

“The Greatest Sermon”

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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.

“The Greatest Sermon”

Most mornings I walk from my house downtown to the new YMCA, a wonderful new facility created in part by our own John Hunting and Don Johnson. Along the way I have watched the new art museum under construction. Even before I arrived they were digging a big hole. And they were digging still last summer. They continued digging into the fall, and even when my head was buried in my parka they kept digging. I began to wonder if it was all going to be underground.

Then, this spring, just as the plants began to grow, so did the new museum. And in less than six months the promised edifice took shape. Now, when I walk, I see workers pouring concrete and forming walls. With startling speed compared to the long seasons of digging, the museum I saw as a drawing is becoming real.

I was not here a month before people were asking me about what I envisioned for the future. The search committee was eager to know what I would do if I were called. I told them, in all honesty, that I had to learn about the church before I could begin to form a vision for the future. That meant reading your history, listening to members, exploring the building, finding out what the neighbors said, and so on. I had to dig a hole.

A little book I treasure is titled, “The whole truth about churches in ten pages – if you don’t count the introduction.” by Roy Oswald, a church consultant. One of the ten pages shares this proverb Oswald learned from his father – “Don’t plant a ten dollar bush in a five dollar hole.” Says a lot, doesn’t it? Take the time to dig the foundation, do the preparation, so that whatever you plant or build will stand.

I have finished digging the hole. There’s much more I can and should and will learn, but I know enough to lay the first foundations of what I believe the future of this church could be. This morning I want to share those foundations with you, not as orders to be followed or plans to implemented, but as my vision for what this church could be. You have to decide if it is your vision as well. Only then can it come true. So I am taking a risk here, sharing my inmost convictions about what I believe. You may reject them, and me along with them. But as I told you a year ago, my spiritual challenge in coming here is to rise to the fears I often have felt in the past, and do what is right even if it is hard and scary. Here goes.

The future of our Fountain Street Church is nothing less than the future of liberal religion itself. Casting off names and associations, claiming only to be a liberal church, we cannot depend on the slogans and systems that sustain other liberal faiths. Perhaps uniquely, our church must define liberal religion itself. In Lent I will lay out the detailed basis and premises that for me constitute the theology of liberal religion. What I want to share right now is the essential conviction that all liberal religions have.

Everyone matters - a simple notion that every religion has. They all say everyone matters, but attach caveats and conditions – cleansing sin, following the rules, submitting to God, or something else. Liberal religion attaches no conditions. You matter. Simple, essential, but when you really take it seriously, it leads to revolutionary ideas.

For example. Why do we matter? Because we are each unique. Whether God designed it or nature evolved it, our uniqueness is our value. Why is that valuable? Because our uniqueness adds to the whole as well as the individual. Individuality is important to both the individual and the community. That is a revolutionary notion.

The second foundation of liberal religion is spiritual liberation. If we all matter as individuals because the world needs us to be individuals to be complete and whole, then we have a duty to become individuals. But just as we enter the world unknowing and unable to care for ourselves, and only slowly acquire the ability to walk and talk and work and think, so we are not automatically capable of spiritual growth. We live in a world where this idea of individual value is not yet universal. There are myriad forces that would confine us by gender, race, culture, nation, class, ideology, and theology. Only Christians are worthy, only Americans, only men, only whites, only rich people. And these are the obvious ones. To become a true person is an act of liberation.

But it does not stop there. It also means freedom to as well as freedom from. Liberation that is only freedom from oppression is not enough. True individuality must be chosen to become that person we uniquely are and the world needs.

The third foundation of liberal religion is to live that life and give it as a gift to others as well as to yourself. It is not enough to get your freedom and then sit back and enjoy a life of spiritual ease. What does it profit a man, says the Nazarene, to gain your life and lose your soul. To gain your soul you must serve others not just yourself.

