

Worship Service
September 23, 2007
Rev. Clare L. Petersberger
The Faith of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

OPENING WORDS

This music would've been familiar to the author of our opening words, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper. She was an African American born to free parents in Baltimore Maryland on September 24th, 1825. She became a poet, author of short stories, and professional lecturer, was active in the abolitionism, suffrage, and temperance movements, and became a member of First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia.

Our opening words are adapted from a speech Frances Ellen Watkins Harper delivered at the World's Congress of Representative Women in 1893. While she addressed her words to women, since she was speaking about "Woman's Political Future," they are relevant to both men and women in 2007.

She said: The tendency of the present age, with its restlessness, religious upheavals, failures, blunders, and crimes, is toward broader freedom, an increase of knowledge, the emancipation of thought, and a recognition of the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity. It is yours to create a healthy public sentiment, to demand justice, simple justice, as the right of every race, to brand with everlasting infamy the lawless and brutal cowardice that lynches, burns, and tortures.

Let hearts respond to the song of the herald angels of peace on earth...Let them throb as one heart unified by the grand and holy purpose of uplifting the human race, and humanity will breathe freer, and the world grow brighter. With such a purpose, Eden would spring up in our path, and Paradise be around our way.

CHALICE LIGHTING

The first cause to uplift the human race which Frances Ellen Watkins Harper undertook was abolition. She was effectively exiled from Maryland in 1853 when the legislature passed a law which provided that free blacks residing in our state could be seized and placed into slavery. Having heard the story of at least one free black man in Maryland who had been forced into slavery and died trying to escape, she pledged herself to the anti-slavery cause vowing to use her "time, talent, and energy in the cause of freedom."

At age 29, she entered the antislavery lecture circuit, delivering 31 lectures in 21 different towns and cities over a period of 6 weeks. Part of her message are the words for our chalice lighting printed in your order of service. Though the issue of abolition is behind us, the altar of universal freedom still needs our commitment of time, talent, and energy. So let us join in a unison reading of these words.

We want more soul, a higher cultivation of all spiritual faculties.

We need more unselfishness, earnestness and integrity.

We need men and women whose hearts are the homes of high and lofty enthusiasm, and a noble devotion to the cause of emancipation, people ready and willing to lay time, talent and money on the altar of universal freedom. We light our chalice for such beacons of light and hope.

READING

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's short story *Two Offers* published in 1859, was the first short story to be published by an African American. It tells the story of two cousins and the paths their lives had taken. One sought marriage for safety and the other who had been brought up in poverty went on to achieve an important place as a writer. At the end of the story this second woman gets up from the deathbed of her cousin who had chosen safety and a conventional life and rededicates herself to the path she had chosen.

While not entirely autobiographical, we hear Ms. Harper speaking of herself and the life she chose to live and the meaning she found there. And we hear her speaking to us of the good and right and true, that faith that invites our action on the behalf of the world, so that at the end of our days, we too, shall know the satisfaction of having lived a meaningful life.

Ms. Harper wrote: *Her cousin turned from that death bed a sadder and wiser woman. She resolved more earnestly than ever to make the world better by her example, gladder by her presence, and to kindle the fires of her genius on the altars of universal love and truth.*

She had a higher and better object in all her writings than the mere acquisition of gold, or acquirement of fame. She felt that she had a high and holy mission on the battle-field of existence, that life was not given her to be frittered away in nonsense, or wasted away in trifling pursuits.

She would willingly espouse an unpopular cause but not an unrighteous one. In her the down-trodden slave found an earnest advocate; the flying fugitive remembered her kindness as he stepped cautiously through our Republic, to gain his freedom in a monarchical land, having broken the chains on which the rust of centuries had gathered.

Little children learned to name her with affection, the poor called her blessed, as she broke her bread to the pale lips of hunger. Her life was like a beautiful story, only it was clothed with the dignity of reality and invested with the sublimity of truth.

True, no husband brightened her life with his love, or shaded it with his neglect. No children nestling lovingly in her arms called her mother. Not vainly pining at her loneliness and isolation: the world was full of warm, loving hearts, and her own beat in unison with them. Neither was she always sentimentally sighing for something to love, objects of affection were all around her, and the world was not so wealthy in love that it had no use for hers; in blessing others she made a life and benediction, and as old age descended peacefully and gently upon her, she had learned one of life's most precious lessons, that true happiness consists not so much in the fruition of our wishes as in the regulation of desires and the full development and right culture of our whole natures.

PRAYER/MEDITATION

To make the wounded whole and revive our souls, let us continue in the spirit of prayer with a spoken meditation, a poem by Ms. Harper, *Songs For The People*, which will be followed by moments of silence.

