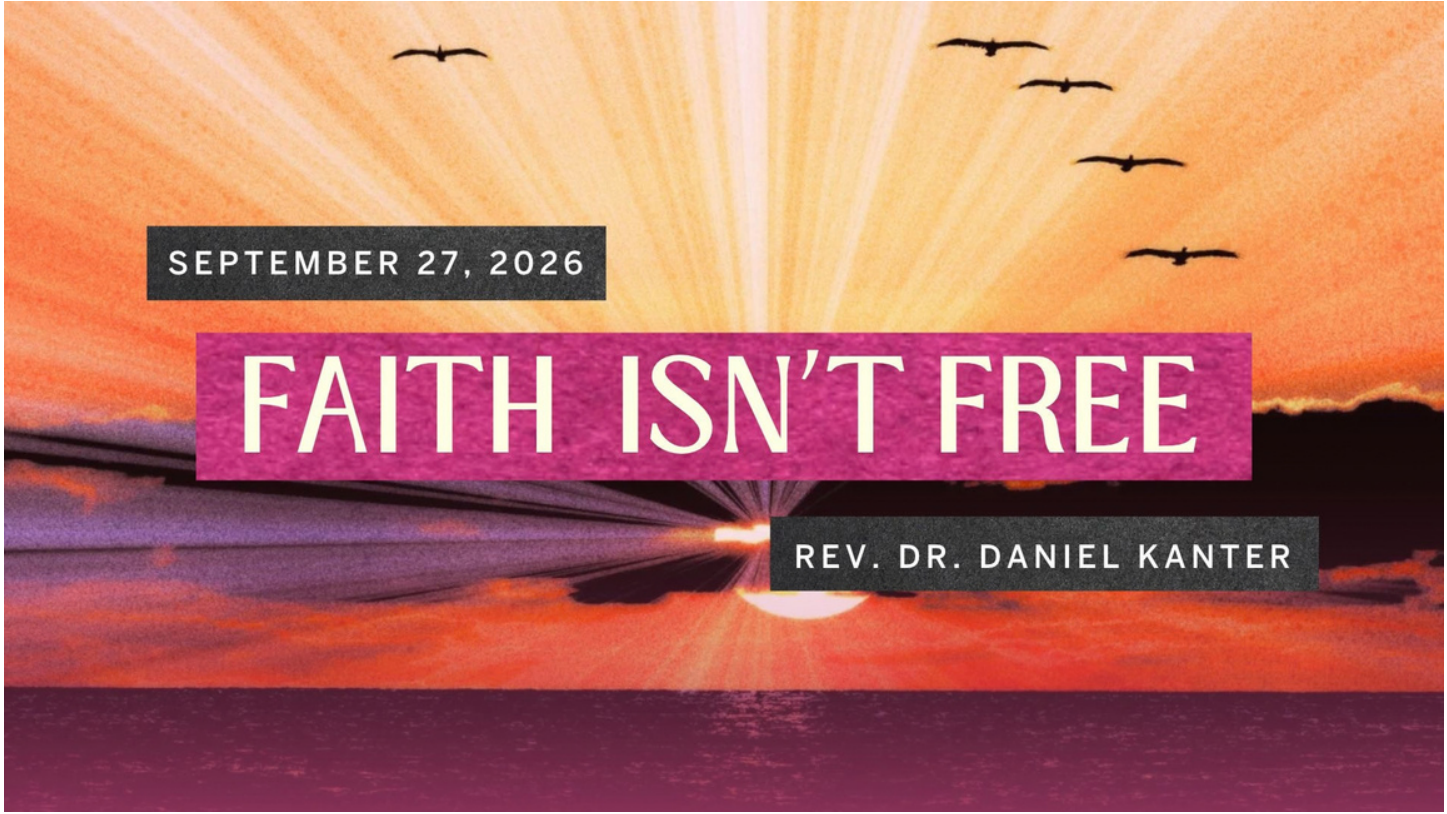




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FAITH ISN'T FREE

REV. DR. DANIEL KANTER

It was a long time ago. From our perspective, they were more simple and more complicated. The people back then, they didn't just walk into a big store where everything was available at a price where they could take home a fully-cooked dinner. People didn't zoom around in machines that they didn't understand how they worked to get from place to place, and so on. Although, they were worried that machines were taking over the world. Simpler and more complicated.

