

WHAT ARE WE, ANYWAY

7 November 2004

The Feast of All Saints

263rd Anniversary of the Parish

Early in my ministry, a member of the church invited me to dinner in his home. The two other guests had been members of the church only very briefly, but nonetheless had served on committees and had been generous in their financial support of the church. They left in the wake of the unfortunate conflict that occurred here in the early 1990s. My host hoped, I'm sure, that I would be able to coax these former members --- and, more importantly, their money --- to return. I didn't stand a chance. When I was introduced to the couple, one of them looked at me, and without even saying hello, stated "I'm so glad we now go to a church that believes in something." The evening went downhill from there.

We do believe in something, of course. And there is much that we have in common with the other churches in our town. But, at many points, our beliefs are quite different than those of Trinity or St. Francis Xavier, and we employ a different vocabulary when we talk about our faith. I know that many who are new to our church struggle to understand what this church actually does believe, given the affiliations we maintain with three separate denominations, one of them not really a "Christian" denomination, given our Quaker heritage, and given the dozen denominations and faith traditions represented in the current membership of the church. The 263rd anniversary of the parish provides me with the occasion to sort some of this out for you.

I begin with a history lesson. This is the First Parish of Bolton. It was "officially" gathered on November 4, 1741, when it ordained its first minister, Thomas Goss. Dick Hines, who worships here, is a descendent of Rev. Goss. At that time in Massachusetts, the town and the parish were, essentially, one and the same. This is why in the 1970s, we sold the Town Hall to Bolton for one dollar, and the town sold us the church for a dollar. The land that the church and the Town Hall stand on had been given to the town, but as the town was also the parish, it was difficult to determine who owned what. And of course, the town still owns the clock in our steeple and pays to have it wound and maintained. The first

church was initially known as “The First Church of Christ,” and then “The First Congregational Church of Christ,” and then “The First Parish and Religious Society, and now, and legally, “The First Parish of Bolton.” Whatever we’ve been, we’ve always been “first.” The First Parish became affiliated with the Unitarian movement gradually. There was never the great fuss that occurred in towns like Harvard, where the First Church split, and the liberals kept the building while the conservatives took the silver and built a church of their own at the other end of the common.

In 1798, there were enough Quakers in Bolton to warrant the town’s Quaker meeting becoming what is known as a “Monthly Meeting,” as opposed to a “Preparative Meeting.” It’s the difference between a driver’s license and a learner’s permit. Quakers had lived here since the late 1750s, some of them having moved here from Dover, New Hampshire where one Quaker branch of my family lived. Before 1789, Bolton Quakers had a small meeting house. In 1797, they built a larger one, which we gave to Sturbridge Village fifty years ago. It was dangerous to belong to a dissenting faith in Massachusetts for most of the seventeenth century and some of the eighteenth. Quakers were thrown in prison. Some had their ears cut off. A few had holes bored through their tongues with a hot iron. And some were executed on the Boston Common. Why were they understood to be such a threat? They defied the established order, and challenged its power and its claim on truth. Here one theme emerges. It says something about Bolton, and the First Parish, that Quakers felt safe, even welcomed, here.

Behind the old brick store, now a real estate office, on the corner of Main and Wataquodoc, sits another part of our history. Now the small Greek Revival building houses antique fire engines, and, until recently, it was also the home of the Bolton Farmers and Mechanics Association. On August 14, 1841, it was dedicated as the First Baptist Church of Bolton. The building cost \$800. The First Baptist Church of Bolton was the offspring of the Still River Baptist Church and began in 1828 when meetings for worship were first held. Much later, the Bolton church would have a child of its own, the Hudson Baptist Church, now part of the First Federated Church of Hudson. Baptists were dissenters, too, and they weren’t popular in the Bay State. Rhode Island was founded by the Baptist Roger Williams as a place of refuge for religious dissenters. Ruth Campbell and her family are descended from this very same Roger

Williams. Bolton's Baptists later built a much larger and more stylish church on Main Street, where the parking lot of the police station is today.

