

A sermon delivered November 14, 1999 by Dr. Ronald Story: Professor of History at the University Of Massachusetts and a member of First Churches.

What is this congregation to make of the formidable figure who stood in the pulpit here nearly three centuries ago? It seems impossible not to be at least aware of Jonathan Edwards, if only because of his likeness hanging there on our wall and the way outside visitors are conscious of him. A recent guest preacher, the Reverend Lawrence Aker, mentioned how honored he was to be invited to this “historic church.” He said that partly, I think, because this was Jonathan Edwards’s parish, and Edwards is still probably one of the most famous ministers in the history of America.

But he’s not a comfortable a figure to live with. When I preached on Edward two years ago, Gordon Pullan mentioned that the presence of this Puritan figure bothered him and made him less eager to join this church. I’m sure he’s not the only one who feels that way. One problem is that Edwards is famous mainly for two reasons that no longer move us very much. First, he was a serious theologian who wrote thick, demanding volumes on original sin, religious affections, freedom of the will, true virtue and other topics of no great urgency for mainline churches today. Second, he is famous for his terrifying sermons on the torments of hell. These proved so powerful and so vivid that they became models for the disturbing fire-and-brimstone, hellfire-and-damnation exhortations of two centuries of fundamentalist revivalists. It’s a tough legacy to embrace.

There’s more. Edwards was Bible-centered in his thinking and preaching to a degree that’s alien to our unbiblical age He built his sermons on a foundation of scriptural references that his 18th century parishioners might have grasped, but that makes them difficult reading today. One reason for his immense scholarship

was to try to reconcile the Bible and modern science and philosophy—which makes it difficult to grapple with that, too. Edwards also believed in original sin in a way that we might find bleak, if not ungenerous. He believed in salvation through atonement and faith to a degree that seems at least non-ecumenical, even intolerant. For example, he hated Catholicism for preaching grace through good works because he thought this doctrine had led wealthy men to try to buy their way into heaven by giving money to the Church, a futile, corrupting, even blasphemous process for everyone concerned.

Edwards could be judgmental about the state of other people's souls and behavior. His parishioners eventually turned him out for judging them too harshly. And he was concerned to preserve his own ministerial dignity and therefore the status and reputation of the ministry as a whole. So he can appear cool and unapproachable rather than warm and welcoming the way we like our pastors.

You can see all this in the sculpture on the wall. The high forehead of the scholar. The judging eyes of the fearsome preacher. The lofty, bewigged minister.

But the sculpture is misleading. If you look at the picture on which the sculpture is based—the only portrait we have of Edwards—you see an open face and level gaze, The eyes are youthful, almost tender, the face modest, almost vulnerable . It's actually the lighting of the sculpture and the deep cuts that the sculptor used to capture the likeness that make the eyes so dark and glowering and judgmental and the visage so stern and lofty. It's not exactly wrong. It just exaggerates certain features at the expense of others, such as the open and inviting right hand reaching to touch us.

Our view of Jonathan Edwards the minister is exaggerated in this way, too. It emphasizes certain parts of his life and work at the expense of others. In fact, there are lots of things about Edwards to appreciate and even respond to with a sense of pride, or at least

not embarrassment. We don't have to like everything about him to appreciate these.

First, he lived plainly. The Town of Northampton paid his salary through its support of the Congregational Church, the only church in town then, and Edwards got into quarrels with the community over an uncertain and inadequate salary. But this was mostly because he thought that any minister should be paid appropriate to his status, which, as God's emissary, should be high. He maintained his growing family, had a weakness for buying jewelry for his wife, Sarah, but spent very little on himself – except for books. He died owning two coats, two hats, a good wig and a “poorer” one, knee buckles but no other ornaments, spectacles and a compass but no watch—and 225 books. As his biographer says, “Why should one's possessions outstrip one's needs?”