These are principles of liberal religion, the priceless value of every person, the necessity of spiritual liberation to release and grow that person, and the duty to share that person with the world and make it better – which is why we exist at all. It is a spiritual circle, you see. We matter because we have something unique. We must find that uniqueness to become true individuals. We have to give that uniqueness to others to enrich the world that made us in the first place.

This spiritual vision is, I believe, very much at the heart of every great religion. Look at Torah, Veda, Gospel and Sutra. It is there. Study history, art, philosophy and science. It is there too. But it needs to be released. "You are the light of the world." said the Nazarene. "Uncover it and let it shine." There it is. There it is for us as a church too. The same principles are at the heart of the liberal church. In a world that still has not heard this message universally, the first foundation of the liberal church, then, is to preach the liberal gospel. We must free minds.

The second foundation of the liberal church is to help people toward spiritual liberation. Once they hear the good word, how will they find spiritual liberation and become true individuals? The liberal church is where that happens. We are here to grow souls, individual souls and our collective soul as a church because as James Russell Lowell wrote – "New occasions teach new duties; Time makes ancient good uncouth; They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of Truth..."

Finally, the third principle of the liberal church is to live in the world as we would live individually, giving to the world not just ourselves. And this is where the sermon title comes in.

A story I have told before has the search committee of the synagogue seeking a new rabbi. They go to see a promising leader and hear a sermon so moving, so deep, so spiritually profound they are convinced this is the right candidate. Eagerly they extend an invitation and when the rabbi preaches before the congregation it turns out to be the same sermon. It is still a great sermon, and the people are ecstatic and so flock to hear the first sermon after the call. It is the same sermon, which is still pretty good but it is now getting familiar. But when they hear the same sermon again each week for a month, the president finally has to go and talk to the new rabbi.

"Rabbi, you've preached this sermon now five times. We love it, but could we hear a new one?"

"When you live that one, I'll preach the next one."

The greatest sermon is not words spoken, but lives lived. The greatest testimony of faith comes not from pulpits and parsons but from living your liberating faith in a world beset by arrogance, fear and suspicion. What I say here is meaningless if it does not move you to free your mind, to grow your soul, to change your world.

My vision looks to the far horizon, to the year 2119, when we will be 250 years old. No one here will be there. Not even our children or our grandchildren will be there. But if there is to be a Fountain Street Church then, we must act now. And what we do must be directed like the gospel plow – toward the far horizon. So come with me for a few moments and imagine what that church could be.

I dream of a Fountain Street Church that will preach the liberal gospel with every heart, not just that of the preacher - in worship that is filled with spirit, a spirit that laughs and weeps, sings and prays, thinks and speaks, and, most important, goes beyond worship into your life, helping to free minds who would never come here to think new thoughts, daring thoughts, great thoughts that will liberate our fearful world.

I dream that someday we will be a place where people come to find and offer their unique gift to the world, their ministry, because they know that this is a place to grow the soul, not just save it. We will be a place children bring their parents, teenagers invite their friends, young adults find friends, and elders are cherished because everyone from cradle to grave is a pilgrim on the journey of faith, growing their soul no matter how old or experienced.

My dream is that someday we will be a place where we live our faith in the world as a community as well as individually. That the name Fountain Street Church will mean a place where faith flows like a fountain out into the world in care for the helpless, friends for the friendless, hope for hopeless here and around the world.

I dream of a church where liberal and religion are almost synonyms, and people across the continent seek our guidance and help in spreading the good news of liberal religion – to free the mind, grow the soul, change the world.

In the next three weeks I will tell you about the three ways we can make this dream come true. I invite you to be part of vision by meeting with me in the chapel after church today and for each of the next three weeks. Tell me what excites you, scares you, worries you, thrills you about the future of the church.

For now, I want you to keep this much in mind – the mission of liberal religion and this church is to free the mind, grow the soul, and change the world. Serve this mission and we shall prosper in ways we have never known. Ignore it or dilute it or divert it to other ends and the future will have but memories of how great we once were. The future is in our hands. Do we have the will and the daring and the faith, yes the faith, to make it happen?