

**A VISIT FROM SAMUEL J. MAY—REMEMBRANCES OF MY MINISTRY IN
SOUTH SCITUATE AND OTHER PLACES**
R.M. FEWKES - NOVEMBER 2, 2015

Dear members and friends of this beloved congregation, may I say how pleased I am to be invited back to preach in the pulpit which I occupied for a period of six years from 1836-42. I extend my heartfelt thanks to your Interim Minister, Len DeRoche, and to your Minister Emeritus, Richard Fewkes, for giving me this opportunity to speak to you on this special occasion of the Restoration and Dedication of the Cold Water Army Banner which played an important role during my period of ministry with you. I will have more to say about that later on in the service.

Though not a long ministry I can honestly say that our years together were good and productive ones both for minister and congregation. Our lives were deepened in so many ways and we did indeed grow together morally and spiritually in body and soul and were the better for it. I've aged some since those days, but am hopefully a bit wiser than I was then.

I was trained and educated for the ministry at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge. During my period of study I struggled with issues of religious doubt and wondered if I was fit for the ministry. I confessed my doubts to Dean Henry Ware who told me that the search for truth was not to be won without effort and struggle. He was right of course. Only later did I come to realize that it was a lifelong struggle.

After my matriculation from Harvard I preached my first sermon from the pulpit of William Peabody in Springfield, Massachusetts, the home of your Minister Emeritus, Richard Fewkes.

I came here to South Scituate after having served for a number of years in my first pulpit as minister of the First Ecclesiastical Society in Brooklyn, Conn., and then as General Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society in Boston. While minister in Brooklyn I became an ardent supporter of Miss Prudence Crandall who had the courage to open her private girl's school to black as well as white female students. Her action raised a storm of public protest among offended whites. But I stood firmly by her and spoke out against those who would deny equal education to all regardless of race.

I call to mind an important event from my childhood which cemented for me the bonds of love and compassion between the races and my later abhorrence of the institution of slavery. When I was about seven years old I was going on an errand for my mother. A dog sprang after me, and I ran, often looking backwards as I tried to flee. I fell and struck my temple upon a stone, and lay senseless. On recovering my consciousness, I found myself in the arms of a large black woman. She said very soothingly to me, "Don't be afraid, little boy, I know who you are. I'll carry you to

your mamma", which she proceeded to do. When my mother saw my face and bosom smeared with blood she feared I had met with a fatal accident. She immediately tended to my wound and once reassured that I was not seriously injured she turned to thank the kind black woman who had brought me home, but my benefactress had disappeared, and we were never able to find out who she was or where she lived. Forever after I felt indebted to her kindness and to the people of her race who had been so mistreated by the awful scourge of slavery and prejudice.

Speaking of my involvement in the abolitionist cause permit me to tell you of my encounter with the founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, the great Universalist, William Lloyd Garrison. I had come to Boston from my parish in Brooklyn, Conn. to hear him speak and I was profoundly moved and affected by him. I wrote in my journal: "This is a providential man; he is a prophet; he will shake our nation to its centre, but he will shake slavery out of it."

Mr. Garrison could sometimes use intemperate language when describing the evils of slavery—upsetting both critics and supporters. I tried to calm him and said to him, "Oh, my friend, do try to moderate your indignation, and keep more cool! Why, you are all on fire!" He stopped, laid his hand upon my shoulder, and said slowly, and with deep emotion, "Brother May, I have need to be all on fire, for I have mountains of ice about me to melt."

When this congregation called me as their minister in 1836 you were well aware of my work as an abolitionist and temperance leader as well as an advocate of women's rights, universal peace and educational reform. Even so you still asked if I would serve as your minister. I heartily accepted but made it clear to your church leaders that I would continue to speak and to work on the practical ethics of Christianity as applied to our human social and political relations. My view of ministry was always two-fold--a belief in the pastoral role of the minister to be a compassionate and caring companion to the members of his congregation--and also to be a voice of conscience speaking to the social and ethical challenges of our personal and collective lives as a people and a nation. It was sometimes difficult to be true to both aspects of my calling, but I did my best to fulfill my obligations to each one.

