

Rev. Dr. Stephan Papa, May 28, 2017

Message: "The Last Man Jailed for Blasphemy"

Sometimes when I consider the problems of our world, the injustice, poverty, and violence, I feel powerless. Sometimes we act powerless when we are not. We possess unparalleled freedom--for which we ought to be grateful. But even more--we ought to use it to make more just, equitable, and safe, societies and world. We can. We have the gift of religious freedom from those who have fought for it. For example, leaders in the United States such as Abner Kneeland, the Universalist minister, who in 1838 became "The Last Man Jailed for Blasphemy" in that land of liberty. He was once famous, infamous, rather, but he has been lost to history; most people including Unitarian Universalists don't know about him and should. So let me share a little of his story in the hope we might be inspired to use his gift of freedom.

Abner was born in 1774 in Gardner, MA. He was raised as a Baptist, and became a lay preacher, but facing heresy charges he left that faith and became a Universalist. He was ordained to our ministry in 1805. After serving several Universalist congregations, in 1825, he accepted the call to the Prince Street Universalist Society in New York City. It was there he became involved with the rationalist, egalitarian, Freethought Movement.

As he became more liberal in his theology and social ethics, he got into trouble with his church and the Universalists Association. He was voted out of both, the latter in 1829. Abner then became the leader of the "Moral Philantropists," a Freethought Society he began in Boston.

In *These Live Tomorrow* Clinton Lee Scott wrote that: "Abner Kneeland was the most controversial character ever ordained to the Universalist ministry. He anticipated by a century opinions now held without opposition, or even curiosity, in Unitarian and Universalist churches. He would not be considered a heretic today in our association, but in his own day, despite the already liberal nature of the Universalist movement, he was ostracized and evicted from ministerial fellowship."

Abner was audacious; he also was an idealist, a rationalist, and an activist. Abner wrote many hymns several of which were in the first Universalist hymnbook of 1808 which he helped edit. However, his words, more polemic than poetic, were rather confrontational. For example, Abner penned one called "A View of Christendom" which went like this: "As ancient bigots disagree, / The Stoic and the Pharisee, / So is the modern, Christian world / In superstitious error hurl'd. / God, when shall all these errors cease, / And Christians learn to live in peace...."

Perhaps you can see why the Universalists disowned him. He was too radical for the Universalists and the Unitarians of his time. Following his dismissal he wrote an *Appeal* to the Universalists pointing out how lamentable it was that “the persecuted for conscience’s sake have almost invariably in their turn become persecutors; not of those who persecuted them, but of those who attempt to go one inch further than they had marked out the way....”

Abner wanted to go further; he wanted to reform society, to go way beyond the social conventions of his time, to make it more just; he did not see the religions of his time trying to do that. Rebuffed, in anger, frustration and disappointment, he rejected them even the religious liberals. In their place he started new progressive communities.

At his *Free Enquirers Society* in Boston he spoke to over 2000 people at their gatherings on Sunday mornings at The Federal Street Theater, and to as many at his Wednesday evening lectures. But not one of the clergy, including Unitarian or Universalist, not one of the proper people of Boston would talk to him; even his family was shunned when walking in the street. But, he was undaunted and all the while becoming more outspoken and radical in his religious and political views.

To get the word of justice out he started his own newspaper, *The Boston Investigator* in 1831, which was intended to improve the condition of [hu]man[ity]....to “advocate a general system of education as a public good....[to] contend for the repeal, or modification of all unequal and oppressive laws, the abolition of slavery, the abolishment of imprisonment for debt....[to] espouse the cause of the laboring and producing classes; and last, though not least, [to] advocate the rights of woman.”

The newspaper’s motto was “...Hear all sides--then decide.” It was this publication that got Kneeland into trouble because some people didn’t want to “hear all sides.” Especially not his side; it was too threatening. What exactly was he saying? There was always much controversy and confusion about him.

For example, it was said that one Sunday as Abner spoke from the pulpit of his Universalist church he opened the Bible and read from the Book of Leviticus these words, “Suffer not a woman during her time of the month to be near you, for she is unclean!” He paused, which aroused the attention of his congregation. Then, as they watched aghast, he said, “That’s not true! Women are not unclean anytime. They say this is a ‘Good Book’. I don’t think it is a very ‘good book’ in its attitudes toward

women!" After saying this he raised the Bible and threw it from the pulpit down the center aisle where it hit the back doors and fell to the floor. Abner, it was said, continued with the service, but someone apparently sneaked out the back door, went to get the sheriff and Abner was arrested, tried, and became "The Last Man Jailed for Blasphemy" in the United States.

