anybody who called themselves a Christian was to love one another, to do justice and to love God.

Everything else, all fancy buildings, all forms of worship, all practices of communion, all denominations, rights, liturgies, Bible stories, organizing principles, Christian podcasters and their heroes, ministers standing up in their robes and stoles and all the things that prop up these truths are transient. Parker preached straight through this idea that one year you get lauded for a certain belief and then the next year you're a heretic. The only thing that is permanent is the call of the through line in our faiths to love one another and do the right thing for each other. All forms of religion, Parker pointed to practice change. All those practices change at the heart of the religion is this very human urge to cooperation and mutuality and trying to act through our better selves. That is why falsehoods in one era are truths in another era, and the more we attach to these transient things, the less we understand and practice the permanent things.

What we need is to see and love and see and love and practice the permanent things, the God within and beyond the moral compass that guides us and the love and practice of justice. The way I say this is that religion is a human invention. It's a human invention aimed at making us better people, more interdependent, more connected, and that all its forms are transient and often distort the permanent truth of this, and we see this rampant in our day today. We do not have to look far into history to see the tyranny of the transient infections of hate or division of people's value created along religious lines or identity. Wars fought, people rounded up and murdered, whole civilizations torn to pieces because of the transient identities we created that became more important than the permanent realities that we know deep in our hearts. The human need to control, to contort the other, no less the desires born and greed in power are forged in transient religious arguments that promote mostly difference, and when those take over, we have idiot defense department heads lecturing generals about how we need to eradicate DEI.

No. But yes, when those transient ideas take root deep in our world as if they were true and we forget the permanent, we lose sight of the permanent glue that all faiths have at their core, love God and humanity. This is the bedrock of religion versus the noise of the time kind of stuff. The permanent versus the transient that 200 years ago Parker was telling us to pay attention to and the question always is, is this relevant today? Well, it might just ask us to clarify what we think are bedrock values and truths in our lives and in our religion over the transient noise, that might be a worthy task.

That could be a good exercise for Parker. The only thing we need to drive our faith is, as he said in his 19th century patriarchal language, "To love man and God and to address the social issues of the day." That's what the reading that T. J. was saying for him. He applied this love of man and God to abolition of slavery, to fighting back the fugitive slave laws while addressing class differences and inequities. He preached literally with a gun in the pulpit to ward off the people who are coming to take the fugitive slaves out of his church, and that was driven by this idea to love man and God, which meant for him and I quote, "Humility, reverence, sobriety, gentleness, charity, forgiveness, fortitude, resignation, faith and active love. Active love."

These were the sources of energy for Parker to address the issues of his day and it was not easy for him, like it is not easy for us today. Just to draw a fine point on this and to critique our own faith and sometimes our mixed up faith that replaces theology with justice making or addressing things like racism or other ideas, if Parker had instead said, "The core mission of our religion was the abolition of slavery," then once the Civil War ended, Unitarianism would've vanished. If he had put at the core of the faith women's suffrage as the core mission of our faith, then once the 19th amendment was passed, our faith would have vanished. Likewise, today we are committed to things that are addressing the government's insistence to eradicate DEI and whitewash society of immigrants and attack our trans siblings. All important causes that we are committed to, but these themselves are not our religion.

What is at the core of our faith is love humanity and God, to act with humility and reverence, sobriety, gentleness, forgiveness, fortitude, resignation, faith and active love. To address issues of racism, yes, because they chip away at the core of these things. To address religious freedom, yes, because they force us to not love each other. To address the right for a woman to make the choice over her body, yes, because those choices come from God, not some transient male patriarchal lawmakers who don't have vaginas. To address issues of inequity, yes, because if God is worth anything, it is found in our mutuality and the reminder that each person is worthy. To address things like climate degradation, yes, is the point of our shared miracle that binds us together. Call it God or something else. What I'm saying is that all the work we do, all the important work we do must stem from something more permanent of our core commitments that outlast the transient issues of our time.

