

ONCE A PROTESTANT ...

A Service by Fritz Hudson
Presented September 25, 2005

Chalice Lighting

*Welcome to this house where we gather to dream of great good.
Welcome to the people who dare to respect and trust
a life-commanding possibility in you
as we dare to respect and trust it in our ourselves.
Welcome to the heritage of faithful doubt and sacred curiosity,
where skepticism and conviction are alternate voices in the same prayer.
Know that you are truly welcome just as you are.
Know that we are all here to share in a stretching of our vision
in a deepening of our hope, and in a strengthening of our courage.
Welcome.*

Walter Royal Jones

Song: Faith of the Larger Liberty"

Introduction: "A Responsible Search"

In our town, as you know, there are many places to learn about and practice religion. One is called a synagogue, where Judaism is taught and practiced. Two are called mosques, where Islam is taught and practiced. Several are called temples, though one follows Judaism while in others Buddhism and Hinduism is taught and practiced. Many, many of them are called churches – like ours. And almost all of those called churches started out teaching and practicing Christianity. But now, let me ask, who among you has attended or visited a church other than ours here? Did they do and say the same things there that we do here? Today I want to tell you a bit about how our churches have become so different.

Most of the kinds of churches we have in Lincoln were brought here by people who moved here long, long ago, from countries across the ocean in Europe. And in Europe, for many years, all the churches practiced Christianity in similar ways, as taught by the church in Rome.

Then about 500 years ago, something new began happening in the churches. Ministers who led some churches began questioning the teachings of the ministers in other churches. Often they couldn't agree on whose teachings were best, and so they tried to convince the kings or princes who ruled the towns to declare their teachings the only true ones. In the city of Rome and other places, the rulers were convinced that the old ways to teach and practice Christianity were still the best. Their churches became known as Roman Catholic. Do you know any Roman Catholic churches in our town? In other places, the rulers decided that the new teachings of a minister named Martin Luther were best. They decided that all the churches in their land should become Lutheran. Do you know any of those? Other rulers in other places chose the teachings of other ministers for the churches in their lands. Their churches then got named for their new teachings – Presbyterian or Methodist or Baptist and

others. You know those here too, don't you?

In one kingdom, though, the king wanted to be very careful about deciding which of the different ministers had the best lessons. His name was John. His small country was called Transylvania. He was very interested in finding the best teachings about the meaning of life and how to live it well. When different ministers in his kingdom urged him to proclaim that all the churches follow their teachings, King John invited all the ministers to come together in a big hall and explain to him and everyone what made their teachings special and why they were the best.

John held several such discussions in several towns. He listened very carefully to what each minister said. In one town the discussions went on for 10 days. To John each of the ministers seemed to have some good things to say, but always on at least one topic, some other minister had something better to say. All of their teachings had some very good and some not quite as good parts.

After several such discussions, several of the ministers were becoming angry with John. "Can't the King see that my teachings are the best?" they grumbled. They began to shout at one another when they spoke at the discussions. The King could see no good coming from this. He called a meeting of all his best advisors in the town of Torda. And at the meeting the King and his advisors agreed to try something that had never been tried before. They decided **not** to decide which teachings were best for all the people. They decided to leave the ministers free to teach their different lessons, and to let the people themselves decide whose teachings they would follow. They decided that the King's job was to protect the ministers and the people from attacking each other when they disagreed, not to try to settle their disagreements by telling them which teaching to follow. So in that kingdom, for the first time, Lutheran churches were built right next to the Roman Catholic churches, and Presbyterian churches grew up right next to them as well. Transylvania was the first place in the Christian world where a government decided to protect the kind of freedom we have here now in our country and in many countries..

And one more thing happened there as well. One minister, in Transylvania, decided to create a wholly new kind of church – a church where different teachings, different practices, could be followed by different people all in that same building. This church became known as the Unitarian Church – the first one in our world. And, while King John protected the right of all kinds of churches to follow only their particular teachings and practices in their individual buildings, this new church, this Unitarian church, is the church that King himself chose to attend.

Sermon: "Once a Protesant ..."

"The age of (humanity) is more than (its) years. (Our) senses, (our) emotions, (our) body and mind processes, are the distillation of the experiences of the millions of centuries --- To understand the limitations of (our) being is (our) first step in transcending them. To recognize the incompleteness and futility of (our) solitariness, and to accept (our) part in the wholeness of life, is to tap the Deep Sources." (*Deep Sources and the Great Becoming*. 1950 p.2.)

