

**Father Thomas Barnes**  
**Sunday February 5, 2012**

**Thought to Ponder:**

The first real gospel sermon I ever heard was from the lips of Father Barnes; the first light that dawned upon my darkened mind on the subject of Universalism was through his instrumentality; and I bless God that since that, my mind has been freed from all direful apprehensions in regard to the future. I have ever since felt that God was my Father and Friend and heaven my desired home. I have felt reconciled to the Divine will, and my faith has sustained me under the severest trials of life.

– George Bates of Canton Mills, reporting remarks made by  
Universalists all over the state of Maine.

*(Memoir of the Rev. Thomas Barnes, by Levisa Buck, 1856)*

**Reading**

Words of Sebastian Streeter, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Universalist Minister, first in Maine, later in Massachusetts, describing his first time hearing Father Thomas Barnes, first minister of this church, preach. (from *Memoir of the Rev. Thomas Barnes, written and compiled by his daughter, Mrs. Levisa Buck Portland: S. H. Colesworthy, 1856.*)

It was at the General Convention of Universalists in the New England States and others, at its session in September 1801, held in Swanzey, New Hampshire. My home at the time was in that town. The meeting of that convention, and of so large a number of Universalist Clergymen, amounting in aggregate to some eight or ten, if my memory serves me correctly, was a very great novelty, and produced a very extraordinary excitement...

With a number of other young people, I attended the meeting. We went not to worship, but to see the wonder, and have a good time. We did not reach the church till some little time after the commencement of the public service. Our seat was in the gallery, and almost directly in front of the pulpit.

I was the last of the party which entered the pew; and just as I was closing the door, Father Barnes rose in the desk and named his text... At first glimpse of the venerable man, a sort of unearthly thrill went through my whole frame. His attitude, his general aspect; and especially the peculiar intonations of his voice, struck me with singular force, a power with which I had hitherto been unacquainted. There was something in the look of his eye which held me spellbound. It was neither large nor sparkling; and still, there was in it a blending of archness with candor; of earnestness with affection; and particularly a tender, pleading, all pervasive languor, from which I had no power to disengage myself. And there I stood, like a statue, wrapt in wonder, and with an intense gaze at the speaker, through the whole discourse, which occupied in the delivery something more than an hour...

... the whole realm of feeling within me was lighted up, and became radiant with ecstasy. I felt I was listening to God's truth, the plain teachings of the holy scriptures; and the tide of bliss rose in my soul...

...I was afraid he would leave off speaking, and I wanted he should keep on, in precisely the same strain, forever...

**Sermon**     Father Barnes

(c)     Rev. Sylvia Stocker

According to our church history, Father Thomas Barnes was our first minister, serving the Universalist Church in Brunswick from 1812 to 1814. Story has it that he came here from his home town of Norway once a month to preach, and we paid him by loading his saddle bags with cotton from the

new cotton mill in town. We know little more than that. In fact, I would argue we don't even know if the story is true. The records of our early years have, for the most part, vanished. True, one or two of the early documents, including our original covenant, signed January 20, 1812, are stored at the Pejepscot Historical Society. But most of the records are simply gone. So there are a lot of gaps. Father Barnes is a perfect example. I cannot find any outside source that lists him as our minister, unless you count Wheeler's *History of Brunswick*, written in 1878. I assume Wheeler got his information from us, though, so I hesitate to count his book as an outside source.

In fact, Thomas Barnes' biography, written by his daughter 40 years or so after his death, never mentions Brunswick, but does include this curious statement:

*After Mr. Barnes' ordination, his engagements were to preach at Norway, Falmouth and New Gloucester, every fourth Sunday. He found employment for the spare Sabbath, in the surrounding towns, occasionally preaching at Livermore, Turner, Danville, Freeport, and Poland. ... Mr Barnes, at the solicitation of the Eastern brethren, paid several visits to Belgrade, Waterville and Farmington, but never journeyed any further eastward (p. 65.)*

Studying our history produces more questions than answers. I find, too, much to ponder in the ways of ministry, when I contrast the world of yesterday to the world of today. Little matter that we cannot locate Barnes here with certainty and accuracy. Chances are he was here. And anyway, we have linked our story to his, so his is worth telling.