He also loved nature in a way that was new and original for a New Englander. God's grace, Edwards wrote, enabled him to see divinity in “the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water and all nature.” He would sit, he said, “& view the moon for a long time; and in the daytime view the clouds and sky to behold the sweet glory of God; ... and would fix myself to see the Lightning play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God's Thunder, which was often exceeding entertaining, leading me to sweet Contemplations.” He preached of “the beauty of trees, plants, and flowers, ... the beautiful frame of the body of Man, the beauty of the moon and stars” and of “the highest heavens.” This verges on high pantheism, closer to St. Augustine and St. Francis than to a typical Puritan and pointing toward Emerson and Thoreau and the ecology movement of our own time. But Edwards was the pioneer.

Edwards in fact was a great lover of beauty in a broader sense. He loved the beauties of nature, but beauty was also a key concept in his theology. He believed that God had given people an instinctive love for beauty of line, proportion, balance, and harmony. You could see it in the universe. You could see it in writing and

philosophy and theological reasoning and mathematics. Harmony was one of his highest values. When he introduced the hymns of Isaac Watts and others to the New England churches, he wanted them to replace the old way of singing, where individuals read or chanted psalms at their own pace and time. Edwards wanted people to sing together, in harmony with one another, and he thought this new way of singing would find ready favor partly because God had created people to love beauty, and harmony was bound to be beautiful in music as in nature. What people needed was exposure and encouragement—as long, of course, as they didn't go overboard and become Anglicans.

For his time, Jonathan Edwards was generous and respectful toward women. He was too much a Congregationalist to support the religious equality of the Quakers, and too much a man of the 1700s to fight for women's political equality. But he treated his daughters with astonishing latitude, allowing them to move about and even travel unchaperoned, never criticizing their behavior – although there doesn't seem to have been much bad behavior to complain about – permitting, even encouraging them to choose their own marriage partners. When he advised them, it was to live according to Christian principles. Edwards fell afoul of his congregation late in his ministry by criticizing the adolescent sons of prominent townspeople for passing around illustrated books on midwifery—the colonial equivalent of pornography. He was especially upset that the boys were treating girls disrespectfully, using sexually suggestive language that the girls found offensive. His stance smacked of prudery, got him in hot water, and probably isn't what we would do. But it's not so different from the way some feminists criticize pornography—as disrespectful, even dangerous, to women. I have not the slightest doubt that had Edwards lived later, he would have supported, out of sheer Christian principle, both women's suffrage and the equal rights amendment.

Most importantly, Jonathan Edwards was a powerful preacher of the gospel of love. This is almost never acknowledged or discussed, but it's crystal clear from his great work, *Charity and Its Fruits*, which expands upon a group of sermons he preached throughout most of the year 1738. These were commentaries on today's scripture from Corinthians, which was one of Edwards's favorite books of the New Testament. The sermons do two things. They instruct us to lead loving Christian lives in this world as best we can. And they offer us a picture and a definition of Heaven as a place of pure love.

Edwards urged us in our daily lives to an imitation of Christ. Christ loved his enemies, Edwards said, Jews and Samaritans and Romans as well as Christians. He loved people so much that he felt one with them; he made them a part of "his flesh and his bone." He so loved us that he gave everything he had and became poor for us and traded ease and honor for suffering and degradation. Christ loved us as he loved the poor, the maimed, the halt, the blind, the empty and needy and vagabond, without ever expecting to be repaid. He was, above all and in spite of the great injuries done to him, "meek and gentle."

And so, preached Edwards, should we love Christian love, he said, is "contrary to a selfish spirit." We must consider not only our own circumstances and necessities but those of our neighbors; regard not only our own desires but others' desires, too. We should love even those of "hateful dispositions," even the proud, the greedy, the hard, the profane, the unjust. We should not only help the poor. We should do it lovingly, "with our hand open wide" and with a charitable heart, "expecting nothing in return." Christian love will dispose us to mercy toward a neighbor who suffers "affliction or calamity." We will in this way "bear one another's burdens and weep with those that weep."

