

01/24/10 Sermon

"Suspended Over the Fiery Pit"

David Hudson, Speaker

"There is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any one moment, out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God.

By "the mere pleasure of God," I mean his sovereign pleasure, his arbitrary will, restrained by no obligation, hindered by no manner of difficulty.

Whatever pains a natural man takes in religion, whatever prayers he makes, until he believes in Christ, God is under no manner of obligation to keep him a *moment* from eternal destruction.

So thus it is, that natural men are held in the hand of God over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his anger is as great toward them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of his wrath in hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that anger.

Neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold them up one moment; the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out; and they have no interest in any mediator, there are no means within reach that can be any security to them.

In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of, all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliged forbearance of an incensed God.

The *Use* of this awful subject (is) for (the) *Awakening* (of) unconverted persons in this congregation. This that you have heard is the case of everyone of you that are out of Christ. That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone is extended abroad under you. *There* is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor anything to take hold of; there is nothing between you and hell but the air; 'tis only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up."

Wow! That's powerful stuff! Although it sounds like Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell, some of you may recognize these words as passages from the famous sermon, "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*," preached by

Jonathan Edwards in the Enfield, Connecticut, Congregational Church, now the Enfield United Church of Christ, on July 8, 1741. This is clearly not Unitarian theology. Neither is it UCC theology, by the way.

Congregationalism, at least in New England, is a far different thing now than it was 270 years ago. That's evident from a brief glance at The Enfield UCC Website, where one sees first the mottos, "God is still speaking," and "No matter where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

So why is this – Jonathan Edwards and his sermon – relevant to us – here – today? It is because we are heirs to a common theological and ecclesiastical heritage over five hundred years old – the Protestant reformation. Although Edwards and the liberal Congregationalists of his day – those who became the Unitarians – represented different branches of that theological tree – branches that began to diverge early in the reformation – before 1609 – they do have common roots in the religion that the Puritans brought with them to Massachusetts from England shortly after 1600.

The Puritans were strict Calvinists, believing, as Calvin did, in the "total depravity" of humans – that humans, on their own, are incapable of doing good – that, having "fallen," they are in complete bondage to sin and Satan – and that the only way to salvation is for God to choose to give one the gift of faith – faith in Jesus as one's savior.

This is the theological position codified by John Calvin, the Swiss theologian who died in 1564 – a form of the theology of the original Protestant, Martin Luther, the Augustinian monk, who argued with Pope Leo X between 1517 and 1520 over the dominant Catholic doctrine of the time – that espoused by Thomas Aquinas two hundred and fifty years earlier – that God infuses us with faith – that we act on that faith by doing good – charity – and that, finally, God judges us on the good we have done – the extent to which we have acted on the faith God has given us.

It is all pre-determined, say Luther and Calvin, arguing against that doctrine. We cannot will to do anything, especially something good; "After the Fall," says Luther, "free will is something in name only and when it does what is in it, it sins mortally."

Luther and Calvin are the heirs of Augustine, the 4th Century church father, who originated the ideas that we're all sinful from the get-go, that God saves us – some of us – and that there's nothing we can do to change that, one way or the other. In their reform efforts, Luther and Calvin were, in a sense, pulling the church back to a place much earlier in its development – 1200 years earlier.

The Puritans arose in England in the 16th and 17th Centuries as a distinct group within the Anglican Church. They believed that the English Reformation hadn't gone far enough. Like the Anabaptists in Europe, who spawned the Amish and the Mennonites, they believed in a "purer" religion – devoid of color and decoration and vestments and ceremony. They called themselves *not* Puritans but "the Godly." Their religion was all about pursuing personal and group piety and purity of worship and doctrine. They intended to live a life exemplified by Jesus.

