

# Minns Lecture

**Boston, June 27, 2003**

*Presented by the Reverend Stephen Kendrick, Minister, First and Second Church*

When I announced to a friend that I would be going to First and Second Church, a parishioner asked, “Won’t you get very tired going back and forth between them?”

As we hear something about the early history of Boston tonight, we will also be moving in time back and forth between these two congregations and their histories, and how, more than 300 years after they separated, they have come together again.

I realized months ago that in putting together a Minns lecture about the history of First and Second Church, that it would be a breeze, a slam-dunk. It would be unbelievably easy. The history of these two congregations is almost an overview of American history itself, and most certainly of our denomination.

You’ve got Anne Hutchinson being exiled from her church and Boston because she believed, as we will hear later, in the ability of the soul to hear directly the divine - and you will hear these words again in the guise of Emerson.

For Second Church, we make the claim (in spite of the Massachusetts Historical Society) that Paul Revere’s two lanterns were actually hung in Old North Church, which *was* Second Church, and that where the tourists go today was then actually a Tory stronghold. Where would Paul Revere have really placed his lanterns? Well, I think he would have done so in his own church, with his own sexton, in a church that the British later tore down as being a “nest of traitors”. Do you really think he went to an Anglican Church? I think not!

First Church was the spiritual home of a President, John Quincy Adams, who after leaving the White House reentered politics as a lowly Congressman to spend the last decade of his life fighting slavery.

And think of the ministers! William Emerson and his son Ralph Waldo Emerson; Increase, Cotton, and Samuel Mather — these were divines who ruled over Boston for nearly a hundred years. Thomas Starr King, whose picture is in my office so I get to look everyday on his gentle and loving face. He kept California for the Union in the Civil War. Edward Everett Hale, author of The Man Without a Country, minister of the South Congregational Church (one of seven churches that have flowed into our church), who, late in life was Chaplain of the Senate. He said, “it is my responsibility to pray for the Congress. But when I look out at them I feel a strong impulse to pray for the country.”

See, this is easy. For this kind of lecture I can’t imagine better material to work with.

Then I thought, well, maybe I want to do something a bit more complicated, something harder, namely, to rehabilitate the man whose statue you saw out front as you entered here, John Winthrop. You all know, or think you know, about Puritanism. H. L. Mencken said of Puritanism that it was the grudging suspicion that somewhere out there, someone is having a good time. I picked up a book called Old New England Churches published by Dolores Bacon in 1906, and I confess it gave me quite a rather different picture than Leo, our archivist, usually gives me about our church. In speaking of historians who wished they had just a splinter of the old First Church of Boston, just a mud-covered thatched hut, Dolores says, “No, we cannot endorse the taste of this chronicler of distressful events. On the contrary we should expect the people to rejoice at moving away and separating themselves from every vestige of a house which had witnessed so much wrong, instituted so much injustice and inhumanity, hoping to begin with a clean spirit in a clean house.” She goes on to say, “The First Church deserves precedence chronologically, but in the summing up it is possible that First Church would be last in the Christian roll-call if it were judged by its too high-handed beginnings.” Well, welcome to Boston, my friends!

The First Church had a covenant “to walk in all of our ways” dating from the 1630’s, actually predating the City of Boston itself. There is a splendid side to our history, and a shadow side to this story.

What can be learned tonight from these old Puritans? What can John Winthrop and John Cotton and Ann Hutchinson and John Eliot and Roger Williams and Anne Bradstreet? What can they tell us about who we really are, as a congregation in 2003, but also as a nation and as a denomination? And what can we learn from Second Church's Increase Mather and Cotton, and his son, Samuel, who was the only minister in this history to be fired from his pulpit. Samuel Mather was fired, believe it or not, because he was too liberal.

In my journey into this material and into the life and archives of this church, I learned that there is quite a lot to be absorbed and reflected on. This is more than simply understanding the city of Boston itself. In our story lie all the paradoxes that constitute what being an American is ultimately all about. Ronald Reagan used to regularly quote from John Winthrop's speech which he delivered from the ship *Arbella* in Boston Harbor. (I would count it one of America's three greatest sermons: Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech, Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural address, and Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity". Interestingly, two of the three were done by lay-people and not clergy.) When John Winthrop spoke to about 700 people, he talked about founding a City on a Hill. You have no doubt heard this phrase from politicians many times.

Well I'm going to give you something of the larger condition of what Winthrop was really trying to get at, and what this dream was really all about. It is a dream that still exists. If you think about it, it was the beginning of *experimental and experiential* religion. John Winthrop had the puritan dream that all were to be united as they came into the Mass Bay Colony. It was a chance to live in God's love and charity and not commerce. There was to be a unity of purpose — and we were literally to be bound together as a people.

