

“A Religious Revolution”

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July 5, 2026

On the 250th Anniversary of the American Revolution

250 years ago—or about ten generations—the Declaration of Independence affirmed our equality and unalienable rights, giving birth to our nation. While fundamentally a *political* statement, in broad language of creation, a Supreme Judge, and divine providence, *religious* claims show up throughout the document. Notably, the Declaration does not cite specific verses of any particular religious text, but rather appeals to a shared, *self-evident* reality. In other words, the founders are not directly quoting the Christian Bible. But they *are* appealing to fundamental truths about who we are and how the world works that they believed anyone could understand. By appealing to these biggest truths, they are making *religious* claims.

As I speak today as a progressive religious leader of this historic church, I am somewhat perplexed on how to effectively speak of religion and politics on this anniversary. With white Christian nationalists holding power at the highest levels of government, I fear that highlighting the religious elements of the Revolution might reinforce nationalistic messages of America as a “Christian nation.” I do not want to inadvertently amplify those who claim Christianity as justification for hateful acts against LGBTQ folx, erosion of equal rights for women, and bigoted exclusion of people of different religious beliefs.

And yet, in listening to several speeches this past week by civic leaders and city officials, I find religion strangely absent from their recollections—not only because religion was so clearly part of the Revolutionary moment, but also because religion is so evidently impacting *this* moment as well. As the first church of Boston, we are part of a long story of entanglement between religion and politics. Revisiting part of this story can help anchor us in the stormy seas of our own political moment.

“We are in a perplex situation,” preached Dr. Charles Chauncy on May 30, 1770. Less than three months prior, British troops had shot and killed five Americans on the snowy ground before the State House. Just behind the State House, the brick meetinghouse of the First Church stood sentinel to this “Boston Massacre.”

Into this pulpit, Chauncy rose to preach what was essentially a protest sermon. It was opening day of the General Court, the Massachusetts legislative body, and by tradition a minister gave an “election sermon.” However, despite meeting in Boston since the time of

John Winthrop, the Lt. Governor, Thomas Hutchinson, had moved the session to Cambridge to avoid the strife on the streets of Boston.ⁱ A sermon was arranged for Cambridge, but in protest of the move, the Sons of Liberty arranged their own sermon in the traditional locale of Boston. With 48 hours' notice, Dr. Chauncy, prepared a 35-page sermon around a line from Psalm 22: "Our fathers trusted in thee: they trusted and thou didst deliver them."

To illustrate the promise of deliverance, Chauncy drew on history—the story of the Israelites of whom the Psalmist spoke, but also on the story of the Puritan founders of Boston.(13) When faced with tyrannical oppression of their faith in England, the Puritans were "delivered" to this new place. When the colonial Charter was revoked in 1684, God again "delivered" the Puritans from their loss of Charter Rights, restoring their liberties. While Chauncy underscores the supreme power of God in these deliverances, he also insists, "their trust in God was accompanied with their own endeavors, in the use of proper means, in order to the obtainment of needed salvation and deliverance." (10) To a room peppered with the Sons of Liberty and their sympathizers, Chauncy gave theological support to taking action. And not just any action, Chauncy clearly has political action in mind.

For while he speaks of virtues of humility and the importance of repentance for sins, he also rails against the political moment, citing the imposition of new taxes, lack of representation in Parliament, and a standing army quartered in the city. (23) Having expressed a litany of offenses—not unlike those that later appear in the *Declaration*—he then stops short of naming explicit political analysis and remedy, saying, "'Tis certainly the truth of fact, however the right of taxation be determined, that we are in a perplex situation." (24)

In May of 1770, as Chauncy preached, the situation was perplexing indeed. After one hundred and thirty years of Charter Rights supporting local rule, the colonists faced stronger controls from Great Britain. In response, alongside his Whig friends, Chauncy spoke against tyranny and the risk of becoming "slaves." (16, 20) And yet, from the church records, we know that Chauncy enslaved Phyllis, a woman of African descent.

Amidst the Revolutionary calls for liberty, we find an entangled history of freedom and slavery. In the recent book, *Belonging—An Intimate History of Slavery and Family in New England*, Gloria McCahon Whiting tells the story of Darby Vassal, a 6-year-old boy who simply walked away from the home of his enslaver in Woburn to rejoin his family in Cambridge(187-7) Whiting argues that Darby's story is not unique—and that all the talk of liberty in Massachusetts was already effectively undermining the system of slavery here *before* the Revolution. For example, in addition to stories like Darby self-emancipating, legal records show an increase in the outright emancipation of enslaved folks as well as

more term-limited contracts for labor. By the time the Massachusetts constitution was ratified in 1780, Whiting argues that it reflected rather than sparked a changed world.