Theologically, I was a liberal Christian. I believed that Jesus was pre-eminent among all the religious teachers of humanity and that his teachings carried moral and spiritual authority, but this did not make them infallible, nor preclude our finding religious truth and inspiration from other sources. I believed that the Bible contained the highest and most sublime moral and religious precepts and views of the character of God and of the nature and destiny of the human race, but I did not believe that everything in it was fully true, nor of equal moral value and spiritual authority. I believed that Unitarianism affirmed the essential goodness of both women and men. Those who would condemn a soul to eternal perdition, I observed,

seemed to have few misgivings about damning a person to the hell of slavery for a lifetime.

Some of you, I know, are aware of my sister's dear child, Louisa May Alcott, who, through her writings, eventually became even more famous than her Uncle Sam. She was but a child between the ages of four and ten during my tenure as minister here in South Scituate, and she did visit here a number of times in those days and sat in that very pew over there with my dear wife Lucretia. My wife was a very intelligent and well-read person who spoke both French and Italian fluently. She was a great support to me in my ministry, and at times had to remind me that I had a family that needed tending along with my trying to reform the world and establish the Kingdom of God on earth. She was more kind and patient with my shortcomings than I can tell you and she brought much joy to our household.

The ministry has many challenges and satisfactions. Let me tell you about a strange request I once received from a poor woman and her daughter who appeared on my doorstep one day carrying a basket with something wrapped in a towel. They looked very sad indeed. The reason for their sadness was that their cat had been set upon by dogs and killed. The cat's body was in the basket and they brought it to see if I might see to its burial on our family premises. They were afraid the dogs would dig it up if they buried it at home. I did my best to respond appropriately and dug a small grave between two currant bushes, said some prayers and tried to give the animal a proper funeral. The distraught mother and daughter went home with thankful hearts. For sometime afterward the women of my household threatened to put a sign on the front gate: "S.J. May, Undertaker for Cats."

I believe I had the distinction of organizing the first Sunday School in the history of your parish, acting as Superintendent along with William P. Tilden, a young man who I helped to train and educate as a future Unitarian minister, a tradition which your Minister Emeritus and others have helped to perpetuate. Education reform (both religious and secular) was a matter dear to my heart and I did eventually decide to leave you (at the urging of Mr. Horace Mann the great Educational Reformer) and became the Director of the Lexington Normal School.

I regret to say that I did cause some discomfort among the members of the congregation with my expressed opposition to segregating blacks and slaves in the rear balcony of the church. I declared that God was no respecter of persons, rich or poor, black or white, and advocated the abolition of the segregated pews. This disturbed some members greatly and so wishing to avoid a divisive conflict I decided to resign and to accept Horace Mann's kind offer to direct the Lexington Normal School. Some years later I did accept a call to return to the parish ministry in Syracuse, N.Y. where I remained as Pastor for more than twenty years. One summer, during the warmer weather, I returned to South Scituate for a visit and a picnic with a number of parishioners. I was so warmly welcomed and kindly received that I was

moved to tears and found myself unable to respond to the expression of affections so generously given.

Though I was indeed an abolitionist, and proud to identify myself as such, I was nonetheless an advocate of peace and nonviolence and believed wholeheartedly that only peaceful means should be used to bring about the demise of slavery. For many years I believed that opponents of slavery should work within the law and use the tools of moral persuasion and advocacy, but not resort to violence or war. But when the Fugitive Slave Act was signed into law by a Unitarian President, Millard Fillmore, I reached a moral threshold. Not only did I come to believe that such a law should not be obeyed, but moreover, should be resisted.

Thus, I came to participate in the rescue of a captured slave from federal marshals when I was minister in Syracuse. And when the Civil War finally became inevitable I threw my moral energies into the support of the Union cause, because I then realized that slavery could not be ended by any other means. Though your era has endured even greater violence than mine I would still pray that the way of peace and nonviolence preached and practiced by the Nazarene may yet become the practice of peoples and nations everywhere.

