

MORE THAN THE AIR WE BREATHE

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This morning we are taking a look at Joseph Priestley, known around the world for his scientific achievements. The one that comes to mind most universally is his discovery or, at least, his isolation, of the element oxygen. In truth he did some amazing work in many areas, looking at much more than the air we breathe, at electricity, biology, astronomy, and many other areas of scientific and intellectual inquiry.

But this morning we are going to look at Joseph Priestley, the Unitarian minister.

Yet in fact, we can't really separate Joseph Priestley, the theologian and minister, and Joseph Priestley, the scientist.

David Williams, Professor of Astronomy at the University College of London and lecturer about Priestley, remembers growing up learning at school about this man, one of the world's great scientists, and then returning home to the Unitarian manse of his parents where there hung in a place of honor a portrait of Priestley as a young man, surrounded by books. Williams mused:

“As a boy, the fact that Priestley's name came up in two apparently unrelated contexts impressed me, and I began to be dimly aware that liberal views in religion might go hand in hand with a particular attitude to everything: a questioning of all received wisdom and a dissent from unsupported authority in any sphere of activity... to every aspect of human life.” (Williams, p.1) Joseph Priestley was indeed a questioner of “received wisdom” and never hesitated from dissenting from “unsupported authority” whether scientific, political or theological.

While this questioning spirit got a lot of results and acclaim in the scientific world, it also brought Joseph Priestley loads of trouble in the worlds of politics and religion. But, for this child of the Enlightenment, this questioning attitude made his world seem like a gracious playground for investigation and wondering at every level. Throughout his writings you can see the pleasure he took in unraveling the mysteries around him. And for him, there was absolutely no division or conflict between science and religion. I suspect that should he join this congregation today he would be first in line to sign up to participate in our Science and Religion group, and would come with bells on tomorrow morning to hear Helen Caldicott speak – and would be full of questions for her! And, I suspect he would be working like crazy to figure out global warming and how to deal with it. Joseph Priestley was first and foremost a minister, but yet understood science as a “theologian's pastime.” (Bumbaugh, 90)

Joseph Priestley was born in England into what some might label as interesting times, when people were no longer hanged for religious views which differed from those in power (although the last hanging had been in Scotland only 26 years earlier). However, it was a period in which those who did not subscribe to the tenets of the Church of England, even though not hanged, were barred from public office and the privilege of using the word “church” for their places of worship. And it was also a time of many free thinkers, many of whom questioned the Trinity and other doctrines of the church and began to look to larger human issues of reason and morality and conscience.

It was a rich time, it was a hard time, and sometimes it was a scary time. It was into all this that Joseph Priestley was born in 1733, near Leeds. His father was a “dresser” and a “finisher of cloth.” Many in his family worked in the textile industry, the industry which, we will remember, helped to trigger the industrial revolution. One biographer noted that since this work was carried out in those days in a home setting “those textile workers developed independence - and a taste for liberty.” (Williams, section 2). Such a taste certainly took hold early for Joseph.

This was further fed when he went to live with his aunt after the death of his mother. Aunt Sarah welcomed many dissenting ministers, meaning dissenting from the established orthodoxy of the Church of England, into the conversations of her parlor. Priestley reflected as a young man that “those who were the most obnoxious on account of their heresy were almost as welcome to her as if she thought them good and honest men.” (Williams, section 2). Joseph learned to challenge and be challenged at an early age. The art of conversation - about politics and theology and everything else - was the centerpiece of much of his everyday life. This is an art I fear is diminishing in our world, with fewer family dinners, overscheduled activities, computers and television. (I am grateful that some of our Adult Programs and religious education groups and other activities here help keep alive that art.)

At 19, he attended the new Daventry Academy – a nonconforming school where, unlike the ancient Oxford and Cambridge, students did not have to regularly profess belief in the tenets of the Church of England. It offered an education in which teachers would often use the method of “disputation” – of presentation of arguments on multiple sides - encouraging what we would call today “critical thinking.” He studied anatomy, astronomy, chemistry, literature and natural philosophy. He had already taught himself many languages!