*Let me make the songs for the people, Songs for the old and young;
Songs to stir like a battle-cry Wherever they are sung.*

*Not for the clashing of sabres, For carnage nor for strife;
But songs to thrill the hearts of all With more abundant life.*

*Let me make the songs for the weary, Amid life's fever and fret,
Till hearts shall relax their tension, And careworn brows forget.*

*Let me sing for little children, Before their footsteps stray,
Sweet anthems of love and duty, To float o'er life's highway.*

*I would sing for the poor and aged, When shadows dim their sight;
Of the bright and restful mansions, Where there shall be no night.*

*Our world, so worn and weary, Needs music, pure and strong,
To hush the jangle and discords Of sorrow, pain, and wrong.*

*Music to soothe all its sorrow, Till war and crime shall cease;
And the hearts of all grown tender bless the world with peace.*

In moments of silence may we listen for the still small voice that soothes all sorrow and promises abundant life.

READING

Our second reading is from the most autobiographical of Frances Ellen Watkin Harper's short stories entitled *Trial and Triumph*. One of the character's, the Reverend Mr. Lomax, is described in these words:

To him religion was a reasonable service and he wished it to influence his people's right conduct as well as sway their emotions. Believing that right thinking is connected with right living, he taught them to be conservative without being bigoted, and liberal without being morally indifferent and careless in their modes of thought. He wanted them to be able to give a reason for the faith that was in them and that faith to be rooted and grounded in love.

Later in the story, Rev. Lomax asks one of the protagonists, Mr. Thomas, for his vision of the church. Mr. Thomas replied, "I would have a parish building to every church, and I would have in them an evening home for boys. I would have some persons come in and teach them different handicrafts, so as at least to give them an opportunity to be more expert in learning how to use their hands.

I would have that building a well warmed and well lighted room in winter, where all should be welcome to come and get a sandwich and a warm cup of tea or coffee and a hot bowl of soup, and if the grog shops were selling liquor for five cents, I would sell the soup for three or four cents,

with a roll. I would have a room reserved for such ladies as Mrs. Lasette, who are so willing to help, for the purpose of holding mother's meetings. I would have in that parish building the most earnest men and women to come together and consult and counsel with each other on the best means to open for ourselves, doors which are still closed against us."

Reverend Lomax agrees with this vision of the church as the great centre of moral, spiritual, and intellectual life. He replies, "For the temporal and spiritual welfare of our people, we have the example of the great Physician who did not consider it beneath him to attend to physical maladies

as well as spiritual needs, and who did not consider the synagogue too holy, nor the Sabbath day too sacred to administer to the destitute and suffering."

SERMON

The Faith Of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Tuesday evening, I went to the rally on the steps of First Unitarian Universalist Church of Baltimore. That morning, Maryland's highest court had struck down by a vote of 4 to 3 the ruling of a lower court that gays and lesbians should have equal access to civil marriage. The reason the highest court gave for defining civil marriage as between a man and a woman ultimately came down to the fact that only heterosexuals can become pregnant by accident. Thus, children of such encounters should have fundamental protections by the state.

But the Court of Appeals said nothing about the children of gays and lesbians. Do they not have an equal right to fundamental protections by the state? If one of their parents is ill and in the hospital, shouldn't they be allowed to visit? If one of their parents dies, shouldn't they be cared for by the other without any possible legal challenges? Shouldn't their parents receive the same tax benefits as the parents of their friends who are married?

And what of heterosexual couples who marry later in life? They are not seeking a marriage license out of fear that they, like Sarah and Abraham, might conceive at the ages of 103 and 97! Nowhere did the higher court ruling acknowledge that as an institution, marriage has been evolving over centuries....from a time when it was primarily an economic arrangement with women treated as property to a time when people of different religious, racial, or cultural backgrounds were forbidden to marry, (think Romeo and Juliet) to today, when, at its best, it is a covenant grounded in mutual respect, love, and commitment.

Instead, the Court of Appeals said that any change to an understanding of marriage will have to come from the State legislature. So about seventy of us gathered on the steps of First Unitarian to express our disappointment in the ruling that day and to begin to prepare to lobby the legislature. My colleague, from a Presbyterian church, said words to the effect, "*We've been here, before. We've been at the tomb after the powers and principalities have gone home to dinner.*"

He was, of course, referring to the crucifixion of Jesus by the Roman authorities. And as he continued to tell that story, and repeat his refrain, "*We've been here, before...*" I found it to be powerful.

My thoughts turned to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper... because she, literally, HAD been here before. She had literally stood in Baltimore... thinking she had certain civil rights as a free person of color, only to see them taken away in 1853 when Maryland passed the law that freed slaves could be enslaved, again. We have been here before.

