ABNER KNEELAND – UNIVERSALIST HERETIC

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching

Unitarian Church North

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[PHOTO AND CAPTION OF REV. ABNER KNEELAND GOES UP ON SCREEN]



Rev. Abner Kneeland

1777-1844

This morning I want to share an important (and I think truly amazing!) story from our Unitarian Universalist history…with which I suspect few (if any) of you are familiar. It's the story of a rather colorful 😊 19th Century Universalist minister – the Rev. Abner Kneeland …Abner Kneeland's historical "claim to fame" is that he was the **last** man in America to be jailed for blasphemy -- that being in the year 1838, in Massachusetts! I'll tell that dramatic and interesting part of his story a bit later in the sermon, but there is much more about the life and thought of Abner Kneeland -- whom one denominational historian calls ***"the most controversial character ever ordained to the Universalist ministry" --*** that is important for us

to understand (as Unitarian Universalists living almost 200 years later). The story of this complicated and iconoclastic man (whose thinking was – in many ways, rather remarkably -- about 100 years ahead of its time) pretty much single handedly tells the story of how our faith has changed and evolved over the centuries…an evolution that is crucial for us to understand as we continue this faith tradition here at Unitarian Church North.

But before I can effectively tell the story of Abner Kneeland, I need to give you a little background into the history of American Universalism and American Unitarianism, so that you'll understand the context in which Rev.

Kneeland made such an impact. Although both religious movements go back at least 500 years in European history, both Unitarianism and Universalism (as we know them today) were liberal Christian American sects that established themselves in New England during the 18th and 19th Centuries, and (even though they pretty much theologically resembled then what a lot of mainstream Christian denominations –Methodist…Presbyterian…Lutheran - look like today) were (BACK THEN) regarded as dangerous heretical movements by the more orthodox Christian traditions, including the Puritans who dominated religion in early America. Indeed, our very names ***"Unitarian"*** and ***"Universalist"*** were basically negative slurs

given to us by the conservatives who regarded us as heretics. Puritan missionaries on the Western frontier, for example, routinely referred in their fire-and-brimstone sermons to ***"Those twin evils of, infidelity and Universalism,"*** and Unitarians were similarly maligned. So the thing you need to remember is that both halves of our faith tradition were <u>born in an heretical context</u>…we were considered (by the theological majority) to be false and dangerous free-thinking heresies. Our Unitarian and Universalist forebears always had to fight (in the public square) to establish the legitimacy of their liberal theological beliefs in the face of being labeled heretics by the dominant church.

So this is the decidedly Christian context in which Abner Kneeland caused such a ruckus. Here is his story.

Abner Kneeland was born in Gardner, Massachusetts, in 1774 (two years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence) the sixth of ten children. His formal education (and this was true for many of the early Universalist ministers who were more rural and less educated that their urban Unitarian counterparts) his formal education stopped after one year in an academy (or high school) in Chesterfield, New Hampshire, after which he moved to Vermont (with one of his brothers) to practice carpentry (like his father before him)

and teach school and compile spelling books. After joining the Baptist church in nearby Putney Vermont, at the age of 27 he began to preach as a Baptist lay preacher.

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF THE REV HOSEA BALLOU IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]



Rev. Hosea Ballou

But 2 years later, he met the famous Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou, whose theology and beliefs he shortly thereafter adopted. Early Universalism's defining theological idea (which

was very different from the negative, sin-and-damnation-centered theology of the Puritans…was that the God in charge of this creation was a good and loving and powerful God, who, in the end, would save and embrace all his human children, even the most wayward. The Universalists said there was no hell and damnation, for all human souls would eventually be united with God in heaven…and that humanity (with its inherent goodness given from God) was capable of creating an approximation of the kingdom of God on earth. Kneeland took this positive theology to heart, and began to preach and spread these Universalist ideas. He began his Universalist career as an itinerant preacher in New

Hampshire, finally settling in the church in Langdon, New Hampshire which he successfully pastored for 7 years. During this time, he was credited with converting several orthodox preachers to the Universalist cause. In 1811, Kneeland moved to a new church in Charlestown, Massachusetts, just outside of the thriving city of Boston. Under his energetic and charismatic leadership the church prospered, and his reputation as a persuasive and inspiring preacher grew. A congregant once described Kneeland as ***"The most venerable man I ever saw in the pulpit. His commanding presence…all illuminating blue eyes; his voice never boisterous, his temper never ruffled…wonderfully impressive in calmness***

and persuasive candor…remarkably self-possessed…tall and erect…there was a quiet dignity in all his movements…Besides all this his moral character was as clear of blemish as we can reasonably hope to see anywhere."