After graduation he entered the ministry, where he found it hard to make a living, in part because of his liberal theological views, which rejected many church doctrines. So to help support himself he also started a school and became a tutor.

This time of teaching provided Priestley with the opportunity for many of his own scientific experiments and writing. It was also a time when he established friendships in London with lots of the great thinkers of the day like Benjamin Franklin and was recognized by them as a kindred spirit.

With a growing family and low teaching salaries, Priestley went back to the practice of ministry, this time in Leeds, where he presented himself publicly as a Unitarian, explaining: “The Messiah is a man like ourselves, a man approved by God, neither unerring nor unblemished.” (Williams, section 2). Local Methodists, aghast, responded with a hymn:

“Stretch out thy hands, thy Triune God,
The Unitarian fiend expel
And chase his doctrine back to Hell.” (Williams, section 2)

In 1780, he with his wife and four children settled in Birmingham, where he preached and wrote for the next decade. His writing continued to challenge a lot of orthodox Christianity. He also was outspoken, as were many other dissenting ministers and liberal thinkers, in support of the French Revolution. His positions angered a lot of people and some felt threatened by them.

Priestley was pronounced by some Anglicans as a heretic, and at least one of his books was officially banned and burned.

I would note, however, a response, a fairly typical response by him, to one of his most unkind critics (and they were bold and public in their hatred of this man): “Having [myself] been educated in the strictest principles of Calvinism, and having from my early years had a serious turn of mind... I [also] was very sincere and zealous in my belief of the doctrine of the trinity.... and was as much shocked on hearing of any who denied the divinity of Christ.... as any of my opponents can be now. I therefore truly feel for them, and most sincerely excuse them.” (Bowers, 22, from Priestley’s “History of Corruptions.”) A compassionate and understanding response to public condemnation!

You find this throughout his life, he was always “out there” with his opinions, always happy to engage in dialog, but always respectful of the thoughts of others even when the courtesy was not extended back to him.

Unfortunately, his rich sojourn in Birmingham did not end happily.

This is one account about Birmingham on July 14, 1791 (Bastille Day)
(from Isaac Kramnick in an essay in “Motion Toward Perfection,” p.61)

“On the 14th day of July, 1791, many dissenters in Birmingham gathered at the Hotel, Temple Row, to commemorate the French revolution. The call to the meeting urged that ‘surely no freeborn Englishman can refrain from exulting in this.... cause of Humanity! [this] cause of the people!’” The people of Birmingham, alas, were not moved. Inflamed by Anglican pulpits, as well as by free liquor, (and as we have later learned, by government officials) the mob that evening destroyed the dissenting chapel and Priestley’s house and laboratory. For days the mob destroyed houses of other known dissenters and radicals. Finally, the Home Secretary, sent royal troops to restore order. George III took note of Priestley in authorizing his Secretary of State to send troops to Birmingham. The King wrote, “I cannot but feel better pleased that Priestley is the sufferer for the doctrines he and his party have instilled, and that the people see them in their true light.”

(After these horrendous events, Joseph Priestley’s next sermon was on the theme, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”)

“Priestley fled to London and was never to return to Birmingham.... During the following months, [he] was verbally attacked in the House of Commons, burned in effigy, portrayed in caricatures, denounced in pulpits and subjected to threatening letters.” Finally, on April 17, 1794, he and his wife sailed to America, two weeks after Priestley’s 61st birthday.

Joseph and Mary Priestley eventually arrived in Philadelphia. Although he chose to settle near his sons in Northumberland, 150 miles away, he continued to spend a lot of time in the city, and helped to establish the first lasting and openly named Unitarian congregation in the United States.

In Philadelphia, his preaching was successful, attended frequently by notables such as John Adams and Benjamin Rush. He felt he was reaching many who had already rejected the more strictly orthodox and rigid faiths.