He held to this dream against everything he had ever been told about his own Calvinist religion. If you think about it, Calvinist religion said that human beings are basically doomed and depraved and deprived. John Winthrop believed the best about human beings, that we could really achieve this by separating out from the Old World structures. This would be a new experiment in human society that could hold together. It would be a place, "where we ought to account ourselves knit together by this bond of love and to live in the exercise of it. All parties of this body, being thus united in a special relation as they must partake of each others strength and infirmity, joy and sorrow, weal and woe. To be knit together in this work as one. We must entertain each other in affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of superfluities for the supply of others necessities, we must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together."

I can hardly imagine a truer Declaration of Independence than these words spoken at the very genesis of this town, this city on a hill. And was Winthrop just a dreamer? Yes, that God's love and this love for one another could pervade all our doings as people *in society*? It is easy to dismiss or even to demean the Puritan ideal. But I ask you some hopefully interesting questions. If the Puritan ideal is to be so easily lost, where did the power of the abolitionist movement come from? Where did the instinct come from, within 150 years, for the creation of such powerful reform movements, such as Unitarianism? And from where did Emerson's spiritual authority ultimately derive from?

These are good questions and we don't ask them enough. John Winthrop said, at the beginning of Boston in 1630, "we have so much to do as if it is the very beginning of the world." They used to call Boston *Shawmut*. Shawmut is an Indian word meaning a crossing point — the place where everyone passes through. Well, Bostonians describe themselves as living in the hub of the universe, but Shawmut is slightly different. As I looked into the history of this congregation and Second Congregation and the five other congregations that feed into the life of this congregation today, I have seen over and over again the currents of reform cross and regenerate themselves over and over again. It is truly Shawmut. And were the Puritans hypocritical? Yes. Hysterical at times? Yes. Stern and demanding? Absolutely. But we would be profoundly misunderstanding the roots of a culture that, like it or not, still have currency, not only in our national culture but in our movement of Unitarian-Universalism. These forebears had courage and fortitude and hope, and yes, their dream of a new beginning of the world was ultimately to fail.

Absolutely. All such great dreams fail, but in doing so these dreams did not die — not completely and not finally.

When they met in that mud-walled meeting house they did more than set themselves up as spiritual authorities, they also began the creation of something called *congregationalism*. What does that mean? What it really means is that the people in front of me constitute spiritual authority — the lay people. John Cotton said, “Our churches are governed by pastors, teachers, ruling elders and deacons, yet” — and listen to this. This was written over 350 years ago! “. . . And yet the power lies in the whole congregation, not in the presbytery, farther than order and precedence.” Edward Everett Hale at the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Second Church stood in front of that congregation and looked at them as I look at you tonight, saying, “The religious history of a church like this is written in the lives of thousands and thousands whom it has trained and whom you will train — hundreds of thousands, “and then he paused and then he added, “and this means in their eternal lives.”

This spiritual authority lies in you.

Winthrop asked, what was the experiment about- this experiential religion? He said, and this is the very essence of what I am trying to convey to you tonight - “*Being come to clearer light and more liberty.*” Now, it seems everyone in the early town of Boston had their opinions. Henry Vane, who was a member, went back to England after one term as governor and lost his head in the Revolution, having such strong views. We also know about the barber, William Dinley, of whom it was said, ‘so soon as any were set down in his chair he would be commonly be cutting off their hair and their truth together.’ Everybody had theological opinions in the town of Boston.

I think as Unitarian Universalists today we would be pretty comfortable in this sense. They discussed what was legal and what was God’s law, and what was grace, what was experience. And there is one soul in our history whom we can never forget, who still haunts us. Who won in the contest between the church elders that faced down Anne Hutchinson? Well, in the short term Anne Hutchinson was indeed banished, but in the long run, whose statue is out in front of the State House? (It stands close to that of Mary Dyer, hung on Boston Common as a Quaker.) These people were not perfect. The Puritans earned their reputation the old-fashioned way. They were tough, they are hard to love, but I find that they must be dealt with and surely respected.

One historian says, “Anne Hutchinson was disruption personified.” She is a true American heroine. But you wouldn’t necessarily want her in your congregation. She was an amazing trouble-maker, and yet we love her. There went Winthrop’s ideal of unity and order— because she asked the question over and over again, “Are those who speak the divine word really connected to the experience of God? Is any minister capable of doing that?” And she said, “No”. No minister could ultimately connect you, the individual, to the divine experience. The minister John Cotton did eventually turn on Anne, after she had been inspired by his words, and Winthrop tried as best he could to ease the trouble and the tension that broke out within ten years of the founding of this church (a congregation based on the dream of unity) until banishment seemed all that was left. Anne, who died in the wilderness, killed by Indians within only three years, was also described as being “A preacher who preaches better gospel than any of your black coats who have been to university”. It is hard not to love her. It is also hard to imagine anything else happening in the tragedies that developed in the First Church. Anne looked at those who banished her and said, “You have power over my body. The Lord Jesus has power over my body and my soul.” And so she went. The world was not yet ready for her. But her experiential faith would find echoes in, of all people, Second Church’s Cotton Mather, and then Emerson.

