

Channing, The Apostle of Liberty

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Matthew 7-7:14

Passage on Calendar

Hymn

May fifth, next, will be the hundredth anniversary of the installation of Jared Sparks when Channing preached what has come to be known as the Baltimore Sermon. Not merely because of its historical significance, but also because of its practical bearing upon the problems of thought and action in our own day, do I wish to reach back into that rich and stimulating past for our own benefit. This morning I wish to recall the main outlines of Channing's life, his point of view, and the temper of his work. Especially will it be worth our while to notice the main method and purpose of his life, the main guiding principles.

Channing was born at Newport, R.I. April 7th, 1780. His father was a lawyer, and became District attorney of Rhode Island. His mother was the daughter of William Ellery, one of the Sons of Liberty, and one of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence. He came honestly by his Liberty-loving spirit, and manifested it while in Harvard College, which he entered in 1794. At the time of his graduation the political feeling was running so intense that the faculty decided that political subjects should be debarred from the commencement program. Channing refused to give the oration assigned to him, and forced concessions from the faculty before he would consent to speak at all. His final rebuke to the faculty for this infringement on freedom came in his commencement address, when, turning and addressing himself to the faculty, he passionately exclaimed, "But I am forbid, I could a tale unfold which would harrow up your souls."

After leaving Harvard in 1798, he spent two years in Richmond Virginia, tutoring. Here the slavery problem was burned into his soul. After a year spent in study at home he returned to Cambridge, and, 1803, accepted an invitation to become minister of the Federal Street Religious Society.

In 1822 and 23 he took a year of travel in Europe. Apart from this interruption his entire work was connected with the Federal Street Society.

In 1842 he came to Lenox for a visit and rest. While at Lenox, August 1, 1842, he delivered his great Emancipation Address. A few days later he started on a drive home going by the way of Pittsfield, Williamstown, and Bennington. At Bennington he became ill, and died in the Walloomaac Inn, October 2, 1842.

What is the reason why this man, whose work was so utterly lacking in dramatic success, should have had such a tremendous influence? Practically all that he ever did centered around his work in the Federal Street Religious society, and his natural associations in the city of Boston. Yet hardly has a man in religious and social life had a wider and more profound influence during the entire 19th Century than Channing. His works have been translated into many languages. They have been read all over the English speaking world. Two incidents illustrate the scope of his influence, When Dean Stanley visited Boston, he asked to be taken to Mount Auburn Cemetery. His friends, surprised at this request, asked why he wished to go there. His answer was, "Is not Channing buried there?" Again when Don Pedro, Emperor of Brazil visited Harvard College, his chief interest was to visit the grave of Channing, and to pluck a leaf from the tree growing on the spot. Perhaps not the least indication of the breadth of his influence, nor geographically but intellectually, was the fact that as, the procession that carried his body from the Federal Street Society to Mount Auburn, moved through the streets of the city, the bell of the Catholic Cathedral was tolled.

To our question, "Why the influence of Channing?" comes the first part of the answer from his own statement in the introduction to his published addresses. "The following writings will be found to be distinguished by nothing more than the high estimate which they express of human nature."

The idea of the worth, the dignity of human nature, has become so commonplace today that we throw it about without any adequate understanding of its meaning. We forget that so short a time ago, not only from the point of view of religion, but also from the point of view of politics, and social life, it was an unpardonable heresy, almost a blasphemous thing to speak of man in such terms as Channing used continually and consistently. Calvinism, with its doctrine of the absolute depravity of man, was still full swing. Somewhat more real and human was the attitude of the Catholic Church, that man was born naturally prone to evil, but under the guidance of supernatural agencies could be redeemed. Into this atmosphere of unreality and pessimism came Channing with the idea of the dignity and worth of the human being. "The reception of this plainest truth of Christianity (the new reverence for man) would revolutionize society, and create relations among men not dreamed of at the present day. ... None of us can conceive the change of manners, the new courtesy and sweetness, the mutual kindness, deference, and sympathy, the life and energy of efforts for social melioration, which are to spring up, in proportion as man shall penetrate beneath the body to the spirit, and shall learn what the lowest human being is. Then insults, wrongs and oppressions, now hardly thought of, will give a deeper shock than we receive from crimes which the laws punish with death. Then man will be sacred in man's sight; and to injure him will be regarded as open hostility to God. It has been under a deep feeling of the intimate connection of better and juster views of human nature with all social and religious progress, that I have insisted on it so much in the following tracts, and I hope that the reader will not think that I have given it disproportionate importance."

Thus the foundation of all Channing's teaching and thought and action. But it is an idea that had its origin, not in an abstract sentimental dogma. It grew out of his insight into mankind, not mankind in general, but men in particular. He saw beneath the surface, beneath the clothes, the station, the limitations, the sin and even the sordidness, into the essential quality of man. He saw the unrealized values, the unfulfilled possibilities, the untouched resources of men, the divine qualities seeking for mastery and control over the more sordid and brutal forces of man.