But – and here's where we begin to see our heritage – they also believed in congregationalism; that is, in church power residing in the congregation itself, not in a hierarchy of bishops and archbishops and, as in England, in the king – the leader of the Church of England. In England they argued for congregationalism; they argued for changes in the Book of Common Prayer; and they argued against the Divine Right of Kings; and during the English Civil War of the early 1600s, they were a key element of the Parliamentary forces. Within the church hierarchy, King James and then his son, Charles, favored the Arminians, a different type of Protestants (more liberal) – more on them later – promoting them over the Puritans. And, when Charles married an ardent Roman Catholic Frenchwoman, favoritism turned to persecution, and the Great Migration to the New World began – and the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Like other Calvinists, the Puritans believed in a personal, direct relationship with God and with God's word – Biblical scripture. They believed in the priesthood of all believers. They believed in education, so that people could read the Bible themselves, and they believed in church leaders who could read and study the scriptures in the original Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. Their religious leaders studied at Oxford and Cambridge.

Once in America, it took them only a few years to establish Harvard College as a place to educate their religious leaders in the New World. And, ironically, this belief in literacy and education allowed for – promoted – the evolution of a new and very different theology.

It took many years for the Massachusetts Bay Colony to expand very far from Boston. The hinterlands remained wild and hostile well into the 18th Century. But near Boston, the colony flourished. Commerce and industry developed, and a new class of citizens emerged – merchants who had arisen from humble circumstances to prosperity and wealth – to positions of influence and power, without the aid of privileged class status. Educated – influenced by the philosophical and cultural currents of the Enlightenment sweeping the Western world – Bostonians of the 18th Century began to see

the world differently than Luther and Calvin and John Winthrop (the Puritan). They believed in the idea of progress.

Far from predestined, they experienced a world in which they could carve out their own destinies by their own effort, with their own will and ambition and cleverness. God seemed to play less a role for them than for their Puritan ancestors one hundred-plus years earlier.

In the 1700s in and near Boston – a very small region – Enlightenment ideas about the power of reason also influenced religious leaders. They became more liberal. These names stand out: Charles Chauncy, who advanced a doctrine of universal salvation in 1784; Jonathan Mayhew, who rejected the doctrine of the trinity; John Tucker, who advocated for use of the free mind – and against creed and dogma, that one can respond to and, with work, overcome the pull of evil and achieve salvation.

They became Arminians, expressing ideas first developed in the 16th Century by Jacobus Arminius, a Dutchman who had studied under Calvin's successor and then rejected his theology. Arminius believed that, although humans are tainted by sin, they are able to place faith in God of their own accord – by their own free will – and, if elected by God, they are able to reject election and salvation – to turn away from God. Calvinists and Lutherans maintained sway in Europe, but Arminian ideas were never snuffed out. This was the other branch of the Reformation.

It was in this environment that the Great Awakening arose, an evangelical movement not unlike the one we see in our country today, reacting to the development of liberal ideas. It called people back to strict Calvinism and to a personal relationship with Jesus – for people to accept Jesus as their savior. Jonathan Edwards was a key player in that movement, and "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*" is a clear exposition of it – the angry Old Testament God, the depravity of humanity, Jesus as the key to salvation, and man's inability to affect salvation through good works or piety.

But even in this sermon we see a softening of Calvinism. The angry God Edwards holds up is patient; he could drop you into the flaming abyss at any time; but he doesn't; because, although you anger him with your innate depravity, he loves you. Edwards talks about how excellent God's love is. He speaks of the rest of nature as good, of God's creatures as good. It's only humanity that's depraved. And he sounds almost Arminian in his appeal to the Enfield congregation to accept Jesus, saying that each of them can accept Jesus of his or her own free will – that salvation is open to all.

Nevertheless, as the 18th Century drew to a close, the extreme and moderate Calvinists closed ranks against the Boston liberals. And in 1805, when a liberal, Henry Ware, assumed the top theological professorship at Harvard, they disassociated themselves from them. They established their own seminary, Andover Theological Seminary, and they began to refer to the liberals with the derisive term Unitarians – the name of a controversial sect that had arisen in England.