But just three years into his Charlestown ministry, Kneeland abruptly resigned his pulpit, abandoned the Universalist ministry, and went into the dry goods business with his wife. He claimed to be leaving the ministry for financial reasons, but the truth was he was beginning to have serious doubts (as one historian puts it) ***"about the authenticity of [Christian] scriptures and the authority of [Christian] revelation."*** He once wrote, ***"I have had my doubts as to the***

truth of many things recorded in the bible" including his increasing doubts about the existence of God and the divinity of Jesus. But the Universalist General Convention (the national church body of that day) would not accept losing so talented and energetic a minister, and in 1814 urged him to return. In 1816 (after a long correspondence debate with this old friend Hosea Ballou over the finer points of Universalist and Christian doctrine – which was published) Kneeland did return to the Universalist fold (serving churches in Whitestown, New York and Philadelphia. But Kneeland was increasingly unable to repress the serious doubts he was having about his Christian faith…and both his colleagues in the

Universalist ministry (and the congregants in the churches he served) were alienated, upset, and offended by the increasingly unorthodox content of his sermons. As Kneeland's theological and social ideas evolved and became more radical, controversy increasingly swirled around him, but that didn't slow this amazing man down one bit. As one historian writes, ***"During the Philadelphia years, Kneeland was almost superhumanly busy. He published sermons and tracts, edited denominational and secular newspapers, compiled a hymnal [which the Universalist church rejected, incidentally], made a translation of the New Testament, and developed a new system of spelling…[He***

engaged in several, public marathon theological debates with orthodox clergy] helped his wife with a new store, <u>and</u> [served] as [a] government inspector of imported hats."
Yikes, I get tired just thinking about this guy!

By this time, Abner Kneeland (whose theological and social thinking was moving further and further from the traditional Universalist and Christian doctrines of the day) was in <u>perpetual conflict</u> with both the Universalist church in America, and with each successive congregation he served. After dividing his Philadelphia congregation (with his radical and iconoclastic ideas) he moved to a church in New York City, and then (after conflict over his ministry arose

in ***that*** congregation) to one in Boston (where his iconoclastic preaching once again) caused him to lose his pulpit. Finally, in 1829, things came to a head. At the urging of his old friend Hosea Ballou, Kneeland formally renounced Christianity, and was disfellowshipped by the New England Universalist General Convention. But this did not mean that Kneeland was silenced. In 1831, having abandoned Christianity BUT NOT what was then called the "FREE RELIGION" or "FREE THOUGHT" movement, he started his own newspaper -- ***The Boston Investigator*** -- and he became active in this "ULTRA-PROGRESSIVE" religious movement where he intellectually remained until his death. As the lead lecturer at the

newly formed **First Society of Free Enquirers** in Boston, Kneeland filled the Federal Street Theatre (each Sunday morning and Wednesday evening) with more than 2,000 listeners, who were excited and intrigued with his modern and radical thinking.

And just what did he believe?

[and here I paraphrase some of the research of my colleague Rev. Kelly Asprooth-Jackson]

1) Kneeland said that scripture was **NOT** "divinely inspired," but rather the product of human authors telling stores ***"to make sense of their lives"***…

2) He saw God **NOT** as some sort of superior/cosmic being with thoughts and

feelings (and other attributes of a person but called himself a pantheist who understood God as "all of nature and the world" of which we are a part…

But let me let him say it himself…In 1833 he put much of his radical thought to paper in ***A PHILOSOPHICAL CREED***:

I believe *[Kneeland began]* ***in the existence of a universe of suns and planets, among which there is one sun belonging to our planetary system; and that other suns, being more remote, are called stars; but that they are indeed suns to other planetary systems. I believe that the whole universe is nature, and that the word 'NATURE' embraces the whole***

universe, and that God and Nature, so far as we can attach any rational idea to either, are perfectly synonymous terms. Hence I am not an Atheist [as some charge] but a Pantheist; that is, instead of their believing there is no God, I believe…all is God; and that all power that is, is in God, and that there is no power except which proceeds from God…Hence I believe that God is all in all; and that it is in God we live, move, and have our being; and that the whole duty of man consists in living as long as he can, and in promoting as much happiness as he can while he lives.

