

“Changing Stories One Word at a Time”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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William Ellery Channing delivered his sermon, “Unitarian Christianity,” two hundred two years ago this month. From the portion of the sermon Sandy just shared, I am sure it is obvious to all of us that the focus of our attention on Sunday mornings is very different than what Channing preached about that day. Here at this Fellowship, my sermon isn’t going to delve deeply into issues such as God’s singularity or multiplicity. My sermon, and probably most sermons delivered in UU congregations in the nation this morning, won’t be a theological discourse as Channing’s was. And my sermon—I am sure you will be delighted to hear this—won’t be an hour or more in length like Channing’s “Unitarian Christianity” sermon was. Thankfully, things have changed dramatically over the past two centuries.

In order to understand the importance of Channing’s sermon, “Unitarian Christianity,” it is important to consider what was going on back then. Religious historians refer to the period from about 1795 through 1810 as the “Second Great Awakening.” Mark A. Noll writes in *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* that “The Second Great Awakening was the most influential revival of Christianity in the history of the United States.” This period was a time of religious revivals, many of which espoused and promoted theologies congruent with Calvinism.

One result of this growing revival in Christianity was an intensification of the theological divides that existed between those of European descent living on this continent. The divides built during the period of the Second Great Awakening and lasted for years afterward. Such divides had been occurring since the early days of Christianity. In centuries past, when these divides would intensify the consequences could be dire for those who held beliefs that were out of the mainstream. People who held what were considered to be unorthodox beliefs were labeled heretics. Once labeled a heretic a person might be shunned, suffer persecution, or in the worst case, be put to death for their beliefs.

During and after the Second Great Awakening the threat of being put to death for holding heretical beliefs was minimal to non-existent. But the possibility of being shunned or suffering persecution was a distinct possibility. The belief that Channing put forth in his sermon, specifically that there is, was and ever will be one and only one God, was counter to the dominant perspective. The belief that God was one, as the title indicates, was often referred to as “unitarian.” At the time the sermon was written and delivered, to be called a “unitarian” was an insult or an accusation. To identify someone as a “unitarian” was to imply that the person was a heretic. Because of this, some who held beliefs similar to Channing were reluctant to express their theological perspectives.

But Channing didn’t hide his religious beliefs. He didn’t seek to avoid the labels of “unitarian” or even “heretic.” Instead, Channing directly challenged the commonly held belief that God consisted of three distinct parts, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. With his sermon, “Unitarian Christianity,” Channing publicly and eloquently refuted the doctrine of the trinity. His sermon had a significant impact on the predominant story of the time regarding what being a Christian meant. Instead of seeking to avoid being identified as a “unitarian,” Channing claimed the word as a title of honor—as a name that deserved respect. As a result of his sermon, a significant number of congregations began claiming the name “Unitarian.” Today our Fellowship, along with many other congregations as well as our national Association, proudly claim the name “Unitarian.” This is the case even though many, if not most people, who identify as Unitarian Universalists today don’t resonate with

Channing's theological beliefs. Channing's sermon, "Unitarian Christianity," exemplifies what I refer to in the title of my sermon today—namely changing stories one word at a time.

There are other more recent examples that highlight how stories can be changed one word at a time. One such example involves what is sometimes referred to as the Stonewall riots or the Stonewall uprising. The Stonewall uprising began in the early hours of June 28, 1969. It began in response to a police raid on the Stonewall Inn which was located in the Greenwich Village area of New York City. The club was popular with the gay community of the area. The gay community in New York City had been experiencing prejudice, discrimination and harassment on many fronts for a very long time. In the mid-1960's, however, the gay community had won a legal battle that allowed bars and clubs to serve alcohol to homosexuals. In spite of that legal win, the New York City Police Department continued to raid homosexual friendly clubs and bars. The Stonewall Inn was such a place. But the police raid that occurred that June night didn't go as other raids had gone in the past. Here is what an article titled "Stonewall Riots" at [history.com](https://www.history.com) states about the uprising.