And she chose to use her abilities as a poet and a writer to change hearts and minds. We have been here before.

And she had to do so not just for a month or a year, but for a sustained period of time. We have been here before.

What was the faith that sustained Frances Ellen Watkins Harper?

Her mother died when she was three. Frances Ellen Watkins was sent to live with her maternal uncle, The Reverend William Watkins. He was an early leader in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He also founded an academy which Frances attended until the age of 13 studying the Bible, Greek, Latin, mathematics, and English.

AND her uncle was an associate of William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist who started the newspaper, The Liberator, and who founded the American Anti-Slavery Society. His son was an associate of Frederick Douglass. So Frances Ellen Watkins came rightly by her connections to abolitionists! But that was not the reason she became one.

At the age of 14, she had left her Uncle's home, accepting the position of a domestic in a Quaker family. That family owned a bookstore and gave her access to their library. They also encouraged her literary pursuits. Her poems appeared in newspapers and a collection of them was published by the time she was 20.

Only when the Fugitive Slave Law was passed five years later, did Frances Ellen Watkins move to Ohio to teach sewing at an African Methodist Episcopal Church seminary. She could've remained there as a teacher and writer. Instead, she moved to Pennsylvania and was moved to become an abolitionist because of what she saw in the world around her.

Her poem *The Slave Mother* conveys some of what she saw. In it, she describes a mother and son being separated by the common practice of slave owners selling the children of their slaves for profit. No doubt, the death of her own mother, when she was three, influenced Frances Ellen Watkins' description of a mother and child being intentionally separated because of human injustice.

*HEARD you that shriek?
It rose so wildly on the air,
It seemed as if a burden'd heart
Was breaking in despair.*

*Saw you the sad, imploring eye?
Its every glance was pain,
As if a storm of agony
Were sweeping through the brain.*

*She is a mother pale with fear,
Her boy clings to her side,
And in her kirtle vainly tries
His trembling form to hide.*

*He is not hers, although she bore
For him a mother's pain;
He is not hers, although her blood
Is coursing through his veins!*

*He is not hers, for cruel hands
May rudely tear apart
The only wreath of household love*

That binds her breaking heart.

*His lightest word has been a tone
Of music round her heart,
Their lives a streamlet blent in one-
Oh, Father! must they part?*

*They tear him from her circling arms,
Her last and fond embrace.
Oh! never more may her sad eyes
Gaze on his mournful face.*

*No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks
Disturb the listening air:
She is a mother, and her heart
Is breaking in despair.*

If Watkins' rhymes sound old-fashioned, keep in mind that her poetry was written close to 160 years ago. On the other hand, you may simply agree with W. E. B. DuBois' critique of her poetry. In his eulogy on her death in 1911, he said of her: "*She was not a great singer, but she had some sense of song; she was not a great writer, but she wrote some words worth reading. She was, above all, sincere.*"

That she was.

She wrote often about slave mothers. One of her stories of a slave mother becomes the central event in Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*. But Frances Ellen Watkins did more than write. Like the minister in her novel, her faith was in action on behalf of the oppressed. She was a friend of Harriet Tubman, known as "The Black Moses," who led over 300 slaves from the south to freedom in the north.

Frances Ellen Watkins helped with the Underground Railroad. She also foreshadowed Rosa Parks. On more than one occasion, in Philadelphia, she refused to give up her place in the street car and move to the car for "her kind." She would have approved of today's display table of "green products" – or at least using one's purchasing power to NOT support injustice.

She participated in "The Free Produce" movement. Rather than buying particular products, this entailed boycotting anything manufactured by slave labor. She even wrote a poem extolling the virtues of wearing "an easy garment" over which no slave cried or toiled.

While teaching at Union Seminary, Frances Ellen Watkins befriended John Brown. He was the principal of the school. When John Brown was imprisoned for raiding a federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry in 1859, she wrote him, "*In the name of the young girl sold from the warm clasp of a mother's arms to the clutches of a libertine or profligate, in the name of the slave mother, her heart rocked to and fro by the agony of her mournful separations – I thank you, that you have been brave enough to reach out your hands to the crushed and blighted of my race.*" Frances Ellen Watkins moved in with John Brown's wife during his trial and provided her with financial resources after his death.