The Mathers are an interesting case. The people of north Boston in 1651 had, with a little bit of contentiousness, separated from the First Church, and now the new church was moving into prominence. Cotton Mather’s father, Increase, was brilliant and chilling. He was a man who traced the comets in the sky and was able to say, and I think you can identify with this, judging by how hot it is today, “Thy soul is hanging over the mouth of Hell by the rotten thread of a frail life, and if that breaks, the devouring gulf will swallow thee up forever.” Which does keep you warm on a cold New England day. His boy, Cotton (named for First Church’s John Cotton—this is getting very Bostonian and confusing), was one of American history’s great figures, author of 400 works, advocate of smallpox vaccinations, writer of one

of first anti-slavery tracts, and also, to the shame of his final reputation, a supporter of the Salem Witch Trials. Interestingly, Second Church gets the blame for Cotton's failings here, but seldom the credit for the fact that Increase Mather helped cool down the Witch fever with a calm declaration that the "evidence was tainted."

There is a dark side to the Puritan underpinnings. This is inescapable. But where human nature and science and human circumstance change, human nature does not. And what they experienced and what they felt and what was important to them, and even what divided them is, I believe, very important to us today— so that we may understand ourselves as a movement, as a free religious movement. The Puritans, it is true, were not greatly loved. None of their homes have been preserved in the City of Boston. Until 50 years ago, we didn't even know where John Winthrop lived. In 1879 there was talk of removing the graves of Winthrop and John Cotton from the Kings Chapel Burying Ground to make "better use of the site". So there is not much use tonight for me to spend a lot of time and calories defending the Puritans. Perhaps it would be easier to join Emerson in saying it is time to move on and be done with them. Except *I don't think they are done with us*. Nor should they be, as long as soul liberty is a concern to any of us. Because there is a very deep paradox with us tonight.

Their quest; their deep spiritual quest directly leads to our own spiritual movement and the liberty of this nation.

In 1660, the British attempted to revoke the Royal Charter by sending agents to receive it from the Massachusetts General Court. It was Increase Mather from Second Church who entered the Town House in the middle of the meeting. He walked through the crowd knowing that he was about to be arrested. He said, "I hope there is not a free man in Boston who can be guilty of such a thing. We shall sin against the God of Heaven if we do this thing." He faced down the Royal Court. The legislature refused the demands of the agent, sending him back empty-handed. Later, it would be First Church's Charles Chauncey, known as 'Old Brick.' Again, perhaps not a very lovable character, but he stood foursquare for liberty at every stage. It is difficult to imagine the American Revolution transpiring as it did without the inspiration of Charles Chauncey of First Church, Boston. It was said, "In Charles 'Old Brick', both well and sick, will cry for Liberty". He had an immense effect on what people felt and how they thought God was speaking to them in the midst of change. Of what was enduring in the civic and political order. This has not gone away. Also in the back, the most recent Memorial to be added to our wall of members of First and Second tradition is Elliot Richardson. He wrote to Rhys Williams in a personal letter, "The world is too small and our lives are too short for the closed mind and the pinched heart." Inspiration takes us beyond the usual to the extraordinary in our actions. And so it moves from politics to our soul's liberty, and in this sense we are all Emerson's children.

Emerson was very unsure about organized religion. He only made it as a minister in this pulpit for three years, but he changed this movement forever. No one has influenced modern Unitarian Universalism more than this man who was unsure that he even wanted to be part of the Unitarian tradition. I believe what we ultimately stand for is the idea that the soul will not be fettered. It is Emerson who taught us that we need to pay the price to be free, for true belief to exist, so that the individual may breathe free, so that we may realize what is eternal in us, that each of us are valuable, unique creatures endowed with the capacity to determine our own religious path and direction.. He said the great business of life is to learn ourselves. He believed this because he took very seriously words from the New Testament, that the Kingdom of God is within you. He took it seriously and religion often has not.