The raid sparked a riot among bar patrons and neighborhood residents as police roughly hauled employees and patrons out of the bar, leading to six days of protests and violent clashes with law enforcement outside the bar on Christopher Street, in neighboring streets and in nearby Christopher Park. The Stonewall riots served as a catalyst for the gay rights movement in the United States and around the world.

Just as Channing took a public stand against the established religious order of his time, those who participated in the Stonewall uprising made their own very clear statement. By taking to the streets near the Stonewall Inn, the demonstrators were challenging the police and the powers that be. They made it clear that they were no longer willing to hide out in fear of being persecuted and/or prosecuted. Many of the protestors proclaimed proudly that they were gay. They proclaimed that they were no longer willing to tolerate the discrimination and harassment they had endured for so long. Those who participated in the Stonewall uprising were demanding their rights, rights similar to those espoused by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement. They were demanding rights equal to those of people who identify as heterosexual. The protestors were demanding the right to be who they were and are, and to be treated with respect and dignity. And just as Channing did, the Stonewall uprising protestors claimed a word, the word "gay," as their own. By claiming the word they changed the story of what it meant to be identified as gay. No longer would they accept that gay meant they were inferior or, worse yet, perverted. By claiming the word and changing the story, the protestors changed history. Just two days shy of 46 years after the Stonewall uprising, the Supreme Court issued a ruling making same-sex marriage legal in the United States.

The two examples I just cited, Channing's sermon titled "Unitarian Christianity" and the Stonewall uprising, demonstrate that there is significant power in changing stories one word at a time. We would be wise today to remember examples such as these because we are living in a time when certain stories that are taking hold need to be changed. Let me offer a couple of examples of stories that need changing. There are a significant number of people in this county who believe that the COVID pandemic is either a hoax or isn't a significant threat. Many of these people believe that the medical experts, public health professionals and scientists who have been telling us we need to wear masks and limit our physical contact with others are simply trying to limit people's rights and freedom. And there are a significant number of people in this country who believe the January 6th attack on our Capital Building didn't occur, was led by Antifa and/or other left wing extremists, or was nothing more than a scenic tour of the building by a peaceful group of people loyal to

our former President. Stories such as these tell me that the word “truth” is under very serious attack in our nation. I believe we all need to be thinking about how we can reclaim the word truth. And as we are thinking about how to reclaim the word “truth,” we need to also be thinking about the story, or more accurately the stories, that will be changed by doing so.

And there is another word that has been under assault for a very, very long time. That word is justice. Justice is something that has been denied to certain groups of people in this country for far too long. Justice has been denied for people of color and people who belong to a religious or faith tradition that is outside what is considered to be the Christian mainstream. And with the ongoing threats of global climate change, justice, specifically climate justice, is being denied for people of all races, religious traditions, ages, genders and sexual orientations as well as all manner of life forms on our planet. I am of the opinion that we need to come up with a way to claim the word justice. We need to claim the word justice in order to change the stories that keep people oppressed and may lead us further down the path to ecological destruction.

Truth and justice are just two of the words I believe we need to reclaim. I am sure there are others, probably many others, that you can think of. I don’t know that I will ever have the opportunity to claim a word and change the story the way Channing did—the way the Stonewall uprising protestors did. I am reasonably certain however, that I have the power to change a story that one person or a small group of people tell and believe by selecting my words carefully and thoughtfully. I know this because I have been told by quite a number of people I have worked with over the years that what I have shared with them has made a positive difference in their lives. My guess is that many, if not all of you, have had people tell you that something you said had a beneficial effect on their life. With such instances in mind, I would encourage all of us to consider how, by choosing our words wisely, we can change stories for the better, whether the stories are our own or belong to others. The stories we tell ourselves and others are made up of words. By selecting our words with care and by reclaiming words that have been used to control or even harm others, we have the power to change stories one word at a time.

So it is and so may it be.