Well, it's a good story, and it's close to true. That passage is there in Leviticus 15:19-30, and again in 18:19. He did throw the Bible after making those comments, but it was not in a Universalist Church; he had been defrocked by that time; it was in his own *Free Enquirers Society* meeting at the Federal Street Theater in Boston. And, indeed, he was arrested.

The trials show that it was not for this that he was found guilty of blasphemy, but for a statement he printed in the *Investigator* in 1833, in which he set forth why he no longer considered himself a Universalist. He wrote, "Universalists believe in a god which I do not; but believe that their god, with all his moral attributes, (aside from nature itself,) is nothing more than a...[figment] of their own imagination." Though he said many more controversial things it was this passage that lead to his imprisonment.

They charged him with blasphemy for denying the existence of God.

He went through five trials. After his attorney died during the second, Abner defended himself in the following proceedings. He argued with the court that his statement “Universalists believe in a god which I do not;” meant only that he disagreed with the Universalist conception of God. He pointed out that pretty much everyone else in the courtroom at that time did too. When that argument didn’t work he tried arguing theology with the court asserting that he was not an atheist as they claimed, but a pantheist as witnessed in his “Philosophical Creed” where he said God and Nature were synonymous. He concluded, “...I did not intend to deny, neither does it deny, the existence of God in a general sense of the word; and if I did, I did no more than what I have, and every one has, a constitutional right to do.”

However, the juries and justices didn’t agree; he was repeatedly found guilty. While he was trying to argue grammar and theology with the court, they were really more concerned with his political views. He was a radical, a prophet. As noted he believed in equal rights for women and equal rights for African-Americans. He believed in inter-racial marriage. He wrote, if they love each other...why not? Abner suggested women should keep their maiden names after marriage and maintain their own

bank account and property. He advocated in his newspaper for the right to birth control in the 1820's. He wrote of the right to divorce. He proclaimed that a woman shouldn't have to suffer all of her life for a decision made when she was young and unwise of the ways of men and the world. He was president of *The Family Guardian Plan* which called for all children to be clothed, fed, and educated at government expense. He was a radical, a prophet, way ahead of his time--and of ours--and I wish we would catch up!

When you read the transcripts of the trials you can see that he was found guilty not for his theology, but his politics. For example, the prosecuting attorney in the first trial said, "We can't allow Mr. Kneeland to continue with what he is saying or women and blacks will be wanting equal rights, marriages will be dissolved, `prostitution will be made easy and safe,...and the foundations of society broken up,...[as private] property [is]...invaded and made common....'"

The prosecutor in Abner's Massachusetts Supreme Court hearing said it was "not for an offense against God that he is this day called to an earthly bar. It is because by his conduct he has committed high treason against the vital interest of society."

Indeed, Abner was found guilty of trying to mix his religion and his

politics, of trying to live his faith in the radical ethics of Jesus, in the human potential, to live the theology of equality and rationality he affirmed.

For this he served 60 days in a Boston jail in the summer of 1838. William Ellery Channing, who founded the American Unitarian Association, put together a petition to the Governor that requested Kneeland's unconditional pardon. One hundred and sixty-eight people signed the petition; most of them considered today among the great of the time. However, the conservative clergy circulated a counter-petition and obtained 230 names.

Through his jail cell window that summer Abner Kneeland watched as the Battle of Bunker hill was commemorated with the installation of its now famous monument. As he sat there in his cell he wrote: "...but what was [this fighting] all for? LIBERTY! And what am I here for? For the honest exercise of that very Liberty for which our fathers fought and bled!!!"

Abner Kneeland became *The Last Man Jailed for Blasphemy* because he made it so embarrassing for the "powers that be," that though the blasphemy law is still on the books in Massachusetts, and in several other states, the authorities have never charged, tried, sentenced, and incarcerated another person for blasphemy again.

However, after Abner was released from jail he was a broken man; he had about lost his faith. He decided to leave the so called “civilized” world for the West. He went out to the wilds of Iowa and started a small utopian community he named *Salubria*. He died a few years later in 1844; his experimental community did not continue long after his death.

I have been to the site; there are only a few grave stones left on the hillside, but down below it I saw the abandoned quarries of the “Ideal Sand” and the “Ready Mix [Cement] Company.” His ideals, the foundation for our effort, are still with us, as are the opportunities, and responsibilities.

Religion and politics do mix. The only question is whether they do so openly and honestly, or narrowly, and divisively. Let us mix our religion and ethics so that our religion is more than words, more than just saving ourselves. Rather let it lead us to work for a more just and peaceful world. Abner Kneeland was way ahead of his time. His sacrifice helped establish the separation of church and state, giving us the freedom we have today in the US of A and here. Let’s use it to witness to the unity of creation and its goodness, the value of diversity, rationality, and the human potential for good. Let Abner be “The Last Man Jailed.” Let us be free and faithful to this vision. Amen.