If you from Ireland, or Scotland or England, or you were Dutch or German, you were free to go where you liked, barring the trampling of property or local custom. If you were from West Africa, or the Islands, or South America, you were enslaved to work, unless you were freed by a benevolent owner. More simple times, more complicated times. You got your news from typesetters who wrote and printed what they found out was going on, but didn't know instantaneously everything that was happening around the world. It was hard enough to get the story straight about what was just going on in town.

So when Reverend Luther Hamilton looked up from his writing desk one morning as Abigail Quince ran in with the local paper and slapped it down in front of him, he was surprised by both Abigail and the news that she brought. "The church was being sued," she said. The year was 1821. 25 miles north, just south of Boston, another church had been embroiled in a lawsuit, but he didn't think it was coming to their town. So Reverend Hamilton was a well thought of member of the town, he had proclaimed himself a Unitarian. But nonetheless, a controversy arrived in Taunton, Mass. It raged in Dedham and then now in Taunton. He would have to steer his church, which sounded like an old battleship when the winter stoves came on, through this battle on hand. He loved the church, but he didn't love the controversy.

He knew that in 1818, the Dedham parish had invited Alvan Lamson to be its candidate for the ministry. A majority of the church members being orthodox rejected Lamson's liberal views. They

voted their refusal to have him as a minister. By custom, the church members decided who the minister would be, but in Dedham, the parish, which was more liberal than the church membership, went ahead and called Lamson as the minister. The church members weren't going to stand for it so they left, taking the church records, the communion silver and the financial assets with them. That's when Deacon Baker of the liberal camp sued Deacon Fales of the orthodox camp for the return of the church property. Fales and the church majority claimed that the assets were the property of the church and since the majority of the church was leaving, the assets were theirs to take. Baker and the liberal minority maintained the assets belonged to the parish, the surrounding town. As the parish majority was staying put, they would like all the assets returned.

The liberal minority prevailed. The jury ruled that, according to the law, the church was built and run at the parish's expense and for the benefit of the whole. And the minister worked for the benefit of the whole parish, the whole town. Therefore, the parish owned the assets, and what's more, the parish had the right to call any minister they liked. The minority cried foul, noting that the presiding judge, Issac Parker, was himself a Unitarian. But when all the appeals were over in 1821, the ruling stood, Unitarians one, conservatives zero.

And now this. Taunton was splitting, but the conservatives would sound the alarm and try to force their ownership and the court would surely support the liberal parish. But at what cost? The hand-painted signs were popping up everywhere in town, the paper said conservatives were claiming the high road, but the yard signs said the liberals in Dedham kept the furniture, but we keep the faith. "Good God," Reverend Hamilton thought. "Why this, why us and why now? And why Abigail, who's standing over my shoulder?" And he said, "Let's pray, Abigail." And when they finished she jumped up and said, "Reverend, we don't have time for prayer, we have a fight on our hands," and she dashed out to make more yard signs.

Over the next year, the church was embroiled in a terrible fight. As he predicted, the court ruled with the Unitarians. The Trinitarians were left empty-handed and went on across the green to start Broadway Congregational Church. "The liberals, in fact, had kept the furniture and the faith," said Reverend Hamilton, who preached that Sunday. He didn't have to remind them of the cost of freedom. Unitarians two, conservatives zero, not that anybody was counting.

The court case in Taunton though had real costs. Real money costs to the congregation and real costs to the people. The question was what were they going to do now? Reverend Hamilton stayed on as their minister until 1831. Some of his church pushed for abolition, others fed the poor in nearby Providence. Others got to work to try to convince the elders that freed Black men and women alike should worship in the church and not just in the back pew. The fight cost the church members a commitment to making the church what it could be. Some wanted to acknowledge their own families had displaced or even killed off Native people so they could be there. Others fought against such admission.

But all of them understood the cost of the free faith they fought for because in the Unitarian church, which kept the furniture, one's faith could be debated and not just digested. The faith had to be examined, not just force-fed. That was why these 19th century New Englanders were Unitarian, in fact. They weren't just about easy answers. They wanted a faith won by a deeper

engagement and a considered thought. They wanted a faith where the ministers were free to preach what was on their conscience, rather than what they had to confirm to of the expectation of the elders. Where the people were free to debate with the minister, although they rightly understood that debate with the minister should better come on Monday than on Sunday. And they wanted a faith that was free to call a minister of their choice, not one which was handed to them by a small delegate of men.