But even in this more tolerant climate Unitarians received quite a lot of opposition. One Rev. Rogers of the Second Street Baptist Church preached to his congregation: “Beware, for a Priestley has entered the land! Oh, Lamb of God! How would they pluck thee from thy throne?” (Bowers, 72-72 from Blakewell, “Some Particulars.”)

One biographer (Bowers) wrote: “The tolerance and bigotry with which the ministerial and lay members of competing denominations greeted Priestley. . . led [him and his congregation] to contest [even] the notion of toleration, which they held out as a ‘degrading idea.’ The very fact that they had to be [merely] tolerated meant that the true spirit of Christian charity and liberty were missing”

Today this remains a rich topic for religious liberals – the idea of toleration versus true welcome! Joseph Priestley set a high mark for us. I am hopeful, as there are many interfaith efforts that now exist in this country (Interfaith Alliance, Network of Spiritual Progressives, etc). But I think we have yet a long way to go.

There were many positive aspects of his ministry in Philadelphia. Among them:

- He accepted all Christians for communion – rare!
- He advocated for the place of immigrants and spoke up for the health that comes from difference, even of opinion.
- He loved a good theological debate even though he took his own views very seriously (Bower, 92-93). Priestley said to the Philadelphia congregation – “You will, I doubt not, show that there is no danger

whatever to any state from [religious] liberty, as enjoyed by Unitarians . . . by your being equally the friends of peace and good order, and by the exercise of meekness and candor towards those who differ from you.”

I hope that is in part what we cultivate right here at Cedar Lane.

Among these and many more contributions, I am personally most grateful for this sense of openness, the questioning of self as well as others, and his manner which had no sense of personal superiority or self-righteousness.

As biographer JD Bowers put it (36) “He questioned his own ideas, admitted his own errors, and searched for deeper truth his entire life. . . [U]nderlying all of his efforts, was his staunch support for free inquiry in all matters religious.”

Although roundly criticized and encountering great prejudice both from the orthodox in Pennsylvania and from even the liberal Christians of New England, he maintained an openness to all.

So why is it that this morning we lift up a person who died over 200 years ago?

Because we live in the Joseph Priestley District of the UUA, the district in which we find the places where Joseph Priestley lived and worked in America!

But, more importantly,

Because he is a forbear in our liberal religious faith, and while we remain open to the new, as he did and would want us to do, we also should remember and respect what we can learn from those who came before us, on whose shoulders, and sometimes sacrifices, we now stand.

AND

Because we live in an age of suspicion and sometimes hate, sometimes lacking generosity of spirit, sometimes lacking tolerance, and often lacking welcome. Perhaps we can learn from Joseph Priestley!

AND

Because the use of reason and debate is still a challenged value. On the hundredth anniversary of his birth, British scientist Michael Faraday said in 1833:

“Dr. Priestley made his great discoveries mainly in consequence of his having a mind which could be easily moved from what it had held to the reception of new thoughts and notions; and I will venture to say that all his discoveries followed from the facility with which he could leave a preconceived idea.” Our own age desperately needs people who are willing to change their minds!

Freedom, Reason, Tolerance and Love remain as the strands that unite us – Joseph Priestley and us, and all of us here within this community of faith. Like him, we still affirm that revelation of truth is not sealed; we still affirm that tolerance and deep respect of difference not only makes for a life of deeper quality and diminished violence and conflict, but also gives us the gift of challenging our own beliefs and assumptions, a lifelong way of being for Priestley. A way of being and a life that was, oh, so much more “than the air we breathe.”

I close with these upbeat and optimistic words of Joseph Priestley (Taken from Hayes, from Priestley)

“The more we see of the wonderful structure of the world, and of the laws of nature, the more clearly do we comprehend their admirable uses, to make all the.... creation happy; a sentiment which cannot but fill the heart with unbounded love, gratitude and joy.”

Thank you, Joseph Priestley. May it be so. May we make it so.

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