We will not stop protesting or fighting or helping real people who are attacked by the state or told they are not worthy. And yes, we will continue to commit to DEI and deeper understandings of racial violence and trespasses, but we do all this because of our core permanent value, our moral religious commitments that do not erode. Thank you. To love humanity and God is at the core. Now, we talk a lot about love. We talk a lot about love, but what I mean mostly when I say love, I mean is to lean in with the heart. Heart comes from the Latin word core. Its original meaning points to the core of the human self, the center place where all our ways of knowing converge. The heart is where we integrate what we know in our minds and what we know in our bones. Core is the place of knowledge that makes us more human.

Core is the Latin root also of the word courage. When all that we know of self and world comes together in the center place called the heart, we are more likely to find courage to act humanely on what we know. So to love humanity is to use the heart to invite otherness into our lives, to understand that us, them doesn't mean us versus them, but to see them more expansively, to remind ourselves of that ancient tradition of hospitality to the stranger that the stranger has much to teach us and we cannot survive if we treat half the world as other. Thank you. I learned this in some way in our Unitarian community in India, which I know you know I've been exploring deeply over the last nine years and written a book about, I explore their hymns and their theology and their practices, and one thing that I come back to is their insistence by their founder in the late 1800s. I believe having read

Theodore Parker that the very simple idea of faith is to love man in his words, to love man and love God.

When I ask the Indian Unitarians what that means, they point to the first hymn in their hymnal, their foundational hymn that was written in the late 1800s. Sneak preview into the book, hymn number one goes [Khasi 00:19:01]. I'm kidding. I'm not going to keep reading in Khasi. It goes like this, this beautiful poetry of these hymns, listen to it. It says, "Let's pray for all people, all humanity to get enlightened. Let's pray so that they live life, they live life with deeper meaning, a deeper meaning than daily existence and they attain righteousness. Let's preach and announce a divine religion so that goodness not cruelty will rule and govern and take over the world's humanity." Beautiful. Right? It goes on. I'm going to just read you the three verses because I can't stop, "The living God is the only God it says, it is the real father, mother of us, all, the father, mother.

It is full of mercy and forgiveness and kindness. Those who turn to God are readily forgiven. All of humanity are children of God, all of humanity, siblings in spirit. We should love God and know our fellow humans. They say we continue to love to worship, to have gratitude, to stay connected, to have faith, to combat indifference or separation from the source and to unite as one." That's the core hymn of their faith, our shared faith. You can see why I go every year to India with a group from this church to learn from our siblings there.

My friend Clure, who's a scholar in that community, in that far Northeast community in India, explained to me that the indigenous faith out of which Unitarianism grew, understands religion to be to know God and to know fellow humans. He says this concept predates Judaism in all forms of religion. What he means is that it drives the culture into a practiced intuition, meditation and knowledge of the necessities of the divine. Clure says, "Unless you know, how can you love? You must try to know others' values, attributes, and needs. And by knowing each other is knowing God." In Northeast India and the Unitarians, the only thing God requires is awe and wonder, which is the clues we have to something bigger than ourselves.

What I witness in India is that they have this way of resetting themselves in kindness through worship, through prayer, through singing, these hymns because they grow the root of the divine with the lives they live. Their theology gives them the opportunities to practice ways to connect to the divine and to one another. I think what the Unitarians there mean by love, man and God is something like the thread in the poem today, that T. J. read the poem by Parker Palmer that says, "When all else falls away, when the work you've done, the success, large and small, your failures to these moments when you were light alongside the times, when you were night, when the threads run its course, then it joins in life together.

This magnificent tapestry, this masterpiece in which we live forever. Love God and each other when all else falls away, the permanent line, the thread is there." It might be the only thing worth anything in religion and religious instruction today. So that's the sermon, the transient attempt to reset your heart and mine like we do every week to reset it to whatever permanent meaning we can find in this

turbulent world. Friends, the human adventure continues in our quest to have life and to have life more abundantly. Amen and amen.