

MINNS LECTURE  
by  
The Rev. Earl K. Holt III  
Delivered in King's Chapel  
June 28, 2003

Before I begin, I would like mention one of my current pet peeves, which is with people who begin their lectures by saying, "Before I begin." It seems to me that once you've begun, you've begun. After the first word is said, it's too late for before: "Before" is over.

That said, let me begin again by formally welcoming all of you here this evening both personally and on behalf of the Wardens and Vestry, which is the governing body of King's Chapel, and the congregation as a whole. I welcome you also on behalf of the Minns Committee, which is a joint committee of King's Chapel and the First and Second Church of Boston, on which the ministers of the two churches serve *ex officio*. The Minns Lectures were established in the will of Miss Susan Minns, a member of King's Chapel and oldest alumna of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at the time of her death in 1938, in honor and memory of her brother, Thomas Minns, a leading citizen of Boston, and a direct descendant of John Wilson, the first Minister of the First Church of Boston, who like all the early ministers of that church is buried just a few feet from where you are now sitting, in Boston's oldest cemetery which is today known as the King's Chapel Burying Ground, though it still as it always has belongs to the city and not to the church.

The first Minns Lectures were delivered in 1942 and since then a series of four to six lectures on religion or religious subjects has been given annually by a Unitarian (later Unitarian Universalist) minister in good standing, according to the wishes of Susan Minns. The Committee has designated the three addresses by the current Ministers of our three historic downtown churches during this year's General Assembly as "special" lectures, which means primarily that we are not being paid for them. How special they are otherwise remains to be seen.

And now, with that introduction having already begun, let me begin.

Two births and two beginnings. Two buildings, both on this spot. Two traditions, Anglican and Unitarian. Two Prayerbooks, similar and related but theologically distinct. 317 years. A lecture at least could be devoted to each of these twins -- births and beginnings, buildings, traditions, prayerbooks, and at least a dozen more to recounting the bare highlights of more than three centuries of the Colonial and then the American history of this place.

Indeed, in 1989 four Minns Lectures -- two each by the Rev. Carl Scovel, then Minister and now Minister Emeritus of King's Chapel, and by the late Charles C. Forman, the beloved Affiliate Minister here for a quarter century -- were devoted to but one chapter, though a singularly important chapter, of that history: the transition of King's Chapel

from its Anglican origins to Unitarianism, primarily during the long ministry of James Freeman, who is memorialized by the oldest of the four busts in the chancel here at the front of the church. Freeman served for well over a half a century, from 1783 until his death late in 1835, a date that corresponds with the end of the thirty-two year period of what we are used to calling "The Unitarian Controversy" but which our Congregationalist cousins refer to as "The Unitarian Departure".

By whatever name, that period marks the gradual division among the constituency and congregations of the original Puritan parishes of New England, and particularly in the neighborhood of Boston, into orthodox and liberal wings, the latter of which gradually came to be called Unitarian, though that doctrinal name was a misnomer, a subject which I will be addressing here in tomorrow morning's sermon.

It need not overly concern us here, because King's Chapel's departure from its own origins is a separate and earlier story, though what they share in common is the influence of the emergent ideas stemming from the Enlightenment, which were the root and source of both. These ideas, concerning individualism, human rights, self-government and self-empowerment were impinging on both the political and the religious thought of 18th century America and would result in both the American Revolution and America's political independence and also the reordering of the religious establishment in New England. The events at King's Chapel in the years immediately after the Revolution were directly connected to the changes which were soon to follow in most of the leading churches in Boston as well as many of towns surrounding it, through the influence of James Freeman and his two immediate successors -- Francis Greenwood and Ephraim Peabody, who are also honored here with busts in and near the Chancel. All three were in collegial fellowship not with the colleagues of our Episcopal past but with those of our Unitarian future, and all three are included in the roster of the association of Boston ministers beside names familiar to any who know our history, which had its origins here: the Gannetts, father and son, and the Henry Wares, Senior and Junior, both Frothinghams, Pierce, Pierpont and others, including of course the Rev. William Ellery Channing. Channing's 1819 sermon, entitled "Unitarian Christianity" is recognized as the defining event in the early history of our movement, as it should be. It is less well-remembered that it was James Freeman who literally set the stage for Channing's delivery of his most famous utterance, through his own preaching and other activity over a period of years prior to that event, in the distant city which gave it its more familiar name, the Baltimore Sermon.

