

The Church of All Souls

A Sermon by Forrest Church

Preached at All Souls Church, New York City

November 19, 2007

It is not an accident that we are worshipping this morning in All Souls Church and not in All Saints Church. First, if this were All Saints Church either there would be many fewer of us here, or, if the pews were packed, a rather higher percentage of pretenders.

All Souls is a splendid name for a church. It was not our original name. When this congregation gathered in 1819, the founding members anointed us “The First Congregational Church in New York (Unitarian).” In polity, we are still a congregational church. Whether it comes to our budget or our choice of ministers, the congregation is invested with irrevocable authority. Not a Pope or Bishop, not a board of elders or presbyters, and not called ministers, but the congregation itself, through a free and open democratic process, makes the critical decisions that shape our common will and destiny. And in theology, we are still a Unitarian church. More accurately, a Unitarian Universalist church, the two liberal denominations having joined forces in 1961.

One thing worth noting about our denominational name. Some churches adapt a denominational moniker according to polity (Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian); others by sacramental practice (Baptist; Seventh Day Adventist); still others by nationality (Greek or Russian Orthodox) or by founder (Lutheran or Mennonite). Our denomination (both of them before they were joined) was named for two specific theological doctrines, Unitarianism (a belief in one God), and Universalism (a believe in salvation for all). We didn’t name ourselves, but were named by our opponents, in each case Calvinists (Trinitarians who believed in

eternal damnation) who held that as Unitarians and Universalists we had demonstrated ourselves to be heretics.

Here is what I find interesting. As far as I know we are the only denomination named according to doctrine. Yet, ironically, we are the most non-doctrinal of denominations. If you take both words at their theological face value, not every Unitarian Universalist is a Unitarian and not every Unitarian Universalist is a Universalist. And nor are we required to be. Ours is the freest of all faiths, each one of us answering not to the authority of power or the writ of revelation, but rather to the oracle of conscience and a wisdom drawn from experience. So what we are, ironically enough, is a non-doctrinal faith named after two doctrines. As a devotee of paradox, I have no trouble with this at all.

This morning we gather to celebrate our 18th year as a congregation. As a break from more earth shattering events in our nation, I propose this morning to honor this modest but not insignificant accomplishment with a few thoughts about our history, a few about our present, and a few about our future.

I'll get back to how we came to be called All Souls, but first my favorite letter from the All Souls archives. By the way, the archives here are amazing, kept in good order by a wonderful, hard working group of volunteers. If you are interested in local history and the history of New York City just give the office or our archivist, Lorraine Allen, a call. This church has a great past. Because we honor the past as much as we celebrate the present and plan for the future, our present is more rich and our future will be finer.

Anyway, here is the letter. 1823. Four years after our congregation was founded. Catherine Sedgwick, soon to become one of America's most popular novelists and an active member of All Souls from 1821 to her death in 1867, wrote these words to her Boston friend, Eliza Cabot.

It requires no little zeal and skill to make the discordant elements of which our church is composed, mingle. Excepting one or two little knots in the church they are strangers here from inland and outland, English radicals and daughters of Erin, Germans and Hollanders, philosophic gentiles and unbelieving Jews. In short, the promise is

accomplished to us, the “north hath given up and the south hath not kept back.” In this our association . . . there is at least one of every sort. There are also those who have been seen “righteous in this generation,” a peculiar people zealous of good works. It seemed becoming that those who passed by on the other side when all the popular charities of the world were going on, should have something of their own trying to do good. Beside the zealous writing and distribution of enlightened essays, which is but a perpetual scattering of seed, without any ingathering of fruits, a free school for some of the ten thousand children of this city that are without any instruction was determined on.

For All Souls, the more things change, the more they remain the same. Even today we are striving not only to affirm but to enhance diversity. In social outreach, we are by far the most active church on the Upper East Side. Children remain a primary focus of our mission. And, as for belief, we are still like a mad dog’s breakfast. We are all over the place. That is neither necessarily a good nor a bad thing. It is simply our thing. You are here, among other reasons, because you can’t sign your name on a dogmatic dotted line. You can’t check your mind at the door when you enter a church.

