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 Arlington Street Church
 5 May, 2019

William Ellery Channing
The Baltimore Sermon
200 Years Later

Rev. Dr. William Ellery Channing served this congregation from 1803 to 1842 — our fifth senior minister. His ordination sermon for Jared Sparks, preached at our then-new church in Baltimore and known rather unimaginatively as the Baltimore Sermon, is considered by some to be the most important sermon in Unitarian history. Today marks the 200th anniversary of that sermon.

But Unitarian Universalist ministers everywhere are in a quandary this morning. Why? Because Channing's sermon is 42 pages of densely-packed type; it took him no less than one and a half hours to preach it.¹ How can we possibly do it any kind of justice without lulling us all back to sleep?

After a little agonizing, I'm going to make a valiant effort not to go full nerd on you and share just a little background and tantalizing highlights in a few paragraphs.²

Ready?

Two hundred years ago, a battle was raging between the fire and brimstone Calvinists and the G*d is Love liberals. The central theme of William Ellery Channing's ministry was "the dignity of human nature as created by a loving G*d, and the potential greatness of the human soul."³ The Baltimore sermon was his

¹ The published sermon (1819) runs 42 pages. Deepest thanks to Roger Hooper, who gave me the gift of this version!

² I am deeply indebted to Alan Coltri, a lay person at our congregation in Columbia, MD. Please see americanunitarian.org/classicwritings.htm

³ Rev. Dr. Patrick T. O'Neill, *Channing's Church of Reluctant Radicals*, 8/5/01

“call to arms” for liberals, and the fact that it was preached outside Boston signaled the intention of the Unitarians to take our movement national.⁴

In this sermon, Dr. Channing made the case against Christian fundamentalism, declaring that the Bible is a book written by people for people, and that it is our duty to use reason and “look beyond the letter to the spirit” of biblical teachings. He then went on to outline the principles of what he named Unitarianism:

“First,” he said, rejecting the notion of a trinity, “we believe in the doctrine of G*d’s UNITY, or that there is one G*d and one only.”

Second, he asserted that Jesus was fully human, sent on a divine mission by G*d “to effect a moral or spiritual deliverance” of humankind. And we are to be transformed by not by sacrifice to a judgmental G*d, but by Jesus’ teachings and the lived example of his actions toward the poor.

Third, he said, we must develop and be guided in our actions by our individual conscience.

And finally, he said, reacting strongly to fundamentalist theology, G*d is neither capricious nor cruel nor vengeful, but rather good, kind, and benevolent.⁵

In his concluding remarks to Rev. Sparks, Dr. Channing advises,
 “Let your life preach more loudly than your lips.”

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And so Unitarian Universalism was well on its way to what it is today. Alan Coltri, a layperson in our congregation in Columbia, Maryland, writes, William Ellery Channing’s work resonates “with me

in the application of thought and reason to moral issues;
 the need for openness to the continuing nature of revelation;
 the requirement for us as individuals to develop and be guided by our [conscience];
 and the need to act.”

If your interest is whetted, the link to an online version of the Baltimore Sermon is printed in your order of service. *Let’s nerd out and talk theology!*

Amen.

⁴ americanunitarian.org/classicwritings.htm

⁵ Please see uucolumbia.net/union-sunday-and-the-baltimore-sermon-part-2-about-the-sermon/