

**UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
COMMUNITY CHURCH**

Park Forest, Illinois

Sunday, September 25, 2005



**A
SUMMONS UNTO
HUMANITY**

The Life of John Haynes Holmes

TIME OF GATHERING

PRELUDE

*Peace March, Todd Denham
Peace Is Just a Word, Eurythmics*

GREETINGS and ANNOUNCEMENTS

ENTRATA

Entrata, Pippo Ark D' Ambrosio

9am: CASTING OUR CIRCLE OF WORSHIP

11am: CHALICE LIGHTING/CALL TO WORSHIP

*HYMN

The Voice of God, *one of John Haynes Holmes' Hymns:*

(* - *please rise in body or spirit*)

The voice of God is calling its summons in our day;
Isaiah heard in Zion and we now hear God say:
"Whom shall I send to succor my people in their need?
Whom shall I send to loosen the bonds of shame and greed?"

"I hear My people crying in slum and mine and mill;
No field or mart is silent, no city street is still.
I see My people falling in darkness and despair.
Whom shall I send to shatter the fetters which they bear?"

We heed, O Lord, Your summons, and answer: Here are we!
Send us upon Your errand, let us Your servants be.
Our strength is dust and ashes, our years a passing hour;
But You can [turn] our weakness [to that which will empower.]

From ease and plenty save us; from pride of place absolve;
Purge us of low desire; lift us to high resolve;
Take us, and make us holy; teach us Your will and way.
Speak, and behold! We answer; command, and we obey!

*WORDS OF AFFIRMATION (Unison)

Love is the spirit of this church
and service is our prayer.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth in love,
And to help one another.

*SONG OF ASPIRATION (Unison)

From all that dwell below the skies
Let songs of hope and faith arise
Let peace, good will on earth be sung
Through every land by every tongue.

TIME OF REFLECTION

THREE DESPATCHES

Special Cable to the New York Times

Paris, September 10, 1917. – American forces attacked the enemy this morning at LaDun, and captured three lines of German trenches on a front of two hundred yards. The enemy had fifty killed, and one hundred and ten wounded or captured. Our loss was trifling.

Article in the Scarborough Weekly Item

The sympathy of relatives and friends is being extended to Mrs. William Brown, of 72 South Main Street, on the death in France of her son, Thomas. News came from the War Department last Thursday that he had been killed in an engagement with the enemy at LaDun on September 10.

Thomas Brown was twenty-three years of age, and was the only son of Mrs. Brown, who has been a widow for many years. After graduating from grammar school, he went to work at Wilkins' Hardware Store in Bangor, hoping to earn money for his college courses at Bates, but after a few months he came home to run the farm and take care of his mother, who has never recovered from a severe attack of pneumonia. Thomas's devotion to his mother was familiar to all of our townspeople, and makes his death at this time particularly regrettable. Memorial services will be held at the First Congregational Church as soon as Mrs. Brown is able to attend.

ADVERTISEMENT

in the Scarborough WEEKLY ITEM

Died On Friday, September 25, Mrs. William Brown, in the 53rd year of her age. Funeral services, and memorial services for her late son, Thomas, at the First Congregational Church, on Sunday, at 3 o'clock. All are invited.

TIME OF CONSIDERATION

PRESENTATION:

A SUMMONS UNTO HUMANITY

Today, if I mention the name *John Haynes Holmes*, few if any will recognize the name. I hope that this morning I can change that. But, in his day, or I should say in his decades, his was a name that nearly every liberal in America would have known, and a name they would have said with honor.

Did he run for office and win? No!

Did he write novels or own a newspaper? No!

Did he make movies, or sing on the stage? No!

Yet, he was someone who knew and was known by the luminary figures for much of the first half of the twentieth century AND he was someone who knew and was known by the nameless and the homeless and the hopeless for much of the first half of the twentieth century.

How does a born-well Philadelphia boy, growing up in well-heeled suburban Boston in the last two decades of the 1800s, in the time of regression from the ideals which had fueled our tragic Civil War, in the time of massive public and private scandals which left millions destitute, in the time of the promise of modernism amid the squalid realities of the industrial age . . . how does a person personally exempt from the trials and tribulations of life at the term of the last century become this figure of inspiration and leadership?