“All men are created equal,” declare the founders. *Created* equal—this religious claim of a foundational truth underwrote their political aims. Of course, their actual political implementation of equality fell far short of their claim of “all.” Not only did many founders continue to enslave people or support slavery, women were also excluded from political rights as well. Even as Abigail Adams chided John to “remember the ladies,” women would not receive the right to vote for another one hundred and forty years.

We also know that after the Revolution, Chauncy published a book arguing for universal salvation—a vision of spiritual liberty for all. Then, inspired by Chauncy and the liberalizing spirit of the times, the congregation of First Church affirmed a new “Declaration of Faith” in 1786, replacing the 1630 covenant after 156 years. This religious “Declaration” would be the basis of membership for nearly 80 years until the congregation moved back to the 1630 covenant in 1865.

The entanglements of religion and politics become even more perplexing if we widen our story as a church to include the other 6 Societies who are part of us through various mergers.

For example, the Second Church in Boston was founded in 1649 and enjoyed three centuries of its own history before merging with First Church in 1970. Second Church deserves its own sermon just on the American Revolution. Called a den of vipers by a British general, the church was entirely dismantled for firewood during the Siege of Boston—a sign of disdain by the British, not of disrepair in the building. Some even argue that Second Church, the first church to be known as “Old North,” was the actual steeple used to signal Paul Revere. Perplexing.

Or consider that we are now in “Hale Chapel”—named for the Rev. Edward Everett Hale, one-time minister of South Church which merged with First Church in 1825. Although South was founded *after* the Revolution, South had previously merged with Hollis Street, a church that dated back to 1732. During the Revolution, Hollis was led by the Rev. Mather Byles. Byles was known for his puns and wit, which included commentary about some Patriot leaders that was not well-received. Tried for royalist sympathies in 1777, he spent time under house arrest, calling his guard an “Observ-a-Tory.” The church parted ways with Byles, but could not dislodge him from the parsonage where he died in 1788. Perplexing.

The particularities in these few snippets of stories underscore Chauncy's point that the nation was in a "perplexed situation." Currents of religious and political change swirled together. As he preached in May of 1770, Chauncy was angry about the political situation, the recent murders of protestors by the state, and the erosion of long-held rights. Sound familiar?

In 1770, Chauncy did not know that in six years, the colonies would unite and declare independence. He did not know he would live to see the end of the war, the publication of his decades long project on universalism, and the embrace of this more liberal theology by the church he had served for 60 years.

As I consider our own moment of political and religious strife, I wonder what we do not know about our future? What story will we be telling about First Church, about religion and politics, at our 400th anniversary in just 4 years? What will our national, our global politics look like 6 years hence—or in just 6 months, post mid-terms?

While I cannot predict the future, in this moment of looking back 250 years, I am reminded that our story as a nation and as a church has deep, *religious* roots in freedom, justice, and equity.

To me, religion is the answers we give to the biggest questions about the nature of existence, of what is. One of the big questions is whether or not we as humans have inherently equal worthiness and dignity, or whether some of us are simply better—or even a "supreme" race within a hierarchy of people. At the time of the American Revolution, Chauncy was clearly aligned with the religious and political message of the Declaration: "all men are created equal." Some of you may resonate with language of Creation as written in the Declaration, holding faith in a divine power as the Source of Life. Others may arrive at the equal worthiness and dignity of people based on other scriptures, experiences, or arguments. For the founders, the Declaration reflected not only political aspirations of a new government, but also a religious vision that insisted that equality is in the very nature of being human.

And yet, 250 years after making this claim, we are still seeking to live more fully into this equality. At the time of the Declaration, there were perplexing inconsistencies that today seem glaringly wrong to us. We celebrate the movement towards a more inclusive and just society in which enslavement is illegal, women can vote, Native peoples are recognized as still here, people can access the healthcare they need regardless of their gender identity, and protesters are not shot by their government.

There are those today who would have us narrow the vision of who belongs in the “we” of America, excluding those who are not white, not straight, not Christian. And there are those who would define Christian narrowly, perverting a message of love for the stranger, the poor, and the vulnerable into a reactionary protection of people like themselves.

Our story as First Church is not that story. Our story may have begun with Puritan beliefs that justified practices of exclusion and enslavement, but century by century we have become a more equitable and inclusive community. We embraced a more liberal Christianity, including Chauncy’s *universalism*, and then we moved further to welcome multiple religious answers and spiritual practices. We moved to include women in leadership—on the Standing Committee, as Trustees, as the Senior Minister. We moved to include gay, lesbian, and other queer identified folks. We are still moving, still journeying together within an ongoing story of more fully living into a vision of a equitable, just, and *loving* community.

We do not know what the next six months or six years may hold for our nation. What we do know is that for centuries, the people of this congregation, city, and Commonwealth have been wrestling with the entangled questions of religion and politics. In our moment, may we strive to leave a fuller reality of equality for the ten generations that follow us.

May it be so. Ashe. Amen.

¹ Griffin, *Old Brick*, 147