The short history of King's Chapel, as most Unitarians know it, is summarized on the plaque to the right of the front door on the outside of the building, which you may have noticed as you entered this evening, which reads: "King's Chapel, Founded 1686. It's first building was the first Church of England in Boston. The cornerstone of the present building was laid August 11, 1749. After the Revolution it became the first Unitarian church in the United States." Thus, as I said at the outset, two births and two buildings.

King's Chapel was founded in 1686, 317 years ago this month. The Rev. Robert Ratcliff, the first Anglican clergyman formally commissioned to conduct worship on New

England soil according to the usage of the Book of Common Prayer, landed here in May of that year, and a month after his arrival the church was organized, on June 15, 1686, though as the church's major historian, Henry Wilder Foote, liked to point out, the birthday could as appropriately be marked on May 20 of that year, when the first religious services were held, "or July 4, when the organization was completed, by strange coincidence anticipating the birthday of America; or the 2nd of August, which [Dr. Foote said he thought of] as the true foundation day of the church, the day when the first celebration of the Lord's Supper was held, according to the reverent usage which was preparing a home for itself here among the Puritan community."<sup>1</sup>

Henry Wilder Foote was Minister of King's Chapel from 1861 to 1889 and the fourth and last represented here with a bust, obscured from your view as is that of Dr. Greenwood, behind this pulpit. During his long and active ministry, Foote somehow found the time to research and write the first two volumes of a work entitled, "The Annals of King's Chapel", a detailed, fascinating and comprehensive history of the church's first two centuries, running with notes and appendices to almost 1200 pages and the rich source for much that has been written and preached about our history subsequently.

This year marks the 317th anniversary of the church's first birth, its original founding in 1686 as an Anglican church, that is as a congregation of the established Church of England. The Commonwealth was then of course the Massachusetts Bay Colony, part of the British Empire. Boston and the surrounding towns were settled by Puritans who came here from England for one primary reason: to escape from the influence and especially the worship of the Church of England, which they deemed corrupt. Not surprisingly, they looked upon the establishment of the King's Chapel -- of an Anglican church in a Puritan city -- as an affront, which it was perhaps intended to be. A more benign interpretation would be that the British soldiers and colonial officials who resided in Boston ought to be provided with a place to worship according to their own familiar customs and practice, but the Puritan's understanding of freedom of religion did not extend that far. In fact it didn't extend very far at all. Tolerance was not their strong suit. It has been observed that the Puritans came to New England to worship as they chose -- and to deny that privilege to everyone else. In its origins King's Chapel existed in uneasy relationship to most of the surrounding citizenry.

Uneasy is an actually an understatement. So hostile were the citizens of Boston that none could be found who were willing to sell land for the building of an Anglican Church, which is how it came to be that the first King's Chapel was built on this spot at the edge of Boston's earliest burying-ground, public land appropriated for this purpose by the despised Colonial Governor, Sir Edmund Andros. And when the cornerstone was laid the townsmen gathered to interrupt the ceremony as they would later harass the builders in their labors, among other things throwing fish to indicate their displeasure. That small wooden building, with a spire, stood on the land occupying approximately the back half of this present building; it was first occupied for worship on June 30, 1669 and

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon at King's Chapel, preached December 5, 1886

with modest additions continued in regular use until and even after construction was begun on the present building in 1749.

One of the most charming stories about the construction of this second building of King's Chapel is that it was actually built around the first, and the congregation continued to worship during at least the first several of the five full years it took to complete this first large granite building in the New World. When the time came, the old building was taken down and thrown out the windows of the new. Thus, the worship of King's Chapel has been continuous on this location, with but one significant lapse, from 1688 to the present day.

Furthermore, this present pulpit is older than the building itself. It was built for use in the earlier church in 1717, and located just a few feet from where it now stands, unchanged except for the addition of the sounding board above the high pulpit. The pulpit consists of three parts or levels -- the wine-glass preaching pulpit above, the reading desk from which the service and lessons are read, and below a spot where in earlier days a clerk or music director stood to lead the congregation in the chants and hymns which were and are a feature of our worship, a role now taken by the Organist and choir in the gallery at the rear. It is estimated that over 30,000 sermons have been preached from this pulpit, which is claimed to be the oldest in America in continuous use in the same location.

The building was designed, with a tall, beautiful spire to contrast with the rather plain and austere exterior of the building itself, by Peter Harrison of Newport, Rhode Island, sometimes referred to as America's first architect. The spire was never built, and other economies in its construction were required, due to an insufficiency of funds, a continuing issue in the history of this as of many other churches.

