

Theodore Parker, The Man of Conviction

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The general interest in Theodore Parker, and his life work, is not merely due to the historical fact that the 24th day of August marks the hundredth anniversary of his birth, but also to the fact that Parker and his teachings are coming to their own. We are doing today what all people have done, we are garnishing the tomb of the prophet whom we stoned. Most people do not realize, as they speak with glowing pride of Theodore Parker, and especially most Unitarians do not realize, just what kind of a man they are praising, and just what attitude they would take towards him were he alive and attending to the problems of our time as he attended to the problems of his times. Indeed, he lived in times of great intellectual, religious and social unrest. German thought, so common now as to be orthodox, was just being introduced into this country by its kinsmen the transcendentalists, and was causing no end of discussion and alarm among the pious, and select guardians of the public intelligence and morals. Parker was one of the first, one of the best, and one of the bravest of the men who husbanded these young plants of the intellectual life of the modern world in the cold and backward garden of New England Hunkerdom. It was one of Parker's friends who first brought a copy of Strauss' *Life of Jesus* to this country, and that alone was sufficient to class a man as infidel and atheist.² Then for years was Parker's mind developing the direction of that type of thought which found its challenging expression in the famous sermon of 1841 on the permanent and transient in Christianity. It is commonplace today, almost trite, and platitudinous to say the things that [he] was saying from the point of view of theology, but in those

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #5"—that includes sermons from January 2, 1910 to January 15, 1911.

² David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) German liberal Protestant theologian; he published *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* between 1835-36. In it he denied the historical value of the Gospels and rejected their supernatural claims, calling them "historical myth."

days before science and the doctrine of evolution, and the leaven of modern thought had eaten away the underpinning of soft wood upon which the ancient structure of supernatural religion stood, it was indeed the rankest form of infidelity that Parker was preaching. Today we hear it in almost every pulpit, although not quite so openly as one might wish. For example, one of the chief points against Parker were his ideas concerning Jesus and Christianity. It is expressed in this form:

Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest soul ever swathed in the flesh; to redeem man, he took his stand on righteousness and religion; on no form, no tradition, no creed. He demanded not belief, but a life, a life of love to God and love to man. We must come back to this; the sooner the better.³

But the times in which Parker was growing to maturity were disturbed by the seething unrest growing up out of the slave situation. Here, as elsewhere, Parker was no compromiser. His share in the agitation and fight against slavery was excelled by no one, and equaled by but few. His bold proclamation of the anti-slavery cause, his wide influence as a lecturer and writer, and his still more bold action in the underground slavery railroad work, and in the assistance of John Brown in his undertaking at Harper's Ferry, and in his bold defiance of the President of the United States in his famous letter to President Filmore defying him to enforce the Antislavery laws, give one some suggestion of the kind of man he was. Certainly not the conventional parish priest, safe, and sound on all disputed doctrines. The mirror of public opinion is not always good, but it throws some light on human society if not upon the character of the man judged. He was called, "disturber of the peace," "an infidel," "an atheist," "an enemy to mankind," and special prayer meetings were held in the churches of Boston, asking God to confuse the mind of Theodore Parker so that he could not write his sermons, and put a hook in his jaws so that he could not preach, and when worn and dying he went to Europe to regain his health if possible, there was great rejoicing among the saints of the Lord in Boston and elsewhere because God had answered their prayers and Theodore Parker was at last to be removed from the midst of their Garden of Eden, in which

³ Theodore Parker, from a speech given before the 1840 Groton Convention, quoted in John Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker*, New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1864, Vol. 1, p. 133.

commerce and the churches of commerce lived upon the fruits of slavery.

What are the landmarks of the life of this man, than whom not a greater has been produced in this country? He was born in the town of Lexington, famous for radicals, and his grandfather was none other than the Captain Parker who met the British Army on its march from Boston more than a hundred [years] before. He was the youngest of a large family of children. His father was a stolid, free-thinking father, and his mother was a devoted mother-love companion of her children, and most of all, the family baby, Theodore. His great tribute to her, and to womenkind, shows itself in the oft repeated form of address that appears in his prayers, "Oh Father God and Mother God."