So who was Father Thomas Barnes? He was born in Merrimack, New Hampshire, on October 4, 1749. He was the third generation of Barnes on

these shores, his grandfather having come here from England and having settled in Merrimack two generations earlier.

He was educated at the town school and by all reports was very studious. His roots were far too humble for academy learning or college learning, though. What he knew he gained from his early rudimentary education and from his own serious course of study.

At 21, he went to reside with a Dr. Jonas Marshall as a student of medicine. He stayed for nearly a year, but was called home to take care of a sick brother, who died shortly afterward of a fever that also threatened Thomas' life. Thomas abandoned his study of medicine altogether when his bereft parents asked him to stay home upon the death of their other son. But he was under Dr. Marshall's influence long enough to leave his congregationalist upbringing and become a Baptist. His daughter reports that at the time Jesus was a perfect savior for Barnes. By accepting Jesus, Barnes became one of the elect and that was enough.

Two years later, he married Mary Fletcher, also a Baptist. Together they had a passel of children – nine all told. By the age of 34, the family was living in Jaffry, New Hampshire.

One day in 1783 Thomas Barnes went to hear Caleb Rich speak about universal salvation. Caleb Rich was one of the first Universalist ministers. To listen to him was to listen to the cutting edge of Universalist theology. Barnes liked what Rich had to say, and he vowed to attend further meetings., much to his wife's dismay.

Their daughter reports: *Mrs. Barnes was fearful her husband would become a believer in what she then thought so fatal an error. One day she urged*

*him, with much feeling, to hear Mr. Rich no more. Mr. Barnes ... said, when leaving her, Can my dear Mary set bounds to the love of God?"*

*She imagined she could: At least she would try. God could not love sinners.*

*But, had she not herself been a sinner and did she not now believe herself a partaker of the love of God? And was he not unchangeable?*

*The supposed unelect passed before her imagination, and the promises of God. Was it possible [those promises] could be impartially applied to all mankind?*

*At length she found it impossible to set bounds on the love of God. The more she tried, the more she found this love overleaping every barrier until it overcame all sin and death; for infinite love cannot be bounded by a finite being. (Memoir, pp. 38-39)*

When Barnes returned home, he and Mary openly declared themselves Universalists, after a prayerful examination of scriptures. Thomas Barnes devoted the rest of his life to preaching Universalism. He preached in Vermont, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and, starting in 1799, Maine, where – as the first and untiring, devoted preacher of universal salvation, he became known as the father of Maine Universalism. (Aha, you may be saying. Maybe that's why they called him “Father” Barnes. But no. In those days the convention was to address Universalist preachers as “Father.”)

When Barnes first started preaching, the only Universalist he had ever heard was Caleb Rich. In fact, at that point, there were only three other people engaged in Universalist ministry in New England: John Murray, Adam Streeter, and Caleb Rich. So Thomas Barnes became part of that cutting

edge of theology that by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had swept across the U.S.

Here in Maine he was ordained in 1802, over the congregations of New Gloucester, Norway, and Freeport. To attend to his Sabbath responsibilities, he traveled 40 miles on average – on horseback in summer and in a sleigh in winter.

Father Barnes was, above all, a preacher – an extemporaneous preacher at that. None of his sermons survive, for none were written down. He would preach for an hour, without consulting a single note. That's not to say he wasn't prepared: He had carefully thought through his points, and his exceedingly competent grasp of scripture enabled him to recite and name chapter and verse with ease. His ease with words served him well when he was challenged, as he frequently was, to defend his theology – sometimes even in the course of a service!

Despite his talents for debate, Barnes is remembered as sweet-tempered and gently persuasive. His sermons were practical, emphasizing how to live in this world, and insisting that faith should result in good works. He modeled what he preached. Because of that consistency between word and deed he was held in the highest esteem. Even his nay-sayers would eventually come around to liking him, even if they could not accept his theology.

In 1814, the year he left off preaching in Brunswick, Thomas Barnes was diagnosed with heart trouble. On October 6, 1816, he died. The previous Sunday he preached his last in Freeport.

I find Barnes' story fascinating for its window into the ministry of his day.