They wanted a faith where it was right to deliberate their commitments in society. To participate in free society in ways others felt constrained by their faiths to avoid. They understood that these principles dated back a long way and that God wanted it that way, and because all these precious gifts, they pooled their resources to have collective power to be the church that stood strong against the narrowing forces of Broadway Congregational Church across the green and that meant something. Reverend Hamilton would go on after his career with the church to be a state representative in the state house in Boston and he would fight for the freedom of others, especially when the city was raging around the fugitive slave laws.

Almost all of this story is real. It is true, though. Even as I exercise my fiction writing skills on all of you this morning, there is truth embedded in the story. And is a good reminder to us when we look back of all that has come before us that allows us to peacefully assemble here this morning, to preach our conscience, to listen to, think, to debate, to deepen, to learn, to educate, to advocate, to show up and show out, to protest, to speak up, to participate in a community like ours that came by efforts of people before us who fought for our rights. That our faith knew and knows Jesus was important, but not God's sacrifice. That He was here to reset the human heart, not to die for it.

Now, as the cult core of their theological argument, but what was at the core of all these arguments was the fact that they were free to argue at all. And that those who called them heretics because the heresy was wanting freedom, wanting ideas about life, and religion, and God and Jesus was all worth the fighting they had to do with their neighbors.

Now, this is just a small story about the fight for freedom in our faith tradition. Part of the reason why we are here is because 80 years after those cases in Eastern Massachusetts, that fire that burned there came to Dallas. And a small band of misfits who gathered at, I kid you not, Odd Fellows Hall, and listened to a philosophical preacher from Mississippi named Daniel Limbaugh who told them that freedom of religion is not only freedom from the state, but also freeing your heart and mind from the shackles of old dogmas that imprisoned us to fear. They knew exactly where those rights came from and they paid yet another cost to advance those rights. The cost to that rag-tag group of Unitarians in 1899 and 1900 amounted to lost friendships, lost family relationships, not to mention lost business connections and commitments because they came to this church.

Now, I'm sure as I'm standing here that being a Unitarian in Dallas, Texas in 1899 was harder than being one in 2026. Yet, they persevered. They persevered for the cost of free religious thinking, of free believing, of freedom from the tyranny of conservatism and orthodoxy. Our people said that they paid those bills over all the times in America and especially in Dallas through world wars, and culture wars, and wars on people with AIDS, and wars on liberals, wars on abortion access and

women's rights and wars on trans kids, and it just keeps going. And we might be careful not to take this for granted because if history repeats itself, it seems it often does, we are sitting on a precious legacy that allows us the 16th century Unitarian Hungarian statement to not think alike, but to love alike. We are here to do just that because those people who came before us fought for our rights to be free religious people.

Which brings me to more mundane things as we ponder the sacred in all these stories of people like us who love freedom, freedom of faith over their own sacrifices. And to why we are here and can be here and can be who we are. And that is that I sent you a pledge card this week in the mail and asked you to support the church as best you can. Did you know that the budget of this church in 1903 was \$1,702.78? Today, it hovers over \$2.4 million. In 1903, the minister was paid \$890. I have the financial statements right here from 1903 if anybody wants them. Today, we pay our ministers well for a reason. We pay our staff of 23 people because they keep all of this going with sacrificing time and energy to keep this church alive. The church has a long history of generosity that has sustained it. It is understood, as my friend David Norton who's sitting over there has said for many years, we are here to pool our resources for our collective power. He gets it and we get it.

So I sent you a pledge card and you may have tossed it aside. Hopefully you didn't just recycle it. Or maybe you said, "The heck with paper, I'm online, I'm going to pledge on Realm a recurring monthly gift," and thank you for that. If you need a pledge card, there's one QR card in your pew also, and thank you for that.