And elsewhere, in explaining how he had moved past traditional Universalist and Christian thinking wrote:

"…In some respects I am still a Universalist, but in others I am not…I still hold to universal philanthropy, universal benevolence, and universal charity…[and, like the Universalists, I do not believe] ***in punishment after death…in these respects I am still a Universalist. [But in several other important respects]…I am no more a Universalist than I am an orthodox Christian. Universalists believe in [a transcendent, personal] God which I do not…Universalists believe in Christ, which I do not…[I] believe the whole story concerning him is a much a fable and a fiction as that [say]***

of the god Prometheus…Universalists believe in miracles which I do not…[and] Universalists believe in the resurrection of the dead, in immortality, and eternal life, which I do not…[I] believe all life is mortal, that death is an eternal extinction of life to the individual who possesses it, and that no individual live is, ever was, or ever will be eternal…[and then Kneeland ended] Hence, as Universalists no longer wish to consider me as being of their faith, and I not longer wish to be considered as belonging to their order, as it relates to a belief in things unseen…I profess to believe in all realities of which I can form...rational conception…[and nothing more].”

So Kneeland had essentially evolved in his thinking from being a **Universalist Christian** to being a **Rational Humanist**…almost 100 years before Rational Humanism took significant hold in American intellectual life (and in our congregations)! In addition to his unorthodox theological and philosophical ideas, Kneeland also held radical social and political views for his day. He was fiercely "COMMUNITARIAN" (believing, as Jesus did, that society's wealth must be broadly shared for the benefit of all). He endorsed a tax-supported national educational system, supported anti-monopoly laws for big business, fought for improved employment conditions for American workers, and land reform for the poor. He also

supported equal rights for Black Americans, and was in fact one of the first abolitionist Universalist clergy to come out against the institution of slavery. In 1830 -- when no one in all of Boston would provide the great abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison a place to speak -- Abner invited him to speak at his Freethought Society in Julien Hall. Kneeland even spoke up in favor of (the then almost universally condemned practice of) interracial marriage. ***"The basic principle of society,"*** Abner wrote, ***"should be the principle of perfect equality as to rights and privileges, totally regardless of sex…[and] totally regardless of color."***

Kneeland also cared deeply about <u>women and family issues</u> -- he enthusiastically married **four times** (being widowed in succession by his first three wives), and even fathered a child by his fourth wife in his sixties! He advocated equal rights for women (suggesting they must have the right to keep their own names and bank accounts upon marriage, and be free to divorce their husbands – an almost unheard of suggestion in that day – and have the right to practice birth control). Once -- during a lecture late in his career, after he had rejected much of biblical scriptural authority, frequently calling the Bible ***"fiction"*** -- Kneeland read from the Old Testament book of Leviticus which instructed husbands to [quote] ***"suffer not a***

woman during her time of month to be near you because she is unclean." "That's not true!" Bellowed Kneeland, ***"Women are not unclean at any time! [They call this the] Good Book? This isn't a very good book in its attitudes towards women."*** and he tossed the bible aside!