Working as an abolitionist, Frances Ellen Watkins was introduced to Unitarianism. According to Janeen Grohsmeyer, of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society, given their place in society, the Unitarians could help Frances Ellen Watkins "*advance her causes in places she could never go.*"

But political expediency was not the only reason she was drawn to our free faith. As we heard in her description of the minister, she also resonated with a vision of religion as "reasonable service." Earlier in her novel, *Trial and Triumph*, Frances Ellen Watkins had shared a dialogue between a grandmother and granddaughter. The granddaughter said *"I felt that I wanted to be good just like the preacher told us, and I went and asked aunt Liza how people got religion."*

The grandmother asks, *"What did she tell you?"* The granddaughter replies, *"She told me that people went down to the mourner's bench and prayed and then they would get up and shout and say they had religion, and that was all she knew about it."*

The grandmother admonishes, *"You went to the wrong one when you went to your aunt Liza. She's got her head too full of dress and dancing and nonsense."*

However, the narrator chastises the grandmother for not offering her granddaughter an alternative view of faith. For her part, Frances always maintained close ties to the African Methodist Episcopal Church. But she joined First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia because it explicitly offered an understanding of faith that entailed doing something for others.

Of her own theology, Frances Ellen Watkins wrote, *"The nearer we ally ourselves to the wants and woes of humanity in the spirit of Christ, the closer we get to the great heart of God; the nearer we stand by the beating of the pulse of universal love."* This faith sustained Frances Ellen Watkins during trying times.

In 1860, at the age of 35, Frances Ellen Watkins married Fenton Harper, a farmer, who had three children from a previous marriage. She moved to his farm and in 1862, they had a fourth child, a daughter, Mary. Four years after her marriage, she told a Woman's Rights Convention in 1866, *"A great sorrow fell upon my life. My husband had died suddenly, leaving me a widow with four children, one my own, and the other stepchildren. I tried to keep my children together. But my husband died in debt, and before he had been in his grave three months, the administrator had swept the very milk-crocks and washtubs from my hands."*

She continued, *"I was a farmer's wife and made butter for the Columbus market; but what could I do, when they had swept all away! Had I died instead of my husband, how different would have been the result! By this time he would have had another wife, it is likely; and no administrator would have gone into his house, broken up his home, and sold his bed, and taken away his means of support."*

Frances Watkins Harper kept her family together by lecturing to blacks and whites in every state in the South except (Texas and Arkansas) during Reconstruction. She used the figure of Moses as an archetype for creating a new egalitarian society. She fought for getting the vote for black men and then for all women. She lived to see the former, with the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1878. She did not live to see the latter with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. She was also active in the temperance movement and was one of the first African American women to hold national office in the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Prohibition may seem quaint, today, but Frances Watkins Harper was one of the first to write publicly about *"the devastating impact of alcoholism on the family"* and especially on communities of color.

In 1894, Harper helped to found the National Association of Colored Women. And she was a member of the Universal Peace Union. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper died in February of 1911, three years after her daughter, Mary. Thanks to Unitarian Universalists working together in 1992, her story has been told and some of her writings have been reprinted.

This is good. For Frances Ellen Watkins Harper reminds us that we HAVE been here before. The gay and lesbian parents who are worried about having children torn from their arms – we have been here before in the *The Slave Mother*. Those of us, who believe that, marriage should be broadened beyond a matter of biology to a covenant grounded in love – we have been here before – in a society struggling with reconstructing human relations.

Those of us honoring the 50th Anniversary of The Little Rock 9 by writing and speaking about The Jenna 6 in Louisiana – we have been here before – in Ms. Harper's *Trials and Triumphs*.

Those of us who believe that the choices of a single individual CAN make a difference – such as purchasing green products – we have been here before in *The Free Produce Movement*.

Those of us who want to join Rev. Sinkford in petitioning the government for peace – we have been here before in Mrs. Harper's call to end the Spanish American War.

Those of us who want to end workplace discrimination – we have been here before in Mrs. Harper's advocacy on behalf of the economic rights of all people.

Those of us who want to support the Matthew Shepard Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act, and plan to call our Senators this week – we have been here before in Mrs. Harper's powerful words "*to brand with everlasting infamy the lawless and brutal cowardice that lynches, burns, and tortures...*"

And all of us, who have found in Unitarian Universalism a faith "to make the world better by (our example), to kindle the fires of our minds and souls on the altars of universal love and truth..." we have been here before – thanks to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. May her faith and example inspire our own.

And thus, may we, too, find, "*that true happiness consists in the full development and right culture of our whole natures.*"

CLOSING WORDS

Slavery had ended, but women had not yet won the right to vote, when, in 1890, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper wrote:

*Oh, sisters kind and loving when your gifts to me shall tell
of the hours swiftly passing, may I learn to use them well.
And write upon them records for the brighter world above,
of a life endowed with power, and transcribed with deeds of love.*

EXTINGUISH CHALICE

And now, as we extinguish this chalice, this symbol of the common spirit that calls us forward in our lives, may its light go with us to illuminate the path ahead. May the flame of our heritage light the way through whatever present challenges we face that we may truly live lives endowed with power and transcribed with deeds of love. Go now in peace.