And now, for some less than gentle pressing on my part on this topic. You see, I am a lead donor in this church. I give 5% of my paycheck back to the church. I don't have to do that. I don't know for sure, but if everyone in this church did something like that, or like my one-time Baptist accounting assistant said to me, she gave 10% of her check to her Baptist church because that first 10% was God's money. If everyone gave to the church even 5% like I do and 5% to other organizations doing good, this place, which has fought so hard to exist, would have no stress at all about what we can do. We would have no pain or suffering over whether we can keep the staff that keeps this place going, whether they will have insurance or retirement funds, or whether we'll have to scale back on programs.

I give to this church because it's my spiritual home, it's not just another charity. I give thousands of dollars so that the world can be fed spiritually by the wholeness of this place. So that a child in first grade can learn about her body so that when she's 15, she can make decisions about her sexuality and her power. I give so that someone in their 90s gets a birthday card from the staff and someone who's dying gets a visit from a minister or a chaplain, so that space can be made to promote democracy while people fellowship over Get Out the Vote cards. So that the LGBTQIA community can gather in peace and safety, so that the work of racial equity has a home in a society that is trying to erase all work to make things equitable. So that worship can be attended by you and by people at home in Montana, and Maryland and Malaysia. So that the choir can sing and the music can soar, and our free faith is proclaimed in the face of authoritarianism once again.

All this happens because of our support of this place and its people. And I want to just debunk something that someone said to me recently. They said that people think we don't need pledges because this church has plenty of money. That is seriously wrong, okay? Sure, we have an

endowment that has grown quite a bit, but we only draw 4% off that endowment to support and maintain this place. Without pledges, we can't even give a cost of living increase to the staff, no less keep their jobs. The budget is as tight as it can be. There is no money sitting somewhere to save us and none is coming from the Unitarian pope, whoever that is. It is we who decide what can be maintained and done here.

I was reading this article recently called Not Your Parents Offering Plate: A New Vision for Financial Stewardship. Really fun reading that ministers do a lot. The author chides church leaders like me who sound the alarm and plead for more money for ministry. He writes about how he was with a group of pastors and he asked, "Why do people give," and they started bursting out, "Taxes, guilt, involvement." No one was even close. And he says, "Finally, a woman in the back said number one, people give because of belief in the mission, number two is a reward for staff leadership, and number three is fiscal responsibility," and she was right. "I was stunned," he said, "I asked her where she was a pastor and she sheepishly said, 'I'm not a pastor. I'm the executive director at Habitat for Humanity.'" The writer said, "People want to make the world a better place to live in, they want to make a difference for the better." There is, embedded in us, a desire to finish out work on this earth with a sense of what amounted to something. People want to be part of something that changes lives.

This is where I say to you I don't want you to give to the church if it just makes you feel better. Honestly, seriously, this isn't a charity. There is no vicarious atonement here. You don't get a ticket to heaven. You already have a ticket to heaven, we're Universalists, so don't worry about that. But what we're doing here is building on this legacy of freedom. We're building a faith that stands for something, that gave us this place by people who fought those battles and supported that 1,700 budget back over 123 years ago. We're saving lives. We're enhancing freedom. We're creating things that matter here. And if that's not enough, I want you to ask your spiritual life what is it asking you about how you can be the most generous person that you can be. Listening to the poets say, "Giving is first and every time, hand to hand, mine to yours, yours to mine, we give so that something greater comes with with a difference."

I want you to feel what it feels like to give and receive, me to you, you to me. And then think, what do you have to give to the world? What do you have to give to the people around you, your family, your children, your friends, your neighbors? Think about it this way, that generosity isn't a once and for all thing. It is who you are. And then ask yourself, can you make a pledge here and then go further? Because this pledging business isn't really about you, it's about us. It's about how we thrive for the present and the future, and how we make a difference in other's lives.

That is why today, I'm talking to you about how faith isn't free. Literally, but also figuratively. The old saying is the charitable give out the door and God puts it back through the window. There is a reason that we practice generosity here every Sunday, it's because it is part of our spiritual lives. It is also how we keep the mission of this place alive. So I say to you make Reverend Hamilton proud. Let's run the score up, Unitarians 10, conservatives zero, I don't know. Let's make the 1899 and the 1903 and the 2026 church proud of your part in it. Consider what you give to the world through the window. Ponder how your support of this faith and place, and how giving changes you and softens your heart so that hand to hand, we help one another and make room for God to

return to us the many blessings of a generous soul. Give until it feels good and don't look back. God will put it back through the window of your heart and that's the story for the day. Amen.