



Well, great turnout today for Ingathering. This week on social media, I promised that if all the members of the church showed up for Ingathering, everyone in Dallas would receive \$5,000. The data is in. We're about 850 short today, so I don't think anybody's getting that. Sorry. But you're here and so you're here for Ingathering and today's a great day for the church. When arguing that religious freedom is rarely fully realized because people tend to tolerate only those beliefs that resemble their own.

John Stuart Mill wrote in 1859 in his book *On Liberty*, which was 40 years before this church was founded, he wrote this. He wrote, "In the minds of almost all religious persons, the duty of toleration is admitted with tacit reserves. One person will bear with dissent. Another can tolerate everybody short of a Papist or Unitarian." It's an amusing line in a thick book.

In the 19th century in England, Unitarians occupied an uncomfortable place in religious life. We were the people many Christians considered beyond the limits of acceptable faith. Unitarians rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. We viewed Jesus not as God, but as a profound moral teacher and spiritual exemplar. To many Orthodox believers at that time, and maybe even today, that was simply a bridge too far. And Mill's point is not really about Unitarians and Catholics anyway. His point is about human nature.

The idea reflects that most people love the idea of tolerance until they encounter a belief, a person or a community that genuinely challenges them. Then suddenly the circle begins to shrink, that most people proclaim openness, but with conditions, that most celebrate freedom, but only to a point that we will defend diversity until it becomes inconvenient. Mill was exposing this universal temptation, the temptation to draw a line of belonging exactly where our own comfort ends.

Yes, there is another fascinating part of this story that is often overlooked, that while Unitarianism appears only briefly in the book on *Liberty*, Unitarianism helped shape the book itself because

behind John Stuart Mill stood Harriet Taylor Mill. For generations, she was treated merely as an influence, an inspiration or a companion. But today scholars increasingly recognized that John Stuart Mill himself had insisted all along that *On Liberty* was a joint production with his wife. He desperately wanted Harriet's contribution acknowledged, but Victorian society would not allow it.

And Harriet's ideas did not emerge from nowhere. She came out of one of the most influential, intellectually vibrant Unitarian communities in England. She was part of the South Place Unitarian Chapel in London led by the remarkable Reverend William Johnson Fox. The congregation became a gathering place for radicals and reformers, writers and artists and religious liberals. They challenged the established authority. They advocated for women's rights. They defended freedom of conscience. They questioned inherited doctrines. They believed that faith and reason could be partners rather than enemies. That sound familiar?

They didn't just have a different theology than their neighbors. They had a different vision of what human beings are capable of becoming, different than most of the Victorian neighbors they had. And Harriet rejected the idea that humanity was fundamentally depraved and broken beyond repair. She believed human capability could be cultivated, developed, and enlarged. And she learned that conscience mattered, that questioning was sacred. She learned that no church, no state, and no majority should have the power to imprison the human spirit.

Long before her ideas appeared in Mill's famous work, she was publishing essays in Unitarian journals arguing for women's equality, economic independence, freedom of thought and social reform. Many of the positions that would later seem revolutionary in Mill's writing were convictions Harriet was already articulating. *On Liberty*, you can see the fingerprints of that religious upbringing everywhere. You see it in the rejection on the idea that self-will is a sin. You see it in the conviction that human beings are meant to grow rather than to conform.

You see it in the defense of what Mill called experiments in living, the belief that people must have the freedom to seek truth through experience and exploration and discovery. And perhaps most importantly, you see it in the book's warning against what Mill called the tyranny of the majority, not governmental tyranny of which they knew something about like we do, but rather the danger of social tyranny, the pressure to fit in, the pressure to stay silent, the pressure to hide what makes us different, the pressure to conform. These Unitarians understood that danger because they and we have lived it. As a religious minority, the Unitarians of Victorian London knew what this felt like to be misunderstood and excluded and dismissed.