Because there were so few Universalist ministers in Maine – and so many pockets of Universalists who wanted to hear good preachers – Barnes, like his comrades, served many churches at once. He served as guests for other congregations, too – such is the work of a missionary, after all, to travel and spread the word. He didn't preach at all those churches every week, but in a rotation: This week in Norway, next in New Gloucester, and so on. That meant a church might have their minister around once a month, maybe for two or three days. It also meant his ministry was primarily a preaching ministry.

How different from today!

I have a hard time conceiving of a ministry that is so solely focused on preaching. To be sure, planning the Sunday service takes the most hours out of my week. But the rest of my work, executed in the hub of the church, side-by-side with you, forms the relationship out of which my ministry emerges.

When I first came to Brunswick, I was terrified of preaching. In my previous church, I was Assistant Minister. As such, I participated in every service, but I preached only twice a year or so. That meant two things: First, every sermon I preached was nerve-racking ... It had to be good, because I wouldn't have another chance for a long, long time. Second, and more significant, I never got to experience how the ongoing relationship with the people helped to determine and form the message. It wasn't until I came here that I fully understood the dynamic between minister and congregation – how so much of what I feel called to say has its genesis in my day-to-day interactions with the congregation.

That dynamic must have been different in Barnes' day. It must have been so exciting when the minister came to town. But if Barnes and the other early ministers who followed him here were conducting circuit riding ministries, don't you wonder what we did in between visits from the minister? I do. The minister couldn't serve as an administrator of any kind. Nor could he much tend to pastoral needs. Any ongoing social justice work would seldom be carried out by the minister.

The people tended to the business of the church. The preacher preached. Day-to-day ministry was naturally taken up by the people... who tended to the sick and dying, and who brought comfort, laughter, joy, assistance, and sometimes needed advice to one another. And the people undertook theological exploration and spiritual questing in the minister's absence.

In fact, in our church's history, there were periodic long gaps of time when we had no minister at all. Perhaps in those days it was clear that the people were the church. Today I think that may be less clear, but it is no less true. The people are the church.

I don't want to minimize the role of the minister. Obviously, if I didn't think that role were important, I wouldn't devote myself to the task. Churches without ministers have a hard time remaining vibrant and strong. But I want to underscore the importance of the shared ministry of the whole congregation. In my short time here, that shared ministry has never been so needed as it has this past year, as we have engaged the work of recovering from trauma and begun to set our sights on a new church. I have been moved over and over again by the caring I see among you – the very real ministry you offer one another.

I confess I have the tiniest concern today, though, and I want to share it with you. Alongside the excitement about the new building – an excitement I both



share and celebrate – I want to be sure we remember the work of the church is still be carried on day in and day out. I look at it this way. The new building is sort of like Father Barnes coming to town. It's the shiny, exciting thing. And the day-to-day work of our church is like the weeks between Barnes' visits when the church was still the church.

For every person on the Building Team or Capital Campaign Committee, there is another doing the day-to-day work of teaching Sunday School, or playing music, or setting up the Minnie Brown Center, or preparing the annual budget or signing the checks or creating fundraisers to help meet the payroll, or creating workshops like the one the Working for Justice group put on last Tuesday.

We need the big shiny thing – Father Barnes coming to town or the new building being designed – *and we also need* the ongoing work of the church. It's not as though we will start being a church once the building is built. We are already a church, now, this moment.

And there's something else – the person sitting beside us may be more in keen need of our shared ministry than anything else. They may have just received an unwelcome diagnosis, or welcomed a new grandchild into the family, or be facing eviction, or have just had their first poem published. Our time together is precious. Let us take the time we need to attend to one another in loving ways, to ask one another how things are with our hearts and souls, to listen to one another's stories.

Two hundred years ago, things were very different Universalism was just getting started. The theology was new, the people felt excited and vulnerable, the air was filled with an urgency for getting the word out.

Our forebears drew into their midst preachers to bring the word. Together, they created the seeds of a congregation that continues to flower today. The watering, fertilizing, weeding, and careful tending... all of that is up to us. It is our turn to take up the legacy and carry it forward into the future.

**\*Benediction**

The words of John Murray, one of the first Universalist ministers in this country.

Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine. Use it... to bring more light and understanding to the hearts of men and women. Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.