Here he grew up through the years of childhood on the farm going to school as opportunity offered, and reading every book that he could get his hands on. He did the work at Harvard college, but did not get a degree. He taught school, and finally entered Harvard Divinity School where he made a name for himself as a scholar and a thinker. Graduated from the Divinity School in 1836, and became minister of the Unitarian Church at West Roxbury. In 1841, he preached the famous sermon on the permanent and the transient in Christianity. In 1843 and 4 he traveled in Europe. Returned to Boston and the 28th Congregational Society was organized over which he was placed as minister in order the Theodore Parker might be heard in Boston. From the platform in Music Hall he was heard by thousands and in that place were held many of the most remarkable of the meetings of the anti-slavery days. In 1854, he was indicted in the U.S. Court for evading the Fugitive Slave laws, but he never was tried. In 1859, he was overcome by a hemorrhage of the lungs. Went to Italy for relief, and died in Florence in 1860, the 10th of May, at the age of fifty. He was the same heroic, unconquerable Theodore Parker on this death bed, as in his life work. Almost the last words were, "There are two Theodore Parkers now; one is dying here in Italy; the other I have planted in America. He will live there and finish my work."⁴

Born of a family stronger in ethical and intellectual capacity than in body, Parker was never very robust, but his ceaseless,

⁴ Quoted in Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Theodore Parker: A Biography*, Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1874, p. 535.

and almost superhuman work conspired to nourish the possibility of his untimely end. Intellectually he was a giant. He was master of 16 to 20 languages, and in a dozen of them he could read and write with ease. He was an omnivorous reader, and had a phenomenal memory. His house was staked with books from garret to kitchen. Not only was he a student, but he was a free and independent thinker. It takes power and faith to travail alone in the unfamiliar seas of thought. This Theodore Parker did. Here is his resolution concerning his preaching:

At the beginning I resolved to preach the natural laws of man as they are writ in his constitution, no less and not more. After preaching a few month in various places, and feeling my way into the consciousness of man, I determined to preach nothing as religion which I had not experienced inwardly and made my own, knowing it by heart.⁵

Morally he was keyed to much the same note as I imagine Jesus must have been. There was neither variableness nor shadow of turning. The fact of his personal integrity, in thought, in speech and in action, was the most sacred thing in the world to him. Once having seen his way clear to a line of thought, or an action, no question of expediency or personal ease could make him side-step in the least. His standards of his own personal life were rigorously high, and he never deviated from them, so it cannot be said that his ethical principles were to be applied only to others. In his 28th Congregational Society he had many members who were fugitive slaves, and he spoke of them as the crown of his apostleship. Because he believed in the integrity of his own personality, he believed in that of the other man, including the negro. When two fugitive slaves came to him to be married, it was perfectly consistent and natural for him to give the man a bible and a sword, telling the groom to protect the body of his wife with the one, and her soul with the other. There was a ring about his preaching that smacks of the old Jewish prophets, who took for the authority of their assertions, none other than their God. They were his spokesman. Thus was

⁵ Theodore Parker, in *Theodore Parker's Experience as a Minister, with Some Account of his Early Life, and Education for the Ministry; Contained in a letter from him to the Members of the Twenty-eighth Congregational Society of Boston*, Boston: Rufus Leighton, Jr. 1859, pp. 45-6.

Parker. In his letter to President Filmore denouncing the fugitive slave law, he closes with these words:

There hangs beside me in my library, as I write, the gun my grandfather fought with at the Battle of Lexington—he was a captain on that occasion—and also the musket he captured from a British soldier on that day, the first taken in the war for Independence. If I would not peril my property, my liberty, nay, my life, to keep my own parishioners out of slavery, then I would throw away those trophies, and should think that I was the son of a coward, and not a brave man's child. ...

... I only write to remind you of the difficulties in our way; if need is, we will suffer and penalties you may put upon us, BUT WE MUST KEEP THE LAW OF God.⁶

Such was the conception that Parker had of the integrity of his personality. One would hardly imagine that a man who suffered so much severe and cruel criticism and was at times so merciless in his criticism of others could be other than a hard, cold mechanical man. Yet he was a very sensitive and shrinking man. He did not become the public character that he was because he took delight in the publicity of his life and work, but on the contrary, he accepted all that as a necessary evil involved in the work that he felt called upon to do. This other side of his nature appears in his deep and richly human feeling about the common and familiar things of home life and family. There was a rare beautiful charm about his feelings for his home and his wife. He was married just at the time of his settlement at West Roxbury. A bit from the journal gives a peep into the quiet beauty of the love and fellowship between Parker and Mrs. Parker. It reads,

At home nominally; but since wife is gone my home is in New Jersey. I miss her absence—wicked woman—most exceedingly. I cannot sleep or eat or work without her. ... But soon I shall go to see the girl once more. Meantime and all time heaven bless her! I can do nothing without Lydia—not even read.⁷

⁶ Theodore Parker, quoted in John Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker*, New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1864, Vol. 1, p. 102.