But leap forward a century or so and the scene was changed. On March 17, 1776, the British were evacuated from Boston under threat of arms by the colonial army led by General George Washington, a date we celebrate in Boston now as a public holiday called Evacuation Day. A large minority, but still it was a minority of the families of King's Chapel, including its Minister, Henry Caner, were Tories, that is Loyalists to King and Crown, and were forced to leave Boston at that time, along with the British troops, some of them returning home to England, many more moving to Nova Scotia. The Rev. Dr. Caner was 77 years old and had served as Minister for 29 eventful years which included the erection of this present building. This building is part of his legacy, for without his efforts it might not have been built. To some extent the same might be said of many of the Loyalist parishioners, leading citizens of Boston, who were forced to leave their homes and most of their possessions behind and seek sanctuary (figuratively and literally) elsewhere.

Like them, the Rev. Dr. Caner had given a good part of his life to the service of this city and to this church. He left in our parish records what seems to us in hindsight an amusing note, but which contains a reminder of what might well have occurred, had history taken a different course than it did. He wrote at that time, "An unnatural

Rebellion of the Colonies against his Majesties [sic] Government obliged the Loyal Part of his subjects to evacuate their Dwellings and Substance, and to take refuge in Halifax, London, and elsewhere; By which means the public worship at King's Chapel became suspended, and is likely to remain so, till it shall please God in the Course of his Providence to change the hearts of the Rebels, or give Success to his Majesties arms for suppressing the rebellion."

The worship of King's Chapel and in this place was suspended for a time, but when it recommenced it was under far different circumstances than Caner anticipated or could have imagined. After the Revolution King's Chapel had its second birth, and even took at this time a new name, being re-christened the Stone Chapel, to remove associations with the monarchy. And so it was called for many years, before the original name was re-adopted, with a new understanding and interpretation as we shall see, but the point to be noted is that the old name was eventually retained. Here is one of many symbols of what has been rather amazingly consistent in the history of this place: a deep respect for tradition and regard for the past, for what has been, that it not be forgotten or lost in the rush of passing events, which are sometimes thoughtlessly labeled progress. It is a characteristic dramatically at odds with the prevailing ethos of America with its bias toward change and whatever seems different or new, a conservative and conserving instinct and a concern that the good of times past not to be lost to future generations. As the famous President of Harvard University, Charles William Eliot, who grew up in this church, said in an Address delivered here at the time of our 200th anniversary in 1886, "The world could not spare its adventurers and pioneers; but for one pioneer it needs a thousand conservers, in order that all the good the past has won or the present wins may be held fast and safely transmitted....This church is a conserver."

This characteristic is manifested in a variety of ways, most concretely and visibly in this sanctuary itself, which has been maintained essentially unaltered for two and a half centuries. With the exception of the memorials to ministers, benefactors and other luminaries which were added mainly in the 18th and 19th centuries, and a few other embellishments, everything here stands exactly as it did when Morning Prayer was first celebrated here in 1754, or soon thereafter, most notably the organ, put in place shortly thereafter. So it is in that in this familiar, unchanging setting the secret prayers of worshippers over many generations, who sat here as we do now in the serene beauty of this space and knelt for Communion here, commingle with our own in our present attendance at worship, and by God's grace and our faithfulness will be similarly conserved for the future, to generations yet unborn.

The same spirit is manifested also in the Prayerbook -- *The Book of Common Prayer According to the Use in King's Chapel* -- the ninth edition of which the congregation approved for use in 1986. The fact is that in the revisions the Prayerbook has undergone over the past two centuries much more has been retained from the past than has been altered or removed. It contains even today some of the oldest prayers in the English language, collects which have been read here continuously in the worship of King's Chapel since its founding, some even preceding those in the Anglican Book of

Common Prayer of 1662, which was the source from which our present book was first amended in 1785.

So it is rather remarkable, and somewhat ironic, that this conserving and conservative church should be credited as the first in the new nation to formally embrace the emergent liberal Christian theology of the 18th century which eventually took the name Unitarian. And in fact no one here entirely planned or intended for it to happen. Rather, it unfolded through a series of events guided as if by destiny, one following another as the church was born anew after the Revolutionary War.

Not long after Evacuation Day in 1776 this building was opened again for regular Sunday worship, but it was for the use of the congregation of the Old South Church, whose nearby building had been desecrated by use as a riding stable for the British troops. This arrangement continued for five years before their own meeting house was finally restored. King's Chapel then found itself in an anomalous position. They had no minister and only the tiny semblance of a congregation. A member of King's Chapel in 1782 recalled later that no more than a dozen families belonged to the church at that time. And as an Anglican congregation they required a Bishop to Ordain their Minister, but in the flush of new-found independence they were estranged from their erstwhile Bishop in London.