Next to my lifelong work to bring an end to the institution of slavery was my passionate belief and advocacy of women's rights and female suffrage. I believe I was the first clergyman of my day to do so. Though I did not live to see women gain the right to suffrage, I declared in uncompromising terms that until they received the vote and were fairly represented, and had an influence, a voice, and a hand in the enactment and administration of the laws there would be no end to injustice and social disorder. I held that every mind, female as well as male, possessed the ability to attain freedom and independence, and had the right to equal education and just desserts for their labor. God did not give one law to men and another law to women, but the same law to both, to perfect the fullness of their character.

Like many ministers in your day I was sometimes charged with preaching politics from the pulpit. I remember during the Mexican War, a man from my congregation met me in the street, and said, "some of us do not like what you have said of public affairs. We are very much displeased with you." I answered him firmly, but politely, "It is not the business of the minister to please the people, but to tell them what he thinks they ought to hear, whether it pleases them or not. I must preach to satisfy my conscience, not to gratify your tastes." The gentlemen said it was an entirely new view of the subject. To another critic I declared: "If inculcating the two great commandments and the Golden Rule be preaching politics, if denouncing every violation of the inalienable rights of the least of our neighbors be preaching politics then woe is me and woe is every other person who stands in the pulpit and does not preach politics."

As I look back upon my life and ministry I realize that I committed my share of mistakes, but in purpose and intent I have wrought for Truth and sought to do what is right for God and humanity. I have worked my way along bit by bit to light and liberty, always trying to see more clearly what it is that God or my conscience has charged me to do. I rest my life and all its accomplishments or failures in the merciful and forgiving arms of the Eternal, and feel that all is and shall be well.

Dedication of the Cold Water Army Banner.

Though some of us may look back upon Samuel Joseph May's work as a temperance leader with a touch of amusement, there are nonetheless some lessons that can be drawn from those events that transcend the times in which they happened to occur. Most especially May's gathering of hundreds of children and young people from both the church and the town into a marching Cold Water Army, carrying banners protesting the sale of alcohol and chanting as they processed: "Here we pledge perpetual hate, to all that can intoxicate." What they did eventually led to the closing of the last rum shop in the town. They all cheered as they poured barrels of rum and alcohol into the Field of Waterloo by a grove near Mr. May's house and property.

One of the very banners used in those processions has survived the ages and bears testimony to their earnest endeavors. That you have seen fit to restore that banner to preserve it for future generations to observe and contemplate is testimony to your keeping faith with the work and efforts of previous generations to build a better world for men, women and children to dwell in. Though neither we nor they have solved the problems of drug and alcohol abuse they nonetheless made a heroic effort, and for that we salute them and honor their endeavors. Moreover, children and young people were enlisted and made their voices heard in the public arena. No matter what our chronological age or the times we live in we can make a difference.

The challenge for our generation is not whether we agree with May's views on temperance or any other moral cause, but whether or not we can connect with the moral and spiritual sentiment to build a better world and to heal the brokenness of human existence wherever we find it. May this Cold Water Army banner ever remind us of that continuing challenge and endeavor.

It is still the case that for those who are unable to control their consumption of drugs or alcoholic beverages to the detriment of themselves or others, some form of temperance—gradual, limited or total—is the only solution available to them. In our day it must be done willingly and voluntarily as each of us determines for him or herself, with as much encouragement and support from others as may be needed. Here we pledge perpetual love and support to all who seek for more and better ways of self-improvement and courage to ask for help from others when needed.

Bless us, O Loving Spirit, in all our endeavors, that we may do thy will of love, peace and reconciliation here on earth. Then teach us to rest content in the knowledge that all our works, begun, continued and ended in thee, shall redound to thy glory and to the everlasting peace and well being of every child of God. So be it. Amen.