⁷ Theodore Parker, from his journal, quoted in John White Chadwick, *Theodore Parker: Preacher and Reformer*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1901, p. 60.

Then there is just another touch of the deep simple home life. On one of the last nights before he died he turned to Mrs. Parker and said, "Lay your head down on the pillow, Bearsie, and sleep; you have not slept for a long time."⁸ It was a rich noble love that they shared with each other, but each felt the tremendous lacking in the fact that no children were born to them. Parker once said, when his sensitive soul was smarting under the sting of criticism, "I am the most hated man in Boston and I have no children."⁹ This gives a glimpse of the other side of his life. As Browning says, "every man has two soul sides, one to face the world and one to show a woman when he loves her."¹⁰

Among men he was ever the same gentle, tender, friend and companion, abounding in sympathy, and able to read and understand, and see things as the other man saw them, and withal a just friend, as he was a just foe. He was the friend to all in his parish and in a wide circle beyond. Perhaps he valued this the more because he was so cordially despised and so completely isolated from all the conventional social circles of his time. But I must not go far afield in this side of his life for it takes us into his religious and social work to which I hope to refer at another time.

Finally, atheist though he was called, he was one of the most devoutly religious men of all times. His prayers are the outpouring of a living vital soul. God was a reality of the spirit to him. He saw God everywhere, and honored and loved him everywhere. He was a man intoxicated with the spirit of life, and the spirit of life was his God. And he was equally intoxicated with the spirit of God, not a God made by the fathers handed down to him moth-eaten, and corroded, but a very living companionable God who was speaking to him in and beneath

⁸ Theodore Parker, as quoted in John White Chadwick, *Theodore Parker: Preacher and Reformer*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1901, p. 372.

⁹ Theodore Parker, as quoted in John White Chadwick, *Theodore Parker: Preacher and Reformer*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1901, p. 60.

¹⁰ Robert Browning (1812-1889) English poet and playwright. I cannot find the original source for this quote, although I have found several sources that attribute it to Browning, including Anna Garlin Spencer, *The Family and its Members*, London: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1916, pp. 43-44.

the harsh tumultuous life of his times. It was just because of this consciousness of the great spiritual presence of life that his work was what it was, as David A. Wasson, in a letter written at the time of Parker's death gives a pithy characterization of his character and work:

He was capable of a mighty wrath, but it was born of his love, and was never expended on account of his private wrongs; he was angry and he sinned not, for it was the anger of the prophet; indignation of wrongs done to humanity; and grand a noble, a sacred passion.¹¹

I have not wished to give you a complete picture, indeed I could not do that, of Theodore Parker, but I wanted to give some suggestion of his spirit, the dynamic and the motive of his life, and with all I have hoped that you may be stimulated to read something of his work, and his contribution to our common life. He would be the last to wish empty words of praise heaped upon him as a means of recognizing the contribution to the common good, he would be the first to say, "Honor and support the work, not of the prophets who are dead, but of those who are living, and are carrying the burdens of the day." He is tremendously interesting for the romance of his own life, but he is not less so for the work that he is doing today. Many true and noble things he said, some daring and challenging, but not one seems to be truer, or more prophetic, than the words said on his death bed, "There are two Theodore Parkers now; one is dying here in Italy; the other I have planted in America. He will live there and finish my work." No small part of the seed, which is causing the great unrest of our time in religious, in political, in social life was sown here by that Theodore Parker that was planted here in America. That Theodore Parker, planted here in America, is preaching from all the pulpits that have any vital message today. His principles and his purposes still are working. And one day we shall see that Parker was still the prophet in adopting as his motto, "No slavery anywhere in America."

¹¹ David A. Wasson (1823-1887) American minister and transcendentalist. This passage is quoted in John White Chadwick, *Theodore Parker: Preacher and Reformer*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1901, p. 377.