Meditating on these words, Emerson was forced into what we'll call radical beliefs — and yet they were not radical in terms of the history and tradition that we have discussed tonight. Emerson's view of self-reliance should be seen as an invitation to take seriously your own life. He said, "All life is an experiment and the more experiments the better." It is that note we heard from Anne Hutchinson and from John Winthrop. He said, "Refuse to chain yourself to the past" — yet the paradox of Emerson is that his own historical path led him to this spiritual message.

It is our struggle today. He said, "I become rather than I am. I am in becoming. I am now nothing, but I am going to be a prophecy of what I will be." Idealistic? Yes, but it is not naive. This message is realistic, it is powerful. It takes us into a new place. Emerson also knew what suffering was about. He

lived it, he experienced it, he knew the limitation of our character and our history and our pain and all these things make up our ultimate potential. Emerson still invites us and offers a challenge — almost a dare — to live and act in our own freedom. He said, “Let the revolution come and let one, let one come breathing free unto the earth to walk by hope alone.” The marble statue that you will see when you go out was actually given at that 250th anniversary at Second Church that I mentioned earlier, and was unveiled by the superintendent of the Sunday School. She announced it was a gift from the pennies collected from the children of Second Church over a four year period. Emerson always speaks to the young — to the young at heart no matter what our age. Political Liberty, intellectual freedom, religious democracy, all these things, but it actually comes back to *clear light and more liberty*— remember these words of Winthrop’s?

Well, I have a great love of history, but you can get lost in it as well. I direct your attention to the picture in the back. There is a portrait of Duncan Howlett, who died three weeks ago. He was the minister here for twelve years. His presence is still here as well. Let us look at what we have become in recent years, and see where the story of soul liberty is taking us.

*And now we have lost another minister, and a friend, through Rhys William’s death. But he always understood the true foundations of this church — not bricks, but the tradition of liberty and unity of loving purpose.*

We need to look no farther back than in Rhys William’s rebuilding of this church when it burned down. This church, known as the Abbey Church, stood on this site for exactly 100 years. Thirty-five years ago, on March 29, then 37 years old, Rhys was awakened at 2 in the morning by a phone call. The dry beams of the old Abbey Church has gone up in flames. Entering a taxi the driver said, “I’m not sure how close I can take you in. The whole city could burn — it is a terrifying fire down there.”

“What church,” Rhys asked.

“First Church, the Unitarian.”

“I’m one of its ministers. I’ve got to get there fast.” The taxi driver was almost in tears. He refused the fare and he said in a very low voice, “I am so sorry.” Rhys stood there the rest of the night. He later said, in a sermon he preached next door at the Lutheran Church, two days later, “It was like an hour on the cross, to watch that church burn, to hear the glass explode, to see the marble reduced to dust, the old memorials that have been recaptured in Margaret Shepard’s calligraphy — to see the old wood — dark, hand-carved, swept away, and yet they rebuilt. They rebuilt in an innovative and creative way. Yes, the old steeple stands and the colonnade, linking us to the past, but what you see around you is a testament to the vision of the people of First and Second Church and to Rhys, because they were not afraid to be innovative, and creative and to do the new, the experiential religion.

It’s the everyday stuff; the long meetings, the work that you do in your congregations, the meals, dropping off to see someone in the hospital, these are the things that make the life of the congregation real. *To walk together in all our ways.* That is the covenant that was given to us by the Puritans in 1630. If we take the old Puritan ideal and to say ‘in all of our ways’ in order to force ourselves into an artificial unity, we have betrayed the best part of our spiritual self. We can become diffused and stifled and inert and certainly confused. The Puritan unity can seem enforced, soul constricting, even coercive.

Yet we can say ‘to walk together,’ in a different way. There is an innate tension here — to walk together and to also be true to authentic, experiential religion. We can fuse these two ideals to walk together in all of our ways, and something very powerful happens. Yes, there is an innate tension, but it is ultimately Winthrop’s genius that this kind of covenant fuels us with a thirst for freedom. This, ultimately, is what makes this congregation work today. During the fire, the Winthrop statue in front fell over, and someone was walking away with John Winthrop’s head. A member of the church said, “Wait a minute,” grabbed back the head, took it home and hid it in his garage so that the City of Boston would not take back the Winthrop statue. It took a number of years of hard work and fundraising, but John Winthrop’s body and head were at last united, as we have been united by the combination of Unitarianism and Universalism.

Let our history not be a dead weight, but rather a sure foundation so that our reach is higher, our vision elevated, a heritage that invigorates and revivifies — these were not plaster saints, by any means,

but they are people who grappled, as we must do, with individualism, and unity and community, the connection between faith and state.

John Cotton came from Boston, England, and in search of spiritual liberty preached from this pulpit. These words moved me very much when I arrived here two years ago. He said, “Go forth, everyone that goes, with a public spirit looking not upon your own things only.”

Amen.