To make a very long story short, they called a recent graduate of the Divinity School at Harvard named James Freeman to serve not as Minister, since he was not Ordained, but as Lay Reader, for an initial trial period of six months. His function was to lead the congregation in Morning Prayer and to read a published sermon to them, although he was given liberty to write and preach his own sermons, which Mr. Freeman mainly did. He could not be Ordained as things stood, and was thus prohibited from performing baptisms or weddings and most critically from serving Communion. When the six months had passed he was formally named pastor of the church, at the age of twenty-four, beginning a ministry which would last for 53 years.

In accepting his original appointment, Mr. Freeman stipulated only one condition, the liberty to omit the reading of the Athanasian Creed. This was granted without difficulty, since that version of the Creed was not popular even among the orthodox. At first, this omission was sufficient, but before long the new minister began to be troubled by other elements of the liturgy, in particular those referencing or implying belief in the doctrine of the Trinity.

This led to a great inward trial of conscience for the young pastor. In time he came to feel he had no choice but to resign his post. According to his admirer, associate and later successor in this pulpit, Francis Greenwood, he would come into the homes of parishioners who were among his closest friends, and say, "I must leave you. Much as I love you, I must leave you. I cannot conscientiously perform the service of this church any longer, as it now stands."

In the end friendship and affection trumped theology, with unforeseen but momentous consequences that would ultimately extend far beyond the walls of this church.

The proposal was made that Mr. Freeman declare openly his doctrinal concerns and difficulties in a series of sermons, to set his case before his people, and then let them judge whether they were such as should require a separation between the congregation and its minister. From this pulpit he did so, fully expecting that though some might agree with him, he could hardly hope for general approval. He nonetheless felt relief in the opportunity to speak his mind and heart, fully and freely, relieved in conscience, and he was heard with patience and attention; but even as he did so he prepared himself to resign his position. However, as it turned out the greater number of his hearers proved responsive to his arguments and voted instead to alter their liturgy and retain their pastor, the first vote coming on the 20th of February, 1785, a date which may be considered at least as important in the history of King's Chapel as the date of its original founding.

In what have become the famous words of the Rev. Greenwood: "Thus did Mr. Freeman, by following the dictates of his reason and conscience, become the first preacher in this country of what he held to be a purified Christian faith; and thus through the means of his mental integrity and powers of exposition, did the First Episcopal Church in New England, become the First Unitarian Church in the New World."

Mr. Greenwood also went on to say: "I mention this not as a matter of boasting, but as an historical fact. He, our departed father, never boasted of it, or indeed of anything which he ever did or helped to do; and at that time the change in doctrine and service which was effected, was [certainly not] regarded by pastor or people as a subject of triumph, but of serious and arduous duty. No motive of future fame or reputation could have been before them; but only a sense of the great opposition and odium which would press upon them from without, together with a deep resolve to bear up against it."

The unforeseen consequences of revising its Prayerbook and altering its liturgy for the congregation of King's Chapel were several and significant. It meant their exclusion from the newly formed American Episcopal church, and foreclosed any possibility of Episcopal Ordination for their minister. They then took the radical step of claiming authority as a congregation to independently Ordain James Freeman, according to a form which has been repeated in the Installation of every subsequent Minister in this place to the present day. This controversial action -- which the church defended by appeal to scripture, the practices of the early church and the republican principles of the new nation, as well as Declaration of Rights contained in the new Massachusetts constitution, drafted by John Adams-- was challenged legally and ecclesiastically, but the ordination proceeded despite the protests, and in the end they prevailed.

In this sequence of events, the congregation of King's Chapel without fully intending to, established three principles which may be seen as essential to the practices of a free church, and became central in the developing American Unitarian tradition:

First, freedom of the pulpit, illustrated in their request to Mr. Freeman to set forth in his preaching the deep convictions of his mind, heart and conscience, even though they gave offense to many in the congregation.

Second, the independent authority of the church, to call and ordain its own ministerial leadership.

The third development came a few years later. Freeman had originally proposed the removal of the Creed altogether from Morning Prayer in 1785. While accepting many of his revisions the congregation at that time rejected this proposal, but did make the change in a further revision of its Prayerbook in 1811, symbolizing the primacy of individual freedom of belief, or as it may be called the “freedom of the pew”, the principle of the free conscience as central to religious faith.