Perhaps this story best illustrates why this free and fiery thinker (who always had a way of drawing public attention to himself) was, in the end, prosecuted and jailed for blasphemy. After years of radical lecturing and publishing, he was accused (by a Massachusetts grand jury) of being an atheist and blasphemer, and was indicted. I must point out, here, that, sadly,

many of his accusers came not just from orthodox religious circles, but also from the "establishment" Unitarian (and Universalist) elites who dominated Massachusetts at that time. Kneeland underwent **five** blasphemy trials from 1834 and 1838, where (as several historians observe) he was tried not only for his theological ideas but for his radical social thoughts as well. At one place in the court record it was recorded, "***The denial of God, his creation, or final judging of the world…with the intent and purpose to…disparage [God] and impair or destroy the reverence due to Him, is blasphemy."*** In fact, Kneeland had moved in his thinking not to atheism but to **PANTHEISM**. He wrote, ***"I believe that God and***

Nature [both capitalized], so far as we can attach any rational idea to either, are synonymous terms. Hence, I am not an Atheist, but a Pantheist, that is instead of believing there is not God, I believe that in the abstract, all is God…it is in God we live and move and have our being, and that the whole duty of man consists in living as long as he can, and in promoting as much happiness as he can while he lives."

Now this is rather tame stuff for us modern day Unitarian Universalists, and many in this congregation hold similar theological views, but for 19th Century Christian New England, it was all too modern, and all too much. The prosecuting attorney for the Commonwealth of

Massachusetts further warned the jury (and some of you may recognize this as being similar to the attacks religious conservatives are making against gay marriage today) he warned that if Kneeland were not punished for his ideas, ***"Marriages [will be] dissolved, prostitution made easy and safe, moral and religious restraints removed, property invaded, and the foundations of society broken up, and property made common, and universal mischief and misery [will] ensue."*** Four times Kneeland won appeals of the guilty verdict, but the fifth time he lost, and the Governor of Massachusetts refused a petition (signed by leading Unitarians Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Ellery Channing and other intellectual luminaries of the day)

based on the principles of freedom of speech and the press. Kneeland served his full 60 day term in the dark and miserable recesses of the Boston common jail. Those who visited him in prison found him ***"in fine fettle"*** enjoying his martyr's role. ***"Abner was jugged for sixty days,"*** said the great Unitarian clergyman Theodore Parker, ***"[But] he will come out as beer from a bottle, all foaming, and will make others foam."***

But this was (sadly) not to be the case. The truth is Abner Kneeland left jail a broken man…disappointed, dispirited, humiliated and hurt by the many, vicious attacks directed at him, including those of his fellow Universalists (and Unitarians). Even his natural enthusiasm

for life could not hide the fact that, after prison, he was a broken man.

Upon his release, Abner decided to abandon his home state of Massachusetts (with all its orthodox social and religious constraints), gathered a few of his freethinking followers, moved to the Midwest frontier, and started a small utopian community named Salubria ***[SAL-U-BRIA]*** (years earlier while in Philadelphia he had fallen under the influence of utopian socialist Robert Owen)

[PICTURE OF FARMINGTON IOWA IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]



Farmington Iowa on the banks of the Des Moines River

(near what is today Farmington, Iowa, on the banks of the Des Moines River) where free thought, free speech, intellectual pursuit and social equality would be encouraged. But the small, idealistic community never prospered, in large part (Kneeland historian Stephan Papa reports) because of its impractical location some 100 feet up a steep bluff from the boat (and supplies) landing -- Kneeland was

apparently a better philosopher than he was topographer! Despite the fact that the community languished, his granddaughter reported that although (during these Iowa years) Kneeland was poor, he had his integrity and his family (and he) was happy. And she wrote of the ***"loving atmosphere of their home and the pleasant social life [in the settlement]."*** As one historian ends the story, ***"Salubria never flourished, and folded soon after Kneeland's death in 1844 [at the age of 70]. Only a few headstones remain to mark the…settlement. But descendants of his colony still live in the area, and historians remember him as a founding father of the state of Iowa."***

[PAUSE…]

So…I hope (on some level at least) everyone here this morning finds some aspect of Abner Kneeland's amazing life story to be of interest…

For sure it is as my colleague Rev. Kelly Asprooth-Jackson points out:

Abner Kneeland's views [expressed almost 2 centuries ago] are very close to our current UU consensus on a variety of important issues:

- ***The importance of Anti-racism and anti-oppression work…***
- ***Equal rights and freedoms for all persons…***
- ***Women's reproductive and other rights…***

- ***God as the "wholeness of the universe" rather than "some sort of distant supernatural being"…***
- ***Jesus not as the divine "Son of God) but as a great teacher of humanity…and***
- ***Scripture as something that can be considered and challenged (rather than blindly and unflinchingly obeyed)***