In a single word: religion!

But, not the religion of repression and collusion, nor the faint-hearted religion of parochialism and liturgy.

[Religion is] a mysterious and mystic impulse working within us to make us greater than we are, and the world through us better than it is; to lift us to levels above the low ranges of physical appetite and satisfaction; to drive us to goals beyond the prudential bounds of time and sense. Religion belongs distinctively to man not because he can think and speculate, build churches and rear altars, but rather because he can sense the whole of life, catch a vision of the ideal in things real, and is willing to give his life to fulfilling this vision among men. To be compelled to serve an ideal cause by a conviction of its enduring value not merely for ourselves but for humanity and its high destiny upon earth—this is religion.

Religion appears whenever and wherever men appear who live under the compulsion of the spirit.

John Haynes Holmes found that religion in the many Unitarian churches visited in the company of his father, who felt that the best preaching of the day was a sure foundation for a young life's ambition to meaning. Holmes followed in a long tradition of Unitarians - one grandfather had served as Treasurer to the society which called social and theological radical Theodore Parker to its pulpit.

Turning away from an expected education for a place in the family business, Holmes proceeded to Harvard College and then Harvard Divinity School with a clear intent: to live, preach, and spread the religion which so enlightened him.

Upon graduation, Holmes was called to the Third Religious Society and Third Congregational Church (Unitarian) of Dorchester, Massachusetts, in 1904, not yet twenty-five years of age. In 1907, he accepted a call to the ministry of the Church of the

Messiah (Unitarian) of New York City, a congregation with which he would an active ministerial relationship until 1949, and an emeritus relationship until his death in 1964.

The Church of the Messiah of 1907 may have been a bastion of liberal religion, but it was not a bastion of liberalism. A fashionable religious home for those of higher status who had theological differences with the prevailing society congregations, it was more a sanctuary for complacency than a pulpit for progress when he arrived. That was not to last for long. As one admirer wrote, Holmes was "accused of many things during his life, but never of being moderate." Hear these words of his from 1912:

THE REVOLUTIONARY FUNCTION OF THE MODERN CHURCH

The church will care not so much for rites of baptism as for public baths and playgrounds; not so much for the service of Communion at the altar, as for that wider communion at every hearthstone which shall give bread to all who hunger and drink to all who thirst; not so much for clerical robes and choir vestments, as for clothing for all who are naked; not so much for splendid churches and towering cathedrals, as for decent and comfortable homes for all men, women and children; not so much for an atmosphere of prayer and worship in the church edifice, as for fresh air to breathe in the tenements and slums; not so much for teaching men to believe, as for giving them means wherewith to live; not so much for keeping Sunday inviolate from open theaters and concert-halls and sports, as for keeping every day inviolate from dishonest stock-transactions, piratical business deals, child labor, starvation wages, preventable diseases, selfish wealth and grinding poverty; not so much for saving the heathen overseas, as for saving the Christians who are perishing at our very doors; not so much for emancipating men from what we call sin, as for emancipating them from the conditions of life and labor which make sin inevitable; not so much for saving souls, as for saving the society which molds the soul for eternal good or ill.

Often, it seems, those best able to articulate the needs and even the solutions are mere theorists, for whom the vision is their realm, while the fulfillment belongs to others. Maybe one thing which set John Haynes Holmes apart was that his was no armchair liberalism.

By the time he spoke those prophetic words, he had already been one of the five who were the incorporators of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. And that's another thing which set him apart: his cause, his concern, his care was not limited by the accidents of his birth. The plight of people of color, he understood, was the plight of all people as long as race was used to divide humanity against its great promise.

Race, however, was not the worst destroyer of that human promise for Holmes.