You are also here because you know that developing a religious and spiritual life is important. The secular world won’t help. Material success and personal victories only go so far. Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. We know we are going to die and therefore question what life means. And we seek to live in such a way that our lives will be worth dying for. For 188 years people just like us, uncertain, aspiring, have gathered here in this place to create a little religious village in the city, a place where we can be at home, whatever we think, whoever we are. With but a few small editorial changes, I could take Catherine Segewick’s letter from 1823 and publish it in 2007. We may not be able to offer heavenly insurance policies here, but since our founding to this very day we have offered a home for free-thinkers who wish to invest their thoughts and deeds so as to enrich their own and their neighbors’ lives.

This said, we never get any of our holidays quite right. When we celebrate the High Holidays or Passover, the Jews are not quite the chosen people. Jesus is not quite born of a virgin on Christmas or

bodily resurrected on Easter. And we often light the wrong number of Hanukkah or Advent candles. The same is true for All Souls Day. We're actually nineteen days late. And we take a very different tack. Where All Souls Day is a major religious holiday, as it is in Mexico, it is the Day of the Dead. Ours is a day of the living.

I have no problem with the way that others celebrate All Souls Day. To celebrate a Day of the Dead may strike you as a bit morbid, but the Mexican holiday is as joyous as it is ghoulish. It sacramentalizes and naturalizes death, one of the two hinges on which our lives mysteriously and magnificently turn.

Our All Souls day is different for parochial, yet not unimportant, reasons. The founder of this church was William Ellery Channing, next to Ralph Waldo Emerson perhaps the most eloquent 19th century Unitarian minister. He inspired the gathering of our congregation on two trips through New York in 1819. On his first pass through New York on the way from Baltimore, Channing met with forty soon to be founding members of our congregation in his sister, Lucy's, apartment. In Baltimore, he preached his most important sermon, Unitarian Christianity. Next to the pamphlets of Tom Paine no single publication had a wider readership throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. By the time Channing came back through New York he was already famous. The Music Hall filled to overflowing for two straight nights. Inspired by Channing's eloquence and gentle passion our founding members gathered, prepared to build a church, and began worshipping within a year.

In the meantime, they asked Channing to be our first minister. He was kind but blunt in his rejection. To move from Boston, the Athens of America, to the port of New York, a rough and ready merchant town, was inconceivable to him. We finally settled on William Ware, who did dare to move from Harvard to Yorkville. Ware's ministry here was brief. He returned to Athens, and went on to write a couple of very successful historical fiction potboilers from the comforts of home.

Though Channing turned us down, he did end up giving us our name. "I am a living member of the great family of All Souls" he once said. Our greatest minister, Henry Whitney Bellows, who served this congregation from 1839 to his death in 1882 latched onto that phrase

in the mid 1850's and somewhat preemptorily but brilliantly named our third meeting house "All Souls Church." On the state record books we are still the First Congregational Church in New York City, but from that day forward in spirit and popular parlance we have been the Church of All Souls.

Today we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of several long time members and offer our profound gratitude to some 200 members who have worshipped and served All Souls for more than 20 years. This All Souls day is not a Day of the Dead; it is a day of the living, when we celebrate, in Channing's words, the living members of the great family of All Souls. The great 20th century Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams said that all of us are called to the priesthood and the prophethood of believers. That is the spirit of this church. It was from the beginning. It is today.

Permit me to close this sermon on a personal note. Today I celebrate my thirtieth anniversary Sunday here among you. When I arrived at All Souls straight out of school, I was, if I am not mistaken, the youngest member of the congregation. Today, three decades later, fewer than two dozen of you remain from the hardy little band of liberal religious seekers whom I pledged my troth to then. We have walked together through good times and bad, sweet times and hard, our faith forged and strengthened in the crucible of this sanctuary. None of would be whom we have become, as people and as people of faith, had we not challenged each other, learned from each other, risen together to occasions that demanded our witness, and comforted each other in times of loss and trial.

On behalf of my fellow honorees this morning, those among us who have labored and celebrated in this house for twenty years and more, I can promise the rest of you—even those who are attending here for the first time this morning, asking yourselves if indeed you may at long last have found a spiritual home—that to be numbered as a living member of the great family of All Souls is to be uplifted on strong wings and charged with heightened purpose.

Looking back, I really can't imagine how I ever could have been so fortunate. Looking forward, I can almost promise you that the search we have undertaken here together will become—with the blessed addition of new companions along the way—even more rewarding. It

a world filled with such uncertainty, with more challenges than we could ever hope to meet alone, we can truly offer up our thanks: for being; for being here; and, for being here together.

Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.