You might remember, from our first Sunday together this month, that these words were Edwin Palmer's - Edwin Palmer who served as our minister for only three years in the 1920s, Edwin Palmer whose most lasting impression among us was made when he stood in our pulpit and zealously tore pages from a Bible, trying to demonstrate what it means to read scripture in reason's light. Have you wondered: Which pages did he tear out? Which pages did he leave in place? We'll come to those questions somewhat further down this fall's path of "starting over," strengthening our connections with the root fibers that must nourish any lasting growth before us. Those roots are broad now – "The living tradition we share draws from many sources," we tell the world on our wall and on every Sunday's bulletin. One of those roots is more central to our stock, though. It is thick, like all old roots, and like many it is twisted. Its years have left in it both dead parts and live parts. We name it "Christian" teachings - but just like the teachings of the ancient and long-hidden Gospel of Thomas I described two weeks ago, our "Christian teachings" have long had to compete with other claimed "Christian teachings." Oftentimes ours have been overshadowed by those others; sometimes ours have been the victims of attempted murder, even actual murder, by those others. So if we now are to grow again from this root, as we do from those more recently grafted, we'll have to remind ourselves how to find our special channel through the dead wood, and how to discern the taste of its distinctive food. I left you two weeks ago at the attempted murder of Thomas' gospel – the good news that we could live like Jesus lived and grow not by believing him God but by joining in his responsible search for truth. I told you how Emperor Constantine's bishops in 325 AD condemned his message, forcing ancient monks to bury it in an earthenware jar. That root for us lay severed and dormant until the jar was unearthed only 50 years ago now. Its power can now be revived to us only by grafting it into our time. The fact of our presence here though, our existence as the kind of "Christian" community that can now appreciate what Thomas taught, is more directly the fruit of other seeds that sprouted on their own in the Christianity of the 16th century, not the first, second, or third. I want to tell you more about these "deep sources."

For 1300 years following Constantine's Council in Nicea, western Christianity grew only in one channel, controlled mostly from Rome. Finally in the 16th century came its first real challenge – its protestant reformation. The protest began October 31, 1517, when the monk and theology professor Martin Luther nailed his 95 objections to Rome's practices on the door of the church at Wittenburg. In subsequent essays he honed in to urge abandonment of three Roman teachings:

- the authority of the pope
- the sacramental power of rites beyond baptism and holy communion, such as penance or anointing of the sick.
- the restriction of the priesthood to those chosen by the church authorities.

Most revolutionary was the authority Luther claimed to attack these teachings. When the Diet (or Congress) at Worms condemned his theses, Luther responded "Unless I am proved wrong by the testimony of Scripture or by evident reason ... I am bound in conscience. ... I cannot and will retract anything, for it is neither safe nor ... (honest) to act against one's conscience." (Rupp. Luther's PROGRESS TO THE DIET OF WORMS, p.96)

Luther's great proclamation was "the priesthood of all believers." His great gift was to translate all Christian scripture into the language of his people, German, so that all believers could seek its meaning according to their own reason and conscience. Once Luther's teachings gained the support of

the Elector of Saxony, his local ruler, his teachings of a new and different Christianity became a force to be reckoned with. In his wake came other unique teachers like Ulrich Zwingli, who garnered political support in Zurich, Switzerland, and John Calvin, similarly supported in Geneva, Switzerland. The seeds that sprouted our deepest direct roots germinated in the heat and light of these first successful Protestants, but their road to power was far less direct. We will find their power, today, I think, if we recall the efforts and the fates of three men of this time, each in their own way our direct creators.