From every point of view—from the standpoint of things spiritual as well as of things material, from the standpoint of the future as well as of the present—war is the antithesis of life. Its one end is to destroy what has been builded up through many years by the sweat and tears of men. Its one aim is to kill the lives which men have conceived in joy, women borne in agony, and both together reared in love. Its one supreme triumph is to turn a busy factory into a pile of wreckage, a fertile field into a desert, a home of joy into an ash-heap of sorrow; a living soul into a rotting carcass. Why, if war could once be carried through to its logical conclusions—if there were not a limit to all strength, and a point of exhaustion for every passion — mankind would long since have annihilated itself and this planet become as tenantless as the silent moon! And yet there are some—yea, there are many!—who are ready to assert that this foul business is sometimes and somewheres justifiable. This I deny without qualification or evasion of any kind. War is never justifiable at any time or under any circumstances. No man is wise enough, no nation is important enough, no human interest is precious enough, to justify the wholesale destruction and murder which constitute the essence of war. Human life is alone sacred. The interests of human life are alone sovereign. War, as we have now seen, is the enemy of life and all its interests. Therefore, in the name of life and for the sake of life, do I declare to you that war must be condemned universally and unconditionally.

Once again, Holmes was not merely spouting theory. When World War I came, he openly announced his opposition to the war, knowing that on the Board of the church was only one person who agreed with him. He could do no other, for his pacificism was rooted in his religious views. And, to their credit, the Church Board did not dismiss him. They upheld the freedom of the pulpit and his right to express his deeply held convictions. They knew that if they did not allow him this freedom, they themselves would not be free to express their deeply held convictions.

But that was also consistent with the ministry that was growing for Holmes. In 1916, hr had helped to form the organization which we now know as the American Civil Liberties Union. His sentiments are clear in his words:

To hear a man attacking your most cherished beliefs, assailing those institutions which you regard as indispensable to social order and stability, and ridiculing your ideals and denouncing your activities—to hold in your hands the power to silence this man at any time, but to give him full opportunity to say what he wants to say, without interference or rebuke—this is to believe in free speech, and to be faithful to one's belief.

His stand for peace would repeat itself decades later, when, on the Sunday after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he submitted his resignation to the Board, knowing the congregation was overwhelmingly in support of going to war. His resignation was returned, rejected, in less than twenty-four hours. The congregation wanted a person of principle and values to stand with them as they faced their most trying times.

Probably one of the reasons that Holmes was so opposed to war was that he was an internationalist - not only in politics, but also in religion. He was one of the first, from

either the Christian or the Jewish side, to reach out to Rabbi Stephen Wise in his reform efforts in Judaism. He was one of the first to promote the personhood and the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Over the years, the two of them met several times, and corresponded frequently. In thinking about Gandhi, he wrote:

What was this first impression of Gandhi, as distinguished from the others which came later? I do not find it difficult to answer this question. It was an impression of the beauty of the man. Where do people get the idea that Gandhi is ugly? Why have they described him as a “dwarf,” and a “little monkey of a man”? It is true that his limbs and body are emaciated—his ascetic life produces no surplus flesh! But his frame is large, and his stature erect and of medium height. It is true also that his individual features are not lovely. He has a shaven head, protruding ears, thick lips, and a month that is minus many of its teeth. But his dark complexion is richly beautiful against the white background of his shawl, his eyes shine like candles in the night, and over all is the radiance of a smile like sunshine on a morning landscape. What impresses you is not the physical appearance but the spiritual presence of this man. You think at once of his simplicity, his sincerity, his innocence. He approaches you with all the naturalness and spontaneity of a little child. There is not an atom of self-consciousness in Gandhi—in spite of all his greatness in the world, and all the adulation which has been heaped upon him, he has no pose, no pretentiousness, no pride. You realize at once that his peculiar aspects of appearance and his peculiar ways of life have nothing fraudulent about them, but are the honest and fearless expressions of a transcendent personality. Therefore you do not think of how he looks, but only of what he is.