Fast forward to 1930. Bolton was small and getting smaller, and poor and getting poorer. The First Parish Church, the Friends Meeting, and the First Baptist Church each had only a few dozen active members. None could support a full-time minister. The Baptist minister, the Rev. George Jacques, who had established an interdenominational vacation Bible school in the town, recommended that the three churches try worshipping together. It worked. And, on February 28, 1931, the three churches "federated," meaning that they kept their own budgets, bylaws, denominational affiliations, and list of members, but they supported one minister and one church program. The brand new third meetinghouse of the First Parish was chosen as the home of this new entity. The Federated Church flourished and was the only church in Bolton until 1953. Twenty years ago, however, the federation ceased to exist. On April 29, 1984, the church became what is known as a "merged parish." And this gets us to the last part of the history lesson.

By 1984, the great majority of those who had joined the church had chosen not to affiliate with either the Baptists or the Unitarians. The Quakers had long since disbanded. Coming from many different denominational backgrounds, these new members either simply joined the Federated Church, or aligned themselves with what was known as "The Community Christian Fellowship," another constituent body that had frequently talked about affiliating with the United Church of Christ, the contemporary descendent of the old New England Congregational Churches. When the Community Christian Fellowship dissolved in 1979, it sent a signal to the Baptists and the Unitarians. They followed suit in 1984, and we legally became an interdenominational church, maintaining historic affiliations to the Baptists and the Unitarians, but welcoming all. In 2000, we finally added an affiliation to the United Church of Christ, because neither the Baptists nor the Unitarians adequately represented the theological diversity of the parish. And in 2003, we dropped the "Federated" part of our name, reverting to our other, older, and by this time more accurate name, The First Parish of Bolton.

I hope this history lesson was helpful! But now I must move onto to the theological content of the history.

At lunch after she spoke here in 2003, my cousin Sally --- who after the events of this week is assured of four more years as the deputy undersecretary of the Army --- questioned me sharply. “How does your church work?” she asked. She didn’t understand how we all managed to get along, let alone accommodate our theological differences.

I offered her a shorter version of the following:

The Unitarians, the Baptists, the Quakers, and, lately the UCC, have much in common. Number one, they are each autonomous. This means that churches in each of these traditions manage their own affairs. The larger denominations cannot, ultimately, force them to do anything.

Number two, they are non-credal. This means that no one, on joining any of these churches, must sign “on the dotted line” about what they believe or subscribe to one particular creed or statement of faith. Number three, each tradition believes in what the Baptists call “soul freedom,” or what the Quakers call “the inner light.” They believe that no intermediary is necessary between the individual believer and God. God’s spirit is in each person, and each person is free to experience the promptings of that spirit as it reveals itself to them.

Number four, each tradition is, in its origins, non-sacramental. This means that even when baptism and communion are observed, they are not regarded as supernatural events. The water of baptism is a symbol of one’s innate identity as a child of God, it does not establish or guarantee that identity. The bread and wine of communion are just that, bread and wine. They memorialize Jesus’ last meal with his friends. They do not re-enact it, or re-constitute it. Jesus, is of course, present with us --- but not only in the bread and wine. Rather, he is present in the soul of each person who gathers around his table.

Fifth and finally, each share a traditionally liberal understanding of faith, and a liberal perspective on the church’s role and responsibility in the larger society. What does this mean? It means that none regards the Bible as literally the Word of God or as God’s last word. Each believes that

“there is more light and truth,” to be found, and not necessarily in sacred scripture alone, particularly the Unitarians and Quakers. Each believes that our faith is meant to be lived out, and that living out that faith means taking Jesus’ mission as our own: to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to heal the sick, to set free all who are oppressed, and to announce the time not of God’s displeasure, but of God’s favor.

Accordingly, Bolton’s Unitarians took an early role in the anti-slavery movement, Bolton’s Quakers were among those who emigrated to Kansas to ensure that it would be a “free” state, and Bolton’s Baptists called the first woman to graduate from Andover Newton Theological School as their minister. The Federated Church’s beloved “Mr. Davis” brought the world into this meeting house, preaching peace, tolerance, and ecumenism from the pulpit. And as for me, well you know where I stand on some important social issues for you have given me the freedom to take a stand. I must mention as well, that this church has regularly given more than 15% of its income to charitable causes, while some churches give no more than 2 or 3 %.