And the turbulent ministry (and innovative thought) of Abner Kneeland importantly reminds us of two important things about our faith:

First, remembering that it was some of his "liberal" colleagues who condemned him…the

truth is that even Unitarians and Universalists (proudly born because others condemned us as heretics) have (and still can, I believe) fall victim to narrow, parochial, conventional and excusatory thinking. In this congregation today, we blessedly have theists and humanists (of varying shades)…we have atheists and agnostics…mystics, pagans and naturalists…Buddhists and Christians (and people treasuring their Jewish roots) and numerous other theological and spiritual allegiances (and perspectives) we must honor and embrace. Unitarian Universalism is a welcoming and open place where we cherish both the spiritual diversity we have and the fertile conversations and cross-pollinations that

naturally arise out of that diversity. Here at UCN (and in the movement as a whole) we must never forget that our greatest strength is that WE ARE A BIG SPIRITUAL TENT…with room for all kinds of healthy spiritual and theological expression and dialogue. There will be no "blasphemy" trials here for "heretical" or "unacceptable" thinking.

And secondly, Abner Kneeland reminds us of **THE ETERNALLY EVOLVING AND FLUID NATURE of our uniquely-open liberal faith**.

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]

OVER ITS 500+ YEAR HISTORY, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM HAS ALWAYS BEEN (AND MUST REMAIN) A LIVING, BREATHING, EVOLVING

FAITH EMBRACING NEW THOUGHT AND FRESH PERSPECTIVES

Just as Abner Kneeland's thinking constantly changed -- theologically spiritually and ethically -- over his lifetime, so must we evolve -- both as individuals and as a faith tradition.

To that end -- as we have already announced [next Sunday, March 10 at 11:15] -- following an abbreviated coffee hour -- there will be an opportunity for those who are interested to gather back here in the sanctuary to discuss the new (rather significant) changes currently being proposed to our basic UU by-law statement of "purposes" and "values." This new "Second Article" to the UUA bylaws would

officially replace our current (and much beloved) statement of UU “principles” and “sources” Julie Konig and I will guide our discussion of this proposed new articulation (which is much more of a ***“covenantal action”*** statement for us than just an articulation of ***“UU beliefs”*** found in the “principles” and “sources”) which will be used (by Unitarian Universalists going forward) to frame in, understand and animate our faith tradition.

[PHOTO AND CAPTION OF REV. ABNER KNEELAND GOES BACK UP ON SCREEN]



Rev. Abner Kneeland

1777-1844

But back to Abner Kneeland for a moment, if I might, before I close. While his thinking seemed downright blasphemous -- even to the liberal and progressive Unitarians and Universalists of the 1830's -- today almost all of his free thinking and humanistic post-Christian perspectives are within the UU mainstream. Indeed Rev. Kneeland pointed the way (almost 3 generations before our movement was really

ready for the transition) toward the more rational, epistemologically open and humanistic faith we have largely become.

So to be a Unitarian Universalist today – I will assert -- is to be genuinely <u>open to</u> (and <u>excited by</u>) the idea that as human life on this planet EVOLVES (and becomes more challenging and complex in so many interconnected ways) our religion must SIMILARLY EVOLVE with new understandings and fresh approaches to our spiritual, ethical, and social lives.

And I take it on faith that over the next century (and beyond) Unitarian Universalism will undergo EVEN MORE spiritual and intellectual evolution (some of it perhaps radical) some of

which we (standing here today) will be scarcely able to predict. The "good news here is that the leaders of our denomination fully and blessedly understands this need to keep our liberal faith moving, changing and growing.

And the 200-year-old story of Abner Kneeland reminds us that, in the end, we have **little to fear from the evolution of faith**. His turbulent and passionate life reminds us that while change (and new thinking) is never comfortable, it is absolutely necessary if we are – as a religion -- to maintain relevancy, dynamism and health. So hold onto your hats, dear friends, the story of Unitarian Universalism is **a moving-living-breathing work in progress**, and

we must trust that the unfolding future will take us to fresh and exciting spiritual places that will be, transformative, healing, useful and good. Thank you, Abner, for showing us the way!

AMEN.