In line with his vision beyond the petty divisions of humanity, he helped the congregation transform itself from the Church of the Messiah, with its heavy theological message, to the Community Church of New York. The congregation has always been affiliated with what we now call the Unitarian Universalist Association, but for Holmes its hallmark would need to be its community, not its denomination. Hear what he said about the special nature of the congregation he helped to nurture:

In quest of a definition which would hold, I wrought out a Statement summarizing the distinctive characteristics of the Community Church which is as useful today as it was on the day it was composed. It runs as follows:

- **“The Community Church is an institution of religion dedicated to the service of humanity. It is distinctive from other churches in these points:**
 - **“It substitutes for loyalty to the single denomination, *loyalty to the social group*. Its first affiliation is not with any denomination, but with the community as a whole.**
 - **“It substitutes for a private group of persons held together by Common theological beliefs or viewpoints, *the public group of citizens held together by common social interests*. It excludes none but welcomes all, regardless of sect class, nation or race, on a basis of membership identical with that of citizenship in the community.**
 - **“It substitutes for restrictions of creed, ritual, or ecclesiastical**

organization, *the free spirit*. It relegates all matters of theology and worship where they belong—to the unfettered thought and conviction of the individual.

- It substitutes for the individual *the social group*, as an object of salvation. It interprets religion in terms of social reconstruction, and dedicates its members to the fulfillment of social idealism.
- “It substitutes for Christianity as a religion of special revelation, *the idea of universal religion*. It regards the religious instinct as inherent in human nature, and all religions as contributions to the fulfillment of man’s higher life.
- “It substitutes for the theistic, *the humanistic point of view*; absorption in the next world, *dedication to a better life in this world*; for the church as a sacred institution, *the idea of present society as fulfilling the ‘Kingdom of God—the commonwealth of man*.
‘The Community Church is the practical acknowledgment of religion as the Spirit of Love incarnate in human fellowship. The core of its faith, as the purpose of its life, is *‘the Beloved Community.’*”

In the end, we are summoned to remember John Haynes Holmes, not as much because of all that he did, all whom he knew, but because of the *how* and *why* of it all. All of his life was the product of a profound and unwavering commitment to a religious faith, a religious faith that was not a product of circumstance, but was the announcement of promise. His life poses a great question to each of our lives: “what is the core of faith by which we live our lives?” His summons was not so much that we fulfill his vision, but that we be clear about our own vision, and devote our lives to its fulfillment. His summons to humanity is for each of us to be our true and best selves.

And, of course, he gets the final word:

I am convinced that in this age of wreck and ruin, of despair and death, man himself is still undefeated. If he is baffled, it is to fight better – if he has fallen, it is to rise. The fabric of one more dream has crashed to ruin — this civilization has seen, or must soon see, its end. But the travail of this hour is the travail at once of birth as well as of death. Even as it perishes, it produces Einstein, Freud, Lenin, Gandhi—four geniuses of mind and spirit greater than any four who have yet appeared in any single age. They read the signs of the times; they point the farther way. In their words and deeds we see as it were the seeds of undying life sprouting like the grain of wheat in the crumbling hand of the Egyptian mummy. In their ideas and labors we hear as it were the tones of prophecy that not only proclaim but promise the time to come. What awaits us we cannot know. But if another world declines and falls, and another thousand years of the Dark Ages intervene, we need not fear. Here in this creative thought and sacrificial spirit, there is Life at work. If not today, nor tomorrow, nor yet the day after tomorrow, then in some more remote but certain time, [we] will solve [our] problem and secure [our] life. And meanwhile we must fight on undaunted for the right, trusting that final victory which we may surely serve but ourselves shall scarcely see.

***HYMN**

God of the Nations, another hymn by Holmes

God of the nations, near and far,
Ruler of all mankind,
Bless Thou Thy people as they strive
The paths of peace to find.

The clash of arms still shakes the sky,
King battles still with king-
Wild through the frightened air of night
The bloody tocsins ring.

But clearer far the friendly speech
Of scientists and seers,
The wise debate of statesmen and
The shouts of pioneers.

And stronger far the clasped hands
Of labor's teeming throngs,
Who in a hundred tongues repeat
Their common creeds and songs.

O Father! from the curse of war
We pray Thee give release,
And speed, O speed the blessed day
Of justice, love and peace!