In other words, we are exactly the sort of church the Rev. Mr. Edes envisioned in 1844. His prayers have been answered.

What of your prayers? What do you want this community to be and to do for you? There are a couple of dozen Unitarians and an equal number of Congregationalists (or UCCers) in our midst. There are handfuls of Baptists and Quakers. We are pledged to honor each of these traditions, and we will. In these traditions are our roots, and they provide the larger context we need in order to build community here. But most of you come from other traditions. In fact, there are more Roman Catholics here than anything else. Why have you come?

Hopefully you have come because while you cherish some of the beliefs you were once taught, you are also aware of how those beliefs have limited you, and you want something larger and lovelier than you have found in churches where there is little tolerance for anything that varies from the party line.

My father's family is Quaker. My mother's is Congregational. I was raised in a Baptist Church. Later I joined the UCC. In college, I worshipped at an Episcopal Church. After I left seminary in 1981, I sang in the choirs of two Roman Catholic churches. I learned how to say the Rosary in front of the altar at St. Joseph's Church in Worcester, the first Roman Catholic church threatened with closure to defy a bishop. Before I came to Bolton, I attended the First Unitarian Church in Worcester. I am what this church is.

And I hope you have noticed that I deliberately try to honor the various liturgical traditions represented in the sanctuary each week. For the Quakers, there is silence and the gesture of parting. I baptize infants, but I baptize adults, too, and I use words drawn from the UCC. The calls to worship and the occasional reading are often more Unitarian than anything else, but the prayers are usually Anglican. We have lit Hanukkah candles and held Passover Seders. On Holy Thursday, our service is more Catholic than the one at St. Francis. Our church school curriculum has always been ecumenical, and this year is taken from UCC and Unitarian sources. Today, we have sung words by an Anglican bishop, an English Unitarian (set to a tune by Martin Luther), and an Englishwoman, set to a melody written by the grandson of Vermont's second Episcopal bishop.

At the baccalaureate service for high school seniors two years ago, David Child wore the medallion we had given to the members of his confirmation class. It displayed the symbols of all the world's major religions. When a senior from another church asked him what the medallion meant, he said "You've got one way to heaven. I've got seven." I loved it!

Yes, we are a heady mix, and we celebrate our diversity, we don't worry too much about it. We are not everyone's cup of tea. As I said in last week's sermon, we don't clutch our Bibles, break into spontaneous prayer on the way to coffee hour, or repeat the name of Jesus over and over again. That's just fine. There are other options available to you if these things are important.

So, then, how does it work? It works because we spend much less time debating articles of faith, much less time talking about who Jesus was, and much more time focusing on how he has taught us to live.

When the followers of John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was the messiah that had been promised, Jesus didn't respond with a theological or Christological pronouncement. He didn't say "Yes, I am the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Instead he said "Go back and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

What do we believe? We believe many things. We believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, and we believe that he is divine only in the sense that each of us is divine. We believe that the Bible is wholly sufficient as a guide to faith and practice and we believe that a poem by W. H. Auden may contain as much revelation from God as the book of Revelation does. We believe that we should each be baptized as an infant, we believe that only adults should be baptized, and we believe that it is not necessary that anyone be baptized. We believe that we should set aside a time each day to pray, and we believe that it is impossible to separate prayer from anything else that we do. We believe that Jesus is the only way to God, and we believe that Jesus simply knew a way to God.

But we also believe that all of this is less important than being the persons Jesus calls us to be, and building the sort of community he asked us to build. This is what unites us, despite our differences.

What are we anyway? We are, or we should be a community centered on healing, and wholeness, and transformation, and the care of anyone whom our culture devalues, marginalizes, calls "other," for this is how Jesus understood his call and this is what he asks of those who seek to follow him. This is, as T. S. Eliot described it, the "still point" of the turning world, and anything else is beside the point.

Rev. Edes would tell us this if he was in this pulpit today, and so would that great cloud of witnesses whom we remember at this feast. They were all of them saints of God, and I mean, God helping, to be one, too.