It is love, moreover, said Edwards, that will check and restrain "bitterness and heated spirits" and prevent "broils and quarrels." Love will help us to "suppress wrath, rage, resentment, revenge,

bitterness” and all the monstrous passions that stir up “hatred, strife, and violence.” “We do not live in heaven, or a world of purity, innocence and love,” Edwards wrote. “We dwell in a fallen, corrupt, miserable, wicked world” full of malice and injury. Even so, Christian love will dispose us to peace.

Most people know Jonathan Edwards for his preaching on the fiery terrors of hell, particularly “Sinners in the Hands of a Angry God.” But this great series of love sermons enabled him to define hell more precisely. Hell, he argued, is a place where there is no love. It is a place deluged not with fire but with wrath and hatred and rage, a place of pride and contention and strife, of spite, treachery, fickleness, hypocrisy and deceit, without friendship or pity or mercy. It’s the best definition of hell I’ve ever read: Hell is the place without love.

Heaven, by contrast, is a world of perfect love. Edwards showed us his vision of Heaven in the last of these great sermons on Corinthians, entitled “Heaven Is a World of Love.” It seems as powerful to me as his hellfire sermons, although for some strange reason few people know about it. In Heaven, said Edwards, we may love God, Christ, and one another perfectly, without envy or malice or revenge or contempt or selfishness. In Heaven no one will ever be grieved that they are slighted by those they love. Nor will the joy of Heavenly love be interrupted by jealousy. “Heavenly lovers,” in Edwards’s words, “will have no doubt of the love of each other. All their expressions of love shall come from the bottom of their hearts.”

In Heaven there will be nothing to clog the exercise and expression of love – no heavy body or lump of flesh or unfit organ or inadequate tongue. We shall have no difficulty expressing our love. Our souls, “like a flame of fire with love, shall not be like a fire pent up but shall be perfectly at liberty, winged with love with no weight tied to the feet to hinder their flight.” Nor will there be any wall of separation to prevent the perfect enjoyment of each other’s love – neither physical distance, nor want of full

acquaintance, nor misunderstanding, nor disunion through difference of temperament or circumstances or opinions or interests. We shall all be united, related to Christ, the Head of the whole society, the spouse, in Edwards's words, of the whole church of saints, which shall be a single family.

As love seeks to have the beloved for its own, so in Heaven all shall have property in one another. The saints shall be God's, preached Edwards, and he theirs. And so with Christ, who bought them with his life and gave himself to them in death. "And the saints shall be one another's." And they shall enjoy each other's love in perfect and undisturbed prosperity, without adversity or pitiful grief of spirit, and shall glory in the possession of all things in common. And Heaven will be a garden of pleasure, a paradise fitted in all respects for an abode of heavenly lovers where they may have sweet society. "The very light which shines in and fills that world is the light of love," said Edwards. "It is beams of love; for it is the shining of the glory of the Lamb of God, that most wonderful influence of lamblike meekness and love which fills the heavenly Jerusalem with light."

And we will know such perfect love forever, with no fear that such happiness will ever end.. "All things," Edwards preached, "shall flourish in an eternal youth. Age will not diminish anyone's beauty or vigor, and there love shall flourish in everyone's breast, as a living spring perpetually springing, or as a flame which never fails. And the holy pleasure shall be as a river which ever runs, and is always clear and full. There shall be no autumn or winter; every plant shall be in perpetual bloom with the same undecaying pleasantness and fragrance, always springing forth, always blossoming, always bearing fruit."

He concludes: "O what tranquillity there is in such a world as this! Who can express the sweetness of this peace? What a calm is this, what a heaven of rest is here to arrive at after persons have gone through a world of storms and tempests, a world of pride, and

selfishness, and envy, and malice, and scorn, and contempt, and contention, and war? What a Canaan of rest!”

Jonathan Edwards did not believe that we could find perfection in this world. If hell is hatred and heaven pure love, this world is a mixture. To find true and perfect love, you have to enter Heaven. But he ended this magnificent sermon by telling us that “as heaven is a world of love, so the way to heaven is the way of love. This will prepare you for heaven, and make you ready for an inheritance with the saints in that land of light and love. And if ever you arrive at heaven, faith and love must be the wings that carry you there.”

