

Abner Kneeland: Convicted Blasphemer

A UU Hero presented in the first person by
The Rev. Lloyd H. Dunham

I'll bet you haven't had very many ex-convicts in your pulpit!

Well, you've got one today!

My name is Abner Kneeland.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts,

that great champion of religious freedom,

made me pay for my religious freedom –

sixty days in jail

for what they called blasphemy!

But then I see they apparently named a section of a street for me –

or one of my relatives

in downtown Boston!

I guess they had a guilty conscience.

I was the last person to be convicted of blasphemy in Massachusetts,

although that law is still on their books!

The point is, of course,

that you can never take your religious liberty for granted.

There are always those who think differently

who stand ready to deny you your freedom.

The price of freedom in my day was high,

though not as high as it was for some of our predecessors.

It may not be high right now for you –

but in other parts of the world

people are still dying for religious freedom!

May I tell you my story?

My family was among the earliest settlers in the early 1600's.

I was born on April 7, 1774

in Gardner, Massachusetts,

a small clearing in the wilderness

about fifty miles west of Boston.

Gardner is a small city now,

but it was just a clearing in the woods in 1774.

My parents already had five older children.

My father earned a living as a farmer and a carpenter.

I went to a little school in Gardner,

then to the Academy in Chesterfield, New Hampshire.

While my schooling was limited,

thanks to my father

I also learned the skills of a carpenter.

By the time I turned twenty-one

I was in charge of the school at Dummerston, Vermont.

A couple of years later I married Waitstill Armsbee.

We had four children together.¹

While I was teaching school
the Baptist Church in nearby Putney
asked me to supply their pulpit
and then called me to be their pastor.

It was fine for a while
being a Baptist preacher.
But then I got my hands on a book
by that great Universalist
Elhanan Winchester of Philadelphia.
You ought to invite him here sometime!
Great man!

He helped me see important new things
which I started preaching.
However those Baptists were not happy with my new sermons.
I found that I was headed straight for a heresy trial.

I quickly got a Universalist license to preach.
I was ordained as minister-at-large by John Murray,
the father of Universalism in America.²
Soon I moved to the Universalist Church
in Langdon, New Hampshire.
It was there that I was ordained as settled minister in 1805.
Hosea Ballou preached for that service
and received me into fellowship.

Remember him?
He was a great Universalist preacher.
He grew up near me
in Richmond, New Hampshire.
I understand he visited here several years ago.

I hadn't been in Langdon long when my first wife died.
Fortunately I soon met Lucinda.
We married and had another four children.³

I was in Langdon for six years
and gained quite a good reputation for my preaching and writing.
Believe it or not,
I convinced four neighboring orthodox preachers
to come over and join us in the Universalist ministry!
During that time I also managed to serve two years
in the New Hampshire legislature.

In 1807 I was elected clerk of the Universalist General Convention
and held office for eight years.
Hosea Ballou and I were named to a committee

¹ Atheist website article

² Papa & Hughes

³ Anonymous

to put together a Universalist hymnbook.
 That book finally had four hundred ten hymns.
 I wrote one hundred thirty-eight of them,
 Someone has said mine weren't very good.
 I notice you don't have a single one of them in your hymnal!

I really liked Langdon, New Hampshire.
 It was a fruitful and pleasant ministry –
 and I felt I made a good mark for myself in the denomination.
 But then I lost my young second wife in child-birth
 and I just had to get away from those sad memories.

I moved to the new church in Charlestown, Massachusetts.
 This church had been formed
 by folks who found John Murray
 a little out of date.
 They wanted more liberal ideas,
 like those of my mentor Hosea Ballou.
 Hosea was there to preach the sermon at my installation
 and the dedication of their new building –
 in 1811.
 It was a grand day!
 I guess you know how we felt
 as we walked into that building the first time.

But things were tough in Charlestown.
 Our young members had small incomes
 and soon the church couldn't pay my salary.
 Fortunately I had married a widow, Eliza Osborn,⁴
 who had been left a large store out in Salem.
 I was able to add to my income
 by helping my wife in the business.
 Some people made fun of me –
 but at least we had food on our table!
 I soon found out I couldn't be a good pastor
 and a good businessman at the same time –
 so after three years at that church
 I resigned.

Later my fellow ministers claimed to hold this against me
 but I think they really objected to what they called
 my heretical ideas.
 You see I came to believe that the valuable teachings of the Bible
 came out of human experience
 and not divine revelation.
 Most Universalists didn't see it that way.
 There was that issue of religious liberty again.
 How free could I really be?

⁴ Ibid.

I never really intended to give up the ministry.

In Charlestown it was a matter of financial necessity.

Finally I took a small church at Whitestown, New York⁵
for two years

before being called to the longest
and most successful pastorate
of my career.

This was at the Lombard Street Universalist Church
in Philadelphia in 1817.

Lombard Street Universalist Church had had a sad history
and had been without a settled pastor for six years,
even though the church dated back to 1790.

All of my predecessors had been Trinitarians
and serious Calvinists.

At the outset I set forth my religious convictions
which were both Universalist and Unitarian.

Some disagreed and left.

Most of them stayed
and many others joined the church.

Within two years we had grown so large
we needed to organize a second church
which my associate helped me serve.

I stayed at Lombard Street Church for seven years –
and probably should have stayed longer.

During those years I studied to learn Latin, Greek and Hebrew.

That gave me tools to further study of the scriptures
and Christian writing.⁶

I left the Lombard Street Church
to become pastor of Prince Street Universalist Church
in New York City.