These are the key principles of the free church tradition, essential to the development of American Unitarianism, and in its conservative and conserving role, these are the principles that have been preserved and maintained in this place ever since.

But these are not the only things that have been conserved here. It may be noted that though the Creed was removed from the liturgy, it remains on the wall. “Time goes not backward or tarries with yesterday,” as the sometime Bostonian Kahlil Gibran wrote in his famous essay “On Children.” We are not what we were. But the past lives on in us, and it is remembered here. True progress, in religion as in all things, consists of both a radical and a conservative dimension. Progress consists not just of change -- which may go backwards, forwards or sideways -- but of continuity and change together. It consists as President Eliot noted of innovation combined with preservation of what is worthy to be preserved. His contemporary and cousin, the Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot of St. Louis once observed that, “It is much easier to go away from the Christian religion than to improve upon it.” And as in the twentieth century Unitarianism has steadily and especially subsequent to merger with the Universalists in 1961 dramatically gone away from its Christian origin and biblical heritage, King’s Chapel has maintained continuity with this deep tap root of our common faith.

For many years the unique character of King’s Chapel has been summarized in a kind of slogan: Anglican in liturgy, Unitarian in theology and congregational in polity. Since the meaning of Unitarian and now Unitarian Universalist has come increasingly to be understood as non-Christian or even anti-Christian, it has become necessary for clarity to modify that slogan to specify “Unitarian Christian” in theology. But it is not that King’s Chapel has changed, only the character of the Association of which we remain a part.

In 1920 King’s Chapel adopted for the first time in its history an explicit Covenant, known as the Ames Covenant: “In the love of truth and in the spirit of Jesus Christ, we unite for the worship of God and the service of Man.” I grew up with those words, in the more or less mainstream Unitarian church in Concord, New Hampshire, of my youth. In fact in 1920 the Ames Covenant was common to more than a hundred congregations in



the American Unitarian Association. It is retained today in a few of the churches of the UUA, but only a few.

King's Chapel is the Mother Church of American Unitarianism. We know who we are, and we remember what we were. This is a church and place beloved by many for many different reasons, and this has been true for many, many generations. Pilgrims, especially Unitarian Universalist pilgrims, come here throughout the year. Most of them come because of what we have been, but here a few come in touch with an understanding of what we are. They see more than a historic building or a serenely beautiful sanctuary; they perceive the character of this church, a church empowered by a strong sense of heritage and tradition, a tradition which does not confine but anchors its ongoing life of worship and service, as a free and independent church gathered "in the love of truth and in the spirit of Jesus Christ". To continue the maternal or parental image, in a paraphrase of the words of Kahlil Gibran: This place is a bow from which its children as living arrows go forth. The Archer bends us with his might, that His arrows may go swift and far. We are glad in the knowledge that even as He loves the arrows that fly, so He loves the bow that is stable.

The Rev. Henry Wilder Foote II, son of the Minister who wrote the definitive history of King's Chapel's first two centuries, and the uncle of Helen Fernald, a present member who is among the most faithful in her attendance at worship here, concluded a talk from this desk more than a half-century ago with the following observations, which in this place that so much symbolizes the continuities of its and our heritage, the connections of generation after generation of the faithful who have gathered here, it seems to me most appropriate to conclude with these words of Dr. Foote:

"Neither this building nor its wooden predecessor was ever formally consecrated according to the Anglican ritual, because that rite must be performed by a bishop, and no bishop of the Church of England visited this shores in the colonial period. But none of us who love this noble building and its historic past doubt that its consecration has come from a higher and more authoritative source, -- the devoted lives of successive generations of the wise and good, whether persons distinguished in their day or the unremembered holy and humble [women and] men of heart, who have here uplifted their hearts and minds in worship and thanksgiving.

"And curiously enough, neither the present building nor its predecessor appears ever to have been known by the name of a saint or of some aspect of the Divine Being, as was universally the case in England, and as the Chapel's two pre-Revolutionary daughter-churches in Boston were called Christ Church and Trinity Church. This church, and the earlier building, were always called, 'The King's Chapel', when a king was on the English throne, or 'The Queen's Chapel' during the reign of Queen Anne, or 'The Stone Chapel' for a time after the Revolution. I have no explanation of this fact which has puzzled me, but we accept the traditional name not only because of its historic

significance but because for us, as for Mrs. Dorr in the sonnet about the Chapel which she wrote more than 75 years ago, 'In the King's Chapel reigns the King of Kings'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> from an Address in King's Chapel, November 14, 1949, published in "The Proceedings of the Unitarian Historical Society", Volume VIII, Part I, 1950