The real Jonathan Edwards is like the wall sculpture. It's the lighting that history has thrown on him that makes him seem so daunting. If you look closely, you see not the shadowy judging eyes, but the warm, welcoming, loving hand.

Amen.

In August of 1822, Benjamin Willard (1783-1862), an itinerant missionary of the Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society, arrived in Northampton, Massachusetts. Mr. Willard circulated a few copies of the Baptist Magazine, and noted in his papers, “visited several families and witnessed some attention.” Despite the determined hostility of the First Church (Congregational) minister and most of the town establishment, Northampton experienced its first vigorous testament to experimental religion since the departure of Jonathan Edwards in 1750.

Preaching in an old tenement on South Street, Benjamin Willard slowly organized a Baptist Church, with the help of Rev. Thomas Rand of West Springfield and Baptists from the West Farms area of Northampton. In 1823, Benjamin Willard was ordained in the newly formed First (Baptist) Church. A few months later, in January of 1824, he baptized two young people “thro the ice” with over 2000 curious Northampton onlookers. On April 25, 1826, 44 men and 26 women approved a Church Covenant and chose two deacons. That summer, in July of 1826, The Baptist Association

Church Council formally recognized the First Baptist Church of Northampton. Rev. Willard resigned in 1838 to do evangelical work in Vermont. He died in Holyoke, Dec. 2, 1862, at the age of 72.

Prominent Clergy

Rev. Abel Brown (pastor: 1840-1841) organized the first Sabbath School with a membership of 25 children in April, 1840.

During the pastorate of Rev. Horace Doolittle (pastor: 1842-1845) the Church took a firm stand against slavery and adopted the following resolutions in 1843:

“Whereas, the institution of slavery is not only tolerated in this country..., and whereas, slave holders in the south suppose that a portion of the church in the north countenances them in penetrating the system,... we wish it to be distinctly understood that we have no fellowship with these unfruitful works of darkness, therefore after mature and prayerful deliberation, resolved:

1. That we believe slavery to be a sin against God and that it has not the slightest countenance from the Bible, nor from the principles of common justice, that it is an exceedingly wicked institution and ought forthwith to terminate.
2. Resolved, that as a Church of Christ we cannot suffer our names or influence to be claimed as approving or countenancing the system, but that we deeply sympathize with those in slavery and will pray for them and use all Scriptural means to hasten their liberation.
3. Resolved, that we cannot consistently, and therefore will not, receive as members of our body, or admit to our pulpit or communion, those who continue to hold their fellow men in bondage.” ¹

In 1878, Rev. Denzel M. Crane (pastor: 1846-1858; 1878-1879) joined the Free Soil Anti-Slavery political party; a party committed to liberty to all men. Rev. Crane also became the first Superintendent of Northampton’s Public Schools.

Buildings and Grounds

In the spring of 1828, the Church purchased property on West St. owned by Capt. Marshall. November 11, 1828, Captain Isaac Damon agreed to design and build a Meeting House on the "Marshall Lot." The church building was dedicated on July 28, 1829.

In April 1848, Rev. Crane began saving funds for an extensive renovation of the Meeting House, however, on December 29, 1863, a \$1800.00 fire damaged the building, requiring services to be held in Northampton Town Hall for a year and a half while repairs were made.

In July, 1902, during the pastorate of Rev. John C. Breaker, (pastor: 1899-1912) decisions were made at a special church meeting to construct a new edifice. Construction contracts were initially handed to M.H. Hubbard of Utica, New York but switched to Orrin E. Livermore (Church Deacon from 1870-1912). The new Meeting House was completed in May 1904 and dedicated May 22, 1904.

1 Cochran., Eve Owen, Centenary history of the First Baptist Church of Northampton, Mass. (1926), 15-16.

Russell, C. Allyn, History of The First Baptist Church of Northampton, Massachusetts, 1826-1947. (1947)[/fusion_builder_column][[/fusion_builder_row][[/fusion_builder_container]