

“The Greatest Church”

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To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

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READINGS

(1 Thessalonians 5: 12-22)

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you... esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

* * *

(Carl Jung on Child Development and Education)

At present we educate people only up to the point where they can earn a living and marry; then education ceases altogether, as though a complete mental outfit has been acquired... Vast numbers of men and women spend their entire lives in complete ignorance about the most important things.

* * *

(William Ellery Channing on Religious Instruction)

The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own;
Not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own;

Not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth;

Not to form an outward regularity, but to touch inward springs;

Not to bind them by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions,
But to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may be offered to their decision;

Not to burden the memory, but to quicken and strengthen the power of thought;

Not to impose religion upon them in the form of arbitrary rules, but to awaken the conscience, the moral discernment.

In a word, the great end is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life.

* * * * *

SERMON

Free the mind. Grow the soul. Change the world. These phrases I believe are the mission of the liberal church. They are in the imperative voice, commands. I came to this after long pondering the future of Fountain Street Church and the future of liberal religion itself. Unlike Christianity, or other religions with an outside authority like a book, we have no explicit commands to observe. But does that mean we have no task, except perhaps to be the unchurch, the place where nothing is commanded or demanded? Turned around, is there a positive mission for liberal religion as well as a negative one? Is there a reason for liberal religious community beyond being grateful we aren't in some other church?

Yes. Liberal religion has a positive core. 1) Everyone matters because we all have something unique to give. 2) Everyone must be free to become that unique person. 3) Everyone has a duty to live that life and give that gift. I defy anyone anywhere to disagree with this. It is the last part, the duty to become your unique self so you and the world can be enriched, that is the great commandment of liberal religion. Thus it is the basis for liberal religious community.

The purpose of liberal churches is to help people do their spiritual duty. To accomplish this, the liberal church, this church, must free the mind, grow the soul, and ultimately change the world.

That's what I said. Now, let's focus on how we can do this. And as I said last week, this is my vision. You have to decide whether it is yours, for only we together can it happen.

To start, focus a moment or two on the nature of mission. A mission is a command, something you must do. If I were to go on a mission, whether across a battlefield or to the grocery store, I would understand this task was my focus until it was done. Get the message to headquarters, buy the milk. I have a mission to create sermons. However hard it is, come Sunday it has to be done. I must do it even though other things are beckoning, even important. The mission takes precedence.

Diana Butler Bass, a sociologist of religion, made a study of churches that turned around. They were struggling, even on the brink of extinction, but somehow found new life. What did they do? They "identified and centered on a single... practice: discernment, hospitality, testimony, contemplation, justice, worship, healing, diversity, reflection or beauty. That became its means for transformation and growth. Often, the practice was part of the congregation's tradition or history... In each case, a congregation-wide focus on the practice ... changed the members. They were no longer spiritual seekers or even spiritual consumers but Christian practitioners, pilgrims who knew that faith is a craft learned over time in community."

Jim Collins, in his work on what makes institutions great, not just good, speaks of a hedgehog principle, by which he means a focus on the essential task of the institution and doing it as well as possible. Focus on your core, the thing you are here to do and how you do it best. This becomes the engine that will drive your institution to the next level, as we say now.

I took these insights very seriously in my work. What is our core, the essential

task? What do we do best compared to others in the field? I considered everything we do, and one thing stood out. Education.

What else frees minds, grows souls, changes the world so reliably as education. What's more, it is deeply religious. The gospel says, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." "Prove all things, hold fast to that which is good." Almost every ancient university began as a religious institution – Bologna, Paris, Alexandria, even Timbuktu. In America Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, started for religious purposes. And yet, how many churches would call themselves learning places, 'schools of the soul,' 'or universities of the spirit.' Sure, they have Sunday schools, adult education, and other programs, but how many define their mission as spiritual education? Why? Because for most houses of worship, education is to save souls not grow them.

What sets us apart from others is our essential mission, to free minds, grow souls and thereby change the world. Ours is a distinctly different, but still distinctly religious idea about education. We know that the phrase "liberal arts" means those skills that set the mind free. We know that the word educate comes from the Latin *educare*, to lead out, which means, as Emerson said, "the drawing out of the soul."

Education is the keystone of the liberal church – the premise for everything we do. What Butler Bass and Collins are saying is that when you focus on your core strength and mission, everything takes on a renewed sense of purpose. It becomes the engine that drives the institution. And when that happens, it gives everyone involved a sense of mission – not just the church, but the members find themselves growing.

I believe we need to become 'the school of the soul.' It was about a year ago when I first suggested this. A year later I am still convinced of it. But now I mean a church that sees its essential mission, its purpose, its duty, to be freeing minds and growing souls and changing the world. That's what focus means, what mission means. And that means building the Fountain Street Church of tomorrow on this foundation.

What would it mean to make education our core mission? It would mean radical equality among all ages. That means Character School would be as important as Sunday service. Teens would be as important as adults. Everyone, including elders, would be students, 'crafting creative and responsible spiritual lives' to paraphrase our current mission statement. We would all be pilgrims, as Butler Bass says, on our way to finding our best selves to give to the world.

Such a change would be seismic, and no doubt kind of scary. But I have good news. You've done it before. The creation of Character School, a daring and demanding project transformed the old Sunday school of the 1950s and 60s. The result was a surge of energy that served hundreds of children and upwards of 100 teenagers, many from outside the church. Many of you here were there then. More than anything else, it changed who you were.

What would it be like to do that today? I firmly believe a learning church would do the following. It would engage all ages, not just children and youth. It would educate intellectually, morally, spiritually, and experientially. It would expect everyone to learn and everyone to teach; we educate each other. It would respect differences of age

and ability and experience but not defer or excuse people on their account.

I firmly believe Fountain Streeters ought to be the most the religiously knowledgeable people in town; that people respect us for our knowledge. We are religiously literate. I firmly believe Fountain Streeters should know how to be spiritually sound; they have a prayer life or they meditate or some other method for cultivating the spirit as well as the mind. We are spiritually competent. I firmly believe Fountain Streeters should be exemplars of integrity and moral probity, impressing others not with their subtle wits but their simple honesty. We are morally sound.

How would we know we are doing it? All our children would be involved in some way. (Currently only a third are). Half of our adults would be involved in some way (Currently less than 20% are.) It would attract as many newcomers as worship. (Outsiders would know about it.) Other houses of worship would ask for our advice.

Revolutionary, and yet clearly part of the great history of this church. It is like the symbol you have used for the last half century. If you look closely, you will see that it is now slightly different. It is clearly what it was, and yet new. Each of the primary shapes still have a meaning, again familiar and yet new. The square with its schematic people includes a child. To me this is the learning church, the school of the soul, for we are all spiritual children who are able to learn and grow wherever we are in life.

Last week I said that the greatest sermon is not one from the mouth of a preacher but one lived by the people. For that to happen we need to create the greatest church, which is not the building or the budget and certainly not the preacher, but a people eager to grow in soul so that they can become the individuals they alone can be, and give that gift to the world. The greatest church is a learning church, a 'school of the soul' afire with the promise made so long ago, "that you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."