The liberals, who were the most influential ministers in Boston, and whose parishioners were among the most influential citizens of Boston, finally realized that reconciliation with the Calvinists was not possible and that, in effect, they had become a distinct denomination. Led by William Ellery Channing, they accepted the name the Calvinists had given them – Unitarians.

They took the occasion of the ordination of a young liberal minister in Baltimore, where successful businessmen wanted to establish a liberal church, to issue a public manifesto.

Accompanied by a cohort of liberal Boston heavyweights, Channing went to Baltimore and delivered the sermon under the title “Unitarian Christianity” at the First Independent Church of Baltimore on May 5, 1819. The new minister, the Rev. Jared Sparks, later published the sermon as a pamphlet, which became more widely distributed than any pamphlet but Tom Paine’s “Common Sense.”

Channing and his peers were still Christians and theists. They still believed that the Bible was the ultimate source of spiritual truth, but were practitioners of what was called Natural Religion, believing that Truth is found both in the divine revelation recorded in the Bible and in human reason. They had been influenced by the development of the new discipline of Biblical criticism and analysis in Germany in the late 18th Century. They believed that the Bible could only be understood in its historical and cultural context – that it must be interpreted. The truth was in it, but it could only be gleaned through interpretation – a huge departure from literalism. And they believed that revelation is not sealed – that humans can continue to receive the Truth through what they referred to as Reason – that is, through intuition.

So in his sermon, Channing laid out this distinctive theology. He explained that the Bible must be interpreted in its cultural and historical contexts. And that a proper reading of the Bible, as a whole, yields these key understandings:

- That God is One – not three;
- That Jesus is not both God and human – that he is a man;
- That Jesus came not to pardon us but to lead us to God through right living;
- That God is supreme goodness, mercy, wisdom, and justice – that he is love – he is moral perfection - not hatefulness and vengeance;
- That true religion is not accepting Jesus as one's savior – rather, it is living the life he exemplified – it is walking the talk; and
- That humans have a moral sense – that they are innately good.

Twenty years after Channing's Baltimore sermon, Emerson and the Transcendentalists took this thinking a giant step further by rejecting the Bible as the source of ultimate truth and applying that designation to human reason and intuition.

Channing and Emerson tell us that none of us lives in a vacuum. We take in the world – and attempt to make sense of it - through the lens that our culture provides us – that with the wisdom of our time and place we continually recreate God and the idea of Godliness. Something in the environment and history of the Puritans presented them with a stern and angry God. They were afraid to be too gentle with their children for fear that they would grow up without fear of Him.

But when I read Edwards' sermon and tried to summon a parental model of God, I could think only of my mother, who was not angry or fearsome, but, rather, a bastion of strength, support, encouragement and – in the years when I gave her reason not to – of patience. For five years, in my late teens and early twenties, I gave my parents a run for their money – totaling their car, flirting with alcoholism, getting thrown in jail, flunking out of college, getting drafted, going AWOL. Jonathan Edwards would call that displaying the natural depravity of humanity – the depravity that arouses God's anger.

But my parents – my mother, in particular, who was paying more attention – displayed only patience. Not the anger and the patience – only the patience. With that model, how could I fashion an angry God?

The long evolutionary journey from Luther, Calvin, and Arminius is the same journey that many of us travel today in moving from conservative Christianity or Judaism to liberal theology – or to atheism – including a larger, more inclusive sense of the divine or the wondrous. Just as we are heirs of humanoids like Lucy of three million years ago, to whom we bear little physical resemblance, so are we the heirs of people like Jonathan Edwards, to whom we bear little theological resemblance. The world he saw

was different than the world of those who followed – as was his God, who reflected that world. (Actually, his was a reaching back for a world and God that had passed him by.)

The glory of our faith is that it grows and evolves – that it can incorporate the heritage of the Puritans and the wisdom of Channing, Emerson, and Parker ... James Luther Adams, Henry Nelson Wieman, the Humanists of the thirties and their manifesto – even Jonathan Edwards. And that we, as UUs, are free to pursue the growth and development of our own faith and our notions of what it means to be alive in the second decade of the 21st Century.

May it be so.