Out of this first great idea which he calls the distinguishing characteristic of all his writings, grows as naturally as water flows, the second principle of his teaching, and guide of his life, the idea of Liberty, Reverence for Liberty, for human rights. "It is because I have learned to regard man under the light of this religion that I cannot bear to see him treated as a brute, insulted wronged, enslaved, made to wear a yoke, to tremble before his brother, to serve him as a tool, to hold property and life at his will, to surrender intellect and conscience to the priest, or to seal his lips or belie his thoughts through dread of the civil power. It is because I have learned the essential quality of men before the common father, that I cannot endure to see one man establishing his arbitrary will over another by fraud, or force, or wealth, or rank, or superstitious claims. It is because the human being has moral powers, because he carries a law in his breast and was made to govern himself, that I cannot endure to see him taken out of his own hands and fashioned into a tool by another's avarice or pride. It is because I see in him a great nature, the divine image and vast capacities, that I demand for him the means of self-development, spheres for free action; that I call society not to fetter, but to aid his growth. Without attempting to disparage the outward temporal advantages of liberty, I have habitually regarded it in a higher light, as the birthright of the soul, as the element in which men are to put themselves forth, to become conscious of what they are, and to fulfill the end of their being."

From this background of the dignity of human nature, and its corollary of a free opportunity of fulfilling the end of being, Channing worked. With the pulpit of the Federal Street Religious Society as the center, he worked out into all the all the relations of human life, political, social, as well as purely religious. To him there was not a purely religious problem apart from its concrete expression in human life. "Many indeed think that they learn God from marks of design and skill in the outward world; but our ideas of design and skill, of a determining cause, or an end or purpose, are derived from consciousness, from our own souls. Thus the soul is the spring of our knowledge of God."

Right here in the teaching of Channing are the foundation principles of the great Humanitarian movement that has grown through the century to such proportion that it has become the dominating idea of our present time. His interests in college, his interests before going into the ministry, his sermons, his lectures on "The elevation of the laboring classes" on the ministry to the poor, on Temperance and poverty, on war and politics, all breathe this same spirit, and are shot through and through with these two ideas, two principles.

With him always went the twofold remedy. His work was always to stir within men that feeling of self-respect, and sense of responsibility, to rouse the latent powers. Never a word of repression, but always expression. He was always urging education, enlightenment, wholesome pleasure, the overcoming of evil with good, not by repressing the evil, but by releasing the good. To this task of rousing the latent possibilities of good, and providing free opportunity of expression, he called all men and all institutions. By this standard he measured everything. "In the Annual Election Sermon on Spiritual Freedom" preached May 26, 1830 he says, "Oh, save me from a country which worships wealth, and cares not for true glory; in which intrigue bears rule; in which patriotism borrows its zeal from the prospect of office." Religion education, business, the state, must all be guided by this one great purpose of providing the free opportunity for developing in the individual the highest qualities of which he is capable.

But there is no dodging the issue over which so much confusion exists today, namely the issue of the relation of environment to individual conduct. He relates the two properly and soundly. Both are factors. The good seed cannot grow in sterile and unproductive soil, it cannot grow in the dark. But on the other hand he realizes full well that given both good seed, and good soil, then to produce good fruits is the result of hard work, of constant and persistent effort. Never does he release the individual from the responsibility resting upon him, a responsibility not only for his own development, but responsibility for providing good soil for the other fellow. This is what he really means by Liberty.

In all relations of life we are not only bound to make full use of the opportunities that come to us, but are under equal obligation to do our full share in guaranteeing to others opportunities such as we have.

One or two striking illustrations of this appear in Channing's life. He was not a popular man in his time. He had to meet with a great deal of very severe criticism. The freedom with which he spoke and wrote upon all subjects was a freedom that he maintained against great opposition. Even in his own Church of which he was pastor for forty years, he was refused the use of the Church for the purpose of holding an Anti-Slavery Meeting. "Many of his brethren condemned him for desecrating the dignity of the pulpit by the introduction of such (political and social) topics, and large numbers of the laity were indignant at his presumption, as they considered it, and his officious intermeddling with matters beyond his sphere." But to him this idea of freedom meant not merely the opportunity of saying what he wanted to say, but the obligation of saying what he felt that he ought to say. But it went beyond that.

I have already spoken at a former occasion of the way he came to the defense of the principle of free speech in his protest against the death of Lovejoy the abolitionist. Channing was not an abolitionist, but to deny the abolitionist the right to speak was to strike at a fundamental right. Most people think of free speech...

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...and clearly his nature.

From what I have said you may imagine him as strong, robust active, not to say offensively self-assertive. The contrary is the truth. He was slight, never enjoyed very good health, and was given, as he has observed to excessive meditation. He shrank from anything like publicity. He refused to give the Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard because he could not face the ordeal of appearing in public. Not a strong robust physique, not a powerful egoistic self-assertion, but just a plain moral passion, illuminated by a deep spiritual insight, was the motive power in all Channing's work and thought.