It turned out to be one of the most conservative churches
in the denomination,
thus no place for the likes of me!

In Philadelphia I had associated with Joseph Priestly
and others
and had become more radical.

But Prince Street knew nothing
beyond the preaching of John Murray.

Very quickly I was in trouble
and had to resign.

After leaving Prince Street Church

I did some writing and editing
for the New York Universalist Book Society

⁵ Sawyer, The Rev. Ken; *Abner kneeland*, a sermon at Wayland, Massachusetts, January 30, 2000.

⁶ Anonymous

and then formed a new church,
the Second Universalist Society.
This group really prospered for a while.
Acting like a good twenty-first century UU,
I got behind the work of Frances Wright,
a radical philanthropist
who was working in Tennessee
to improve the economics and cultural life of Negroes.
But this was around 1825
and her work was regarded with suspicion
even in the churches.
Thus I was dismissed!
Ah, religious liberty!

A year later
I attended the Southern Association of Universalists
in Hartford, Connecticut.
I knew that some of my long-time friends
no longer supported me
but I also had continuing friends there.
I presented a clear and dignified statement of my theology
and asked to be continued in ministerial fellowship.
They refused my request.
After twenty-five years service in Universalist churches
my fellowship in the denomination was withdrawn.
They claimed I was too radical
and that I was too often an embarrassment.
So much for religious liberty!

In 1831 I left New York
and returned to Boston
to start a weekly paper
which I called *The Boston Investigator*.
It was the first rationalist journal in America.
My publishing and lectures brought me a busy speaking schedule
in New York and Philadelphia and elsewhere,
where we drew large crowds.
There were exciting people in and around Boston
in those days,
people you may know or remember:
William Ellery Channing,
Theodore Parker,
Hosea Ballou,
and Ralph Waldo Emerson.
In *The Investigator* we stood for important causes:
improving labor conditions,
ten-hour work day,
abolition of slavery.
We supported public education for children,
women's rights

and birth control!
 We stood for freedom to think, speak and write
 with no authority other than reason and conscience.
 You may think of these ideas as fundamental freedoms
 but In 1831 these ideals were considered wild and radical,
 serious threats to public peace and order!

We also had some hard things to say
 about accepted Christian doctrine
 that raised the hackles on many Boston church people.
 Even some Unitarians and Universalists
 claimed to be embarrassed by my public comments.

With my small cadre of followers
 I formed a Free Thought organization.

In a hired hall
 I lectured regularly on philosophy and religion
 and the errors of Christian doctrine
 as well as the errors of the clergy.
 Amid a lot of accusations about my theology, in 1833 I said,

*I believe ... that God and Nature,
 so far as we can attach any rational idea to either,
 are synonymous terms.*

*Hence, I am not an Atheist,
 but a Pantheist;
 this is, instead of believing there is no God,
 I believe that in the abstract,
 all is God.⁷*

As you might expect,
 I was roundly criticized by fellow clergy.

The Investigator which we published on December 20, 1833
 did it!

Somebody took my article from that issue
 to the Massachusetts Grand Jury.
 They had me arrested and indicted
 for blasphemy.
 Where was religious liberty?

In the midst of this turmoil
 I entered into my fourth marriage,
 having been widowed again.

I married Dolly Rice
 and together we had another four children
 bringing my family to a total of twelve offspring.⁸

⁷ Papa & Hughes

⁸ Anonymous

June 8, 2008

Convicted Blasphemer!

7

I had a good lawyer when my case came to trial –
but a judge who was against me from the start.

On his instructions
the jury deliberated five minutes
and found me guilty.

I was immediately sentenced to three months in jail!
Of course I appealed to the Supreme Court.

At that trial four months later
we had a hung jury.

At a third trial I argued my own case.
I could go into some of the detail
but I will spare you.

Again the jury could not agree.
Finally my case went to the full Supreme Court of Massachusetts.

In March of 1838
by one vote
this Court supported the original conviction
and sentenced me to sixty days in jail.
It took over three years to get a verdict!!

The editor of the *Boston Advocate* said
my conviction and imprisonment for blasphemy
added another page of shame
to the history of Massachusetts
which included the hanging of four Quakers in 1669
and the hanging of nineteen witches in 1692.

No one ever questioned my character
and many felt this was a case of persecution.

A number of reputable citizens spoke up on my behalf –
including William Ellery Channing.

From my Boston jail cell
I wrote an open letter to my friends,
saying:
“Fellow citizens!
Countrymen!
And Lovers of Liberty!!!
Sixty-three years ago
a battle was fought on Bunker Hill
in plain sight of my window where I now am.
But what was it all for?
LIBERTY!
And what am I here for?
For the honest exercise of that very liberty
for which our fathers fought and bled.”

When I walked out of that jail
I headed west, out of Massachusetts
and I didn't stop
until I arrived in what you now call Iowa.

My family and others followed
 and we gathered like-minded folk,
 free of narrow-minded clergy
 in a new little community
 we called Salubria.

That community did well
 until my death on August 27, 1844.

I may have been one of the most controversial among Universalist ministers
 but now days no one would give my ideas a hostile glance.

Religious liberty is a slippery and relative term.

Watch it!

Guard it!

Or you can lose it without even noticing!

I see serious challenges –

even threats

to your religious liberty.

You can't afford to take your freedom lightly –

for tomorrow it may be gone!

Your Unitarian Universalist forebears

are counting on you

to keep this freedom alive and well!



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