

“Of Love and Liberty”

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First Church in Boston

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Easter Sunday + 250th Anniversary of Patriot’s Day

Boston is a busy place this weekend. Today is Easter and the final day of Passover. Tomorrow is the 129th running of the Boston Marathon. And yesterday was the 250th Anniversary of the Battle of Lexington and Concord which began the American Revolution.

On Friday night, I attended the Lantern Service at the Old North Church, which commemorated the hanging of two signal lanterns that the British Regulars were on the move by sea. Boston [Mayor Michelle Wu opened the evening](#). Highlighting all the uncertainty that faced Paul Revere as he set out that night towards Concord, she affirmed his choice to press on, saying,

“To choose to press on in the face of uncertainty is more than resilience. It is faith. Faith that there is a right and a wrong and that what we do in each moment matters. Faith in the community and the people around him. Faith that his friend would hang lanterns as asked. Faith that friends would row him to safety. Faith that a horse would be ready and waiting. Faith that when he was caught just outside of Lexington his fellow riders would continue carrying forward the message that freedom is worth fighting for and the fight had arrived.”

As she closed, Mayor Wu made clear that this question of faith and collective action is not only one of history, but also faces us today. “250 years later,” she said, “Freedom is worth fighting for and the fight has arrived.”

What do you believe is worth fighting for—perhaps even worth risking your life for? For me this is the question that connects Easter, the American Revolution, and the choices we face today.

In the 20th century, Unitarian theologian [James Luther Adams](#) asked a similar question: who or what do you put your *faith* in? In his 1946 essay, “A Faith for the Free,” Adams argued that history is a battle of faith—a fight over where we choose to give our allegiance. For example, the Gestapo, he explained, placed their faith “in obedience to the Führer, in obedience to the call of “blood and soil.” (*Essential James Luther Adams*, 24) In contrast to this faith of obedience to a single man, place, and race, Adams chose a “free faith”

committed to open questioning, collective action for the common good, and a just organizing of power.

What faith do you choose?

When reflecting on how to describe my faith, I eventually landed on this statement: *“Unitarian Universalism is a progressive religious tradition centered on values of freedom and love.”* For me, love and freedom are the foundational touchstones of my faith. Both are needed. To have freedom without love risks indifference, harm, or even cruelty to others. To have love without freedom endangers our personal sense of dignity and meaningful action. Love inspires our care for others—including fighting for others’ freedom and liberation.

In Adams’ essay on the free faith, he writes that Jesus preached a Kingdom of God powered by love, a “love that fulfills and goes beyond justice, a love that “cares” for the fullest personal good of all.” This is a universal love that leaves no one out. It is a love that affirms the worth and dignity of each person—even in our enemies...even when it’s hard for us to perceive or name! This is a love that fuels our commitment to equity, to the wondrous gifts of human diversity, to the ongoing work of building an ever more just society.

It is also a love that can heal wounds and it is a love that may call us to risk the possibility of being wounded. Jesus made a choice to go to Jerusalem even when he knew the danger. Although Jesus chose this path, Adams insists,

Jesus was not only a martyr dying for his convictions, but also the incarnation of the affirmative power of love transforming life, even in death, and creating a transforming community, a fellowship of free men and women yielding to the tides of the spirit.

Love called Jesus to risk his life. And even though he died, his vision of a just community built around love did not. Many have continued to place their faith in this love that cares for others, that believes in the “free, cooperative effort for the common good.” Love is the power that uplifts the inherent worthiness and dignity in each and *all* of us. Freedom empowers the effort to *do* good, collectively with and for others.