Miguel Servet of Spain is the first of these. He is also known as Michael Servetus. He was 6 years old when Luther proclaimed the priesthood of all believers. Miguel's homeland, Spain, had a rich multicultural heritage of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. When his University studies led him to apply reason to scripture, he wanted most to examine the scriptural basis for what set Christianity apart, that God had three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, sharing one eternal essence, substance and nature. Jews and Muslims inability to make this affirmation had brought 800,000 Jews to be banished from Spain and thousands of Muslims Moors to be burned at the stake. "In his newly discovered Bible," however, "Servetus found not one word about the Trinity, nor about its Persons, not about an Essence, nor about a unity of the Substance, nor about one Nature of the several beings." (Earl Morse Wilbur. *The History of Unitarianism. Socinianism and its Antecedents* p.53)

Just out of university, Miguel was called to serve the Holy Roman Emperor's Court Preacher, who prosecuted Martin Luther at Worms. Thus introduced to the seamy backstage of the Roman Church, Miguel's sympathies moved quickly to the protestants. In 1531, at the age of 20, he published a book entitled *On the Errors of the Trinity*, which he hoped move the reformers Luther and his followers to pronounce the doctrine unsupported by scripture. Unfortunately, his plea came just as the protestants were settling in to their new found political strength. Their reformist ire was cooling. When Servet could see that his book was being condemned by both Catholics and Protestants, he sought refuge in Switzerland by taking on an assumed name and beginning a whole new life as a physician.

Miguel stayed undercover in this way for 20 years. He gained great respect as a scientist, making major contributions to our understanding of the circulatory system. In the early 1550s, however, when John Calvin brought the protestant movement to nearby Geneva, Miguel had to see if he could finally gain support for his reading of scripture. He published *The Restoration of Christianity* arguing now that both the doctrines of the trinity and infant baptism were unscriptural. Though Calvin had his own questions about Jesus' divinity, he betrayed Servet to Roman Catholic authorities. They arrested him, convicted him of heresy and sentenced him to death. When Servet escaped their control, and tried to pass through Geneva to freedom, Calvin's government now arrested him. Calvin himself met with Servet, and talked with him about whether scripture did or didn't present Jesus as God, but he calculated that he could not bear the political risk of sponsoring this radical a reinterpretation of the Christian doctrine. Under pressure to pull the reins in on reformation, he decided to carry out the catholic condemnation. Servet's death, by burning at the stake, on October 26, 1553, at the hands of supposed protestant reformers, gave the lie to Luther's claim for the authority of reason and conscience. His spirit however, soon found new life in other breasts.

Ferenz David, of Transylvania, is our second creator. He is also known as Francis David. He was

seven when Martin Luther proclaimed the priesthood of all believers, a year older than Miguel Servet. Educated by Franciscan monks, he entered adult life as the rector of a Roman Catholic school. When Luther's ideas reached Transylvania, Ferez rather quickly became convinced that the teachings of Christianity should be found as Luther taught: in a reasoned reading of the Holy Scriptures, rather than in the interpretations of Church leaders. On the other hand, when John Calvin's ideas reached his land, questioning the character of Jesus' divinity and the dogma that Holy Communion physically transformed bread and wine into Jesus' body and blood, Ferez argued forcefully against them. He was such an effective defender of the traditional teachings that he was appointed Superintendent of all Transylvania's Lutheran Churches. Even after he'd bested the Calvinists in those debates, however, their arguments festered in his thoughts. "What did the Scriptures really teach about Jesus' divinity?" he found himself asking. "What did they really say happened at the Last Supper?" The next time a debate on these issues was held, who showed up now arguing the Calvinist positions? Ferez David. It was, in fact, the force with which Ferez championed these positions that prevented King John from squelching them, and led the King to deliver the Edict of Toleration I told you of earlier, at Torda. The year was 1568, a bare 15 years after the David's teacher, John Calvin, had determined his Christianity could not tolerate even continued life for Miguel Servet. Ferez David then became first superintendent of the Calvinist, called Reformed churches. But his quest for truth did not stop there. Over the next two years the scriptures led him to see that Jesus made no claims to divinity. Jesus' God was one, not three, as the Church had long taught. As Reformed Church superintendent, David convened a synod to argue the unity of God and the humanity of Jesus, but he succeeded only in so inflaming the traditionalists that King John was forced to convene another general synod. There the edict of toleration was broadened to confirm protection even for this further stretch of Christianity, this Unitarian Christianity, and Ferez David became first superintendent of these first Unitarian churches in our world. King John died just two years later. His successor was not a Unitarian. He was a Calvinist. When Ferez's restless search of scripture led him next to eschew invoking Jesus' name in prayers, he learned that the kingdom's search for knowledge had died with King John. For stretching the Unitarian creed beyond what had been authorized at King John's last synod, Ferez was tried and convicted of heresy in the royal court. Condemned to perpetual imprisonment he died in the castle dungeon on November 15, 1579.