You see the defense of liberty for them and for us is not an abstract philosophy. It is survival, which brings us to the here and now why this crazy preacher's talking about some book from the 19th century and you're sitting there scratching your head thinking, "I never read that, did I?" Why should we care about any of this today? Why revisit a 19th century philosopher, radical Unitarian woman in a religious movement on the other side of the Atlantic while we're sitting here in Dallas in another Texas summer wanting the temperature to go down below 90?

Instead, this preacher is asking us to wonder what this church is and what this church might yet become because these questions have never gone away. We are once again living in a moment when conformity is rewarded and dissent is treated with suspicion. We are living in a moment when complexity is flattened into slogans, a moment when people are told what they must believe and whom they must fear and what parts of themselves they are allowed to express. A

moment when erasure can masquerade as unity, a moment when certainty is celebrated and questioning is condemned.

And in such a moment, the Unitarian tradition still has something urgent to say. We are here to proclaim that freedom of conscience is not just an idea, it is sacred. We are here to affirm that truth is never the possession of any one institution, ideology or authority. We are here to defend the dignity of people whose voices are being marginalized.

We are here to create space for questions that have not yet found answers. We are here to insist that the human spirit was not created for conformity and that this year is dedicated to liberating faith and that matters. It matters not because liberty is easy, but because liberty is necessary, not because freedom guarantees truth, but because truth cannot be discovered without freedom, not because everyone will agree with us, but because a healthy society depends on people who have the courage to disagree.

So the question before us is not merely what John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill believed or even what they stood for. It is what do we stand for when liberty is in jeopardy? And this is not just about what our ancestors built, is what we are facing, is how religious freedom and how our society will live up to its ideals and how we will survive in it. I want to confess to you that this summer I avoided the news while I was away in Europe. I apologized a lot to my friends over there, tried to explain to them the rise of the idiocracy while keeping the conversation local on what we are working on. And so when I was on the airplane coming back home, I was shocked to read a statement by the Unitarian Universal Association about government surveilling our churches directly relating to our religious liberty.

You see, surveillance is a key tool in a system that allows those who control information to shape behavior and normalize certain actions while marginalizing others. It is a form of disciplinary power that produces docile bodies that conform to social norms without direct coercion. And the reason this is interesting to me is, maybe to you, is that we are rapidly descending into a society where such power is being centralized in the hands of specialty law enforcement locally and federally, and the impact on things like this are on issues of religious freedom especially.

Let me unpack this. I drove 5.2 miles from my house in Lakewood to the church this morning. I passed six flock cameras that registered my license plate, took pictures of my bumper stickers on my car and tracked my commute here. Now on the whole, this isn't really a problem for me. I have a Boston Red Sox sticker, a University of Vermont sticker and a church sticker, and I haven't committed any crimes that I know of. I'm probably not that interesting to the surveillance camera unless I am.

To be sure, these cameras are being used largely for crime, but they are also being assessed by the ICE and who knows who else. And if someone wants to know where I was at 7:30 this morning, they have 30 days to see my car go down Mockingbird Road and make a right on Preston. Again, I'm not hiding anything, but if I drive from here to an anti-ICE protest, if I accompany a woman to get an abortion, if I go to a meeting at the Truth Pregnancy Center or show up in a place that the government deems as a threat, I will be easily identified. The uproar around flock cameras is well documented. You can read all about that.

The data suggests there are over 120,000 cameras in the US today and they've been used to do

things like track down immigrants that ICE is looking for. And at least in one case, one Texas woman who was suspected of taking self-induced abortion pills was being tracked by flock cameras in law enforcement. How far this goes is anyone's guess, but the culture where power is information and information is used as discipline is not far from our concern. And to be honest, we have cameras around the campus here against my original instincts, but they were put here to protect us from violence when we started being more public about supporting women getting abortion six or seven years ago.