As free people of faith, we must make choices again and again about what matters, about how to treat one another, and about how to live as well as what risks you may be willing to take in life. To be clear, in asking what risks you may be willing to take, it is not my intention to extol martyrdom as a virtue. As Adams and other liberal theologians have

argued, Jesus did not set out to be a martyr to fulfil a debt of blood. Rather, Jesus sought to widely preach a message that defined God by love not law, by mercy not retribution. In choosing this path, Jesus knowingly risked confrontation with his enemies. In this choice, I hear an echo in Mayor Wu's depiction of Revere. Revere was uncertain about where his path would lead that night but chose to go anyway. Although Revere would go on to live decades more, the long rolling battle from Concord back to Boston left more than a hundred men dead, more than two hundred wounded, and thirty-one missing. On both sides, some risked everything to fight.

The Minuteman National Historic Park is adjacent to where I live in Lincoln (the town between Concord and Lexington). Yesterday my son and I walked over to view one of the reenactments of battle at Hartwell Tavern in the park. For nearly an hour, we watched as people representing the colonial militia, the British soldiers, and various civilians crossed the road and fields before us. As a local, I am familiar with this part of the park from jogging or biking along its paths, smiling at other passerby, and noticing the seasonal changes from my last visit. Perhaps because most of my time has been spent in such peaceful, ordinary ways, the staged danger of battle jarred and unsettled me. Yet would this not also be how locals experienced the arrival of violence 250 years ago? Indeed, even more so as the muskets then used actual lead balls and not just the reenactors explosive noise of gun powder.

The visceral quality of what was at risk can become muted by time and distance when reflecting back on the story of the Revolution (*or* of Easter). Smelling acrid smoke, hearing gunfire, and watching people run in pursuit or in fear reinforced for me some of what was at risk 250 years ago. Still, many chose to fight. *And some did not.* Before the soldiers marched by and fighting began, a wagon with several passengers rolled by on the road. When questioned why he wasn't fighting, a man in the wagon shouted back his wife had just given birth. Sometimes our situations—including our responsibility to care for ourselves or those dear to us—means we may rightly choose a different course of action. And sometimes, we freely heed the call to take the risk to defend what we love.

More than sixty years after the battle, Ralph Waldo Emerson penned the "Concord Hymn" to mark the dedication of a monument at the battle site of the Old North Bridge. At the time of the violence, Emerson's grandparents, William and Phoebe, lived next door. His father, William, was a six-year-old boy at the time. When the boy became a man, he served as minister to this church for a time until his early death in 1811. These generational connections must have been on Emerson's mind as he wrote, saying,

On this green bank, by this soft stream,

*We set today a votive stone;
That memory may their deed redeem,
When, like our sires, our sons are gone.*

250 years after the battle we do still remember. We remember the risks they took and the price they paid. And we remember that their rallying cry was freedom.

To be clear, I do not at all believe that defending freedom *requires* violence to secure its privileges. Likewise, I do not believe that God demanded Jesus' violent death on a cross as appeasement for human sin. But I do think that sometimes people take risks for what we love and for what or whom we have faith in.

Although my own faith journey has shifted and changed over the years, I have always loved Easter for its full-throated affirmation of the power of Life. Even now when I have long ceased believing in Jesus' bodily resurrection, I embrace Easter for its confident tone of hope and assurance. And yet, both today and 250 years ago Easter arrived in a moment of great civic and political uncertainty. Some might say that any attempt to connect the political moment and the religious celebration inappropriately mixes "religion and politics." But of what use is religion if it cannot speak relevantly to the moments in which we live?

In this moment, it feels critical to reaffirm that as Unitarian Universalists and as First Church in Boston, we reside within a centuries long religious tradition of affirming love and liberty. Rooted in Christianity, our founders committed themselves in 1630 to move together "in mutual love and respect each to other." And, of course, they came to Massachusetts for a chance to more freely live out their faith—although their sense of liberty was far more limited than ours today. Excluding some as unworthy of freedom, they created harm and violence to others, including by enslaving Africans and Indigenous persons. And . . . they also planted a seed of freedom that grew.

Jesus taught that seeds of love and faith can grow in the right conditions. In our moment, may we help to foster these conditions by reaffirming our progressive religious values of liberty and love. May we choose to risk what we are able to fight for a society that protects human dignity and that freely works together to support the common good.

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.