Fausto Sozzini of Italy was our third creator. He is also known as Faustus Socinus. He was born in 1539, twenty-two years after Martin Luther proclaimed the priesthood of all believers. Though nominally Catholic, his family was actively engaged in the early years of the reformation. After studying in Switzerland, Fausto wrote a book entitled *Jesus Christ, Servant*. It was not Jesus' death which was important to human salvation, he argued, as atonement for human sins. Jesus' life is what's important to salvation, he argued, in giving us a model of saving human conduct. (You might call it the Gospel of Thomas II.) The book brought Fausto an invitation to visit Transylvania and study directly with Ferez David in the final year of his life. When he left there he found his lifelong work among the Anabaptists of Krakow Poland.

The Anabaptists movement grew out of Zwingli's reformation in Zurich, Switzerland. While Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and even Servet and David, sought government sponsorship, the Anabaptists were determined to be politically independent. Religious identity, they felt, should not be imposed upon infants through baptism (hence their name) but rather chosen by individuals as adult. Congregations should not be shaped by ministers or princes but rather created by covenants among members. The

Anabaptists of Krakow had been formed 14 years before Fausto arrived. By the time he arrived they had found the wisdom of Miguel Servet's reading of scripture, and affirmed the humanity of Jesus. Their quest to live according the scriptural commandments, had also led them to teach absolute pacifism -which meant they had refused to answer the prince's call to arms and refused to serve as magistrates in the administration of capital punishment. They had also become the most democratic of polish religious movements, drawing members from all classes and resolving their controversies in wide-open public discussion.

Fausto embraced what he found, and enriched it formidable power as the community's doctrinal scholar and public spokesperson. He wrote a book justifying absolute pacifism, and then was forced into exile for 4 years to escape the religious and political condemnation it brought. He wrote an anabaptist catechism, revealing the reasoned interpretation of Christian scripture which supported God's unity, Jesus' exemplary leadership in this life, the necessity of adult commitment to Christian life, the open and democratic character of Christian community, and its necessary independence from civil authority. Published shortly after Fausto's death in 1604, this catechism quickly made its way beyond Poland's borders to Anabaptist communities all over western Europe. In particular, it found an eager audience among those communities in Holland. And, as you might remember, those communities served as mid-wife to the birth of our countries, Pilgrim pioneers, who set sail just a few years later for Plymouth Rock.

Three weeks from now I'll pick up this trail again on this side of the Atlantic. You'll remember the old joke describing the difference between Unitarians and Universalists. Universalists, it was said, believed that God was too good to damn them forever. Unitarians, on the other hand, believed they were too good to be damned forever. I'll explore how we got to and where we've come from these two starting points, asking first "Is God Still Too Good", and then "Are We Still too Good."

For the next two weeks, we'll step off of this path, to draw from two sources we've tapped into more recently – next week, from Jewish teachings, on the eve of Rosh Hoshannah and the Days of Awe, and then the following week from Islamic teachings, in the first week of Ramadan.

At our service's opening next Sunday, however, we'll feel some of the strong tug of these old protestant roots however. We'll be welcoming Diane Merrill and Robyn Molden's child, Evan, into our midst. This will be no baptism, listen for our affirmation that religious identity is an independent adult choice, and prepare to experience it as a reaffirmation of the covenant of our freely formed community. As we continue on, drawing upon the teachings of Judaism and Islam, we will at the same time feel where that tie is no longer so direct. We have grown beyond the tandem authority claimed by Luther. "The testimony of Scripture" no longer holds equal footing for us with "evident reason." Scripture is now a source of inspiration and an object of respect, but is no longer an ultimate test of truth.

Strongest in our ties to that long ago time is the spirit with which our first churches, back in King's John's Transylvania, were born. Its slogan then and now, was and is, *semper reformanda*, always reforming. Once a Protestant - always a protestant, always protesting.

Songs: "A Mighty Fortress"

"We Are the Earth Upright and Proud"

Candle Extinguishing

Because of those who came before, we are;

In spite of their failings, we believe;

Because of, and in spite of, the horizons of their visions, we too dream.

Let us go, remembering to pause, to live in the moment,

to love mightily, to bow to the mystery.

Barbara Pescan