And our cameras don't get access by government authorities unless we give them access, which we won't. The larger issue is surveillance culture, which has become an issue related to religious freedom, in particularly Unitarian universalism. Hang in there. I'm getting to the point. Here's a statement from the Unitarian Universalist Association dated August 20th, 2026 that goes like this. "Free societies protect houses of worship. They do not spy on them. Healthy democracies understand that the right of a citizen to dissent from the state is part of maintaining that sacred form of self-governance. Unhealthy ones murder people in the streets when they're merely exercising their rights."

"As such, the Unitarian Universalist Association condemns the actions of this administration in secretly spying on at least one of our congregations, the first Universalist church of Minneapolis. To be clear, the news that an undercover agent on behalf of the Department of Homeland Security used surveillance inside UU congregations, especially one in Minnesota, is not shocking to us. This event is a further reminder that our Unitarian Universalist values call us into courageous, prophetic work. We must remain mindful that UUs, among others, are facing increased scrutiny and perhaps harassment and threats, acting with intention, strategy, and in line with best practices for the security and safety of our members and communities is one of the best ways to remain vigilant."

If this is news to you, welcome to my world. The actions of the administration to spy on our sister church is deplorable, but familiar. I have heard from members of the staff of this church and members that during the McCarthy era, agents attended church. They wrote down names of people that they were following. People like Greer Ragio Sr. and others were banned from employment and listed, if not required to make loyalty claims to the government in part for participating in this church. Whether or not this kind of surveillance is happening now in our church is unknown to me, but if you're here from the government or Department of Homeland Security, please raise your hand now.

But like the Minneapolis Universalist Church, I am not concerned because I have nothing to hide. On the other hand, these actions are actions of intimidation and they cause some concern for me. Here's the second part of the UUA statement. It says, "The role of the prophetic dissenting church has long been to push back against authoritarianism and state violence." And to meet this moment, we must again answer this faithful call. We are in this together, both as you use, an in courageous, unapologetic collaboration with all progressive people of faith and conscience.

As stated by Reverend Jennifer Crow, senior minister of First Universalists in Minneapolis, there is no need for covert surveillance of our community. We make no secret about who we are or what we are about. Jen is a colleague of mine who preached here during Beth's ordination ceremony anniversary last fall. Some of you met her. She's in the thick of this battle, so I wrote to her when this news broke and I got home and I sent her good wishes and she wrote back and she said,

"Thanks so much for this note, Daniel. I know you know what it is to be in the public eye and the challenges and the sense of unity and purpose it can bring, and I'm sending love and care to you and the congregation in Dallas."

Are we in this battle or not? I do not know. But my response is the same as it was when we were under attack for support of abortion. And that response is this, "We will not stop acting on our values and we have nothing to hide." Will we continue to support clergy response to attacks on immigrants? Yes. Will we continue to widely promote and support reproductive dignity? Yes. Will we fight for the rights of our Muslim neighbors to peacefully practice their religion in private and in public? Yes.

And here's the UUA's final bit of their statement. It says, "As members of a religion, Unitarian Universalists are guaranteed the right to freely exercise our faith. We have a grave concern over unconstitutional infiltration of houses of worship and will fight against this infringement of our rights. This incident is further evidence on the harm that is being perpetrated against faith communities and other sensitive spaces. Will we be in this fight?" Yes. This is what is all on my mind as we launch this new year, this year of liberating faith.

In a year when our right to vote freely is in jeopardy, when our rights of assembly and free speech are being questioned or more, when our neighbors' rights to religious expression are under attack, the question on all our minds is what are we going to do? What are we going to live into? What kind of congregation are we to become? Will we be people who simply talk about freedom or will we practice it? Will we defend liberty only when it is comfortable or will we defend it when it is costly? Will we retreat into safety or will we continue the great Unitarian experiment of trusting human beings to seek, to question, to grow and to become?

The future of this congregation has always depended on answers to these questions and now it is our turn, our turn to protect freedom of conscience, our turn to make room for difference, our turn to resist the tyranny of conformity, our turn to live this liberating faith with others have passed on to us, our turn to discover together what new experiments and living and loving and building beloved community await us next. Welcome to the year we are calling liberating faith. Let's get going. Amen.