

WELCOME HOME!
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: “Likeness to God” by William Ellery Channing

“We call God a Mind. He has revealed himself as a Spirit. But what do we know of mind but through the unfolding of this principle in our own breasts. That unbounded spiritual energy which we call God is conceived by us only through consciousness, through the knowledge of ourselves. We ascribe thought or intelligence to the Deity, as one of his most glorious attributes. And what means this language? These terms we have framed to express operations or faculties of our own souls. The Infinite Light would be for ever hidden from us did not kindred rays dawn and brighten within us. God is another name for human intelligence raised above all error and imperfection, and extended to all possible truth.”¹

This statement by William Ellery Channing is perhaps one of the most brazen statements ever uttered by a Christian minister. Why? Channing claims there is an affinity, a kinship, between Universal Mind and the human mind. He believes that the human mind is the scion of the mind of God. We would be mistaken to think that Channing was suggesting that the human mind is God, particularly the one nestled between our own ears. It is like the little boy who asked his mother, “Mommy, who do you think is the smartest boy in the whole world?”

The mother replied, “Probably not the one you are thinking of.”

¹ William Ellery Channing, “Likeness to God,” *The Works of William E. Channing, DD* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1886), 293.

And we will also have misunderstood Channing if we think that God is a mere Freudian projection of human thought and ego need. Rather, Channing saw the human mind as a depository, in various quantities, of the great intelligence and natural law of the universe. Human consciousness is a reflection of the universal mind which none of us can fully possess or comprehend, which is why we dare not associate it with ego. At the same time Channing suggests that we cannot know God without mind. Anything that we can know of God or Universal Mind is known to us through the function of human intelligence in its many expressions of reason, intuition, and imagination.

Such intelligence cannot be divided up into the simple categories that we all science, philosophy, religion, art, mathematics, and literature. All bodies and disciplines of knowledge lend themselves to the Mind that Channing calls God. There is no such thing as sacred knowledge or profane knowledge. The atheist philosophy professor, the theologian, the poet, the scientist, the musician, and the artist all reflect a greater intelligence that makes up the mind of God.

Let us never forget that Congregationalism in general and University Congregational Church in particular celebrates the life of the mind. Recall that Congregationalists established Harvard University in

New England and Fairmount College in Wichita, a private Congregational school founded by the Rev. Joseph Homer Parker in 1886. Fairmount outgrew itself and became Wichita State University. So if you are looking for a church home this morning, please understand that in this congregation we honor the mind of God in image, work, music, and movement. Every Sunday we sing, "Praise God the Truth that makes us free." In this congregation we honor the human mind in its exploration for truth without censorship. For that reason we value lifespan Christian Education. I have tried to strengthen the adult Christian education program with more opportunities for adults, including the Religion and Life program, the Minister's Bible Study, and the lecture series.

If you are looking for a faith community where intellectual integrity is a partner in matters of faith and practice, we welcome you home. Here you are encouraged to employ your reason. You are welcome to suspend judgment and even be skeptical from time to time. The human mind is a sacred gift and holy responsibility that each of us is entrusted to exercise. Dr. Channing proclaimed, "Mind, by which we mean both moral and intellectual powers, is God's first end." Welcome home if you are looking for a faith community that encourages thought and common sense in matters of belief and character.

Having said that, I must extend one major caveat. We are not as rational as we presume to be. Our minds are limited and sometimes clouded. Human actions are not always reasonable. We are not always in our right minds. A friend of mine sent me the book, *Bozo Sapiens* by Michael and Ellen Kaplan. They quote from the essay by Italian economist, Carlo Cipolla, “The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity.” Cipolla complains, “Day after day, with unceasing monotony, one is harassed in one’s activities by stupid individuals who appear suddenly and unexpectedly in the most inconvenient places and at the most improbable moments.”²

My father was a coxswain in the United States Navy during World War II. When he was not on duty at the helm he spent time in the galley where he learned to bake. One day he noticed the cook pumping bug spray into huge sacks of flour. Asked why, the cook replied that he was trying to kill the roaches. The man’s limited mind did not allow him to consider other reasonable outcomes.

Pity the parent who has taken every measure to assure that his or her teenager has had the best sex education available, but never considers the power of hormones. Nature is always on the side of lovers, even when

² Carlo Cipolla, as quoted in Michael and Ellen Kaplan, *Bozo Sapiens* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 4.

logical consequences defy her passion. Indeed, it is most irrational of us to think that we are ultimately rational creatures.

With that reality before us, again I say, welcome home all ye thinkers. Despite the limits of the human mind let us not lose the celebration of the human mind that Dr. Channing invites us to. Ours is a faith tradition that fronts human intelligence as sacred! The mind is sacred because it is the time and space where we meet the mind of God. When ink marks the poet's paper; when paint wets canvas; when notes are tapped out on the keyboard before they make their way to composition paper; when a mathematician applies chalk to blackboard; when the scientist adjusts her hypothesis yet again; when the teacher patiently elicits a student's response to Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*; when a parent wipes away the tears of guilt and encourages a child to right behavior with the neighborhood kids – when all of these activities of the mind are engaged, God is engaged. As we think and learn and gain wisdom we approach the throne of Truth. When we have a great idea the most appropriate response is not, "Boy, am I smart." I think the most appropriate response is gratitude. For behind every bright idea shines a brighter Light.

Welcome home to a church that honors human mind and the importance of thought. But please understand that we do not all think alike! Be assured that there are some in this very room who take exception to the previous paragraphs. We will disagree on many things and, believe it or not, it is not the purpose of this pulpit to be agreeable! It is enough if I have encouraged the congregation to think and have affirmed the human mind. We gather under this steeple not to confirm some ancient creed, but to affirm our responsibility to think through the matters of faith and ethics.

Welcome home to some of the brightest minds you will ever have the privilege of meeting. You will find among us empiricists and members of the flat earth society. We are agnostics and mystics, poets and humanists. By and large we are women and men who try to live as reasonably and as responsibly as we know how. We often run the whole spectrum of thought and faith in a single day.

We celebrate the mind and the Mind of the Creation. We honor reason and understand that we are not always so reasonable. We cherish the freedom to think and doubt. And we are also free to change our minds! Because you change your mind in a Congregational church does not mean you are “backsliding.” Even scientists change their minds. For

centuries astronomers decided that Pluto was a planet. But in 1996 they changed their minds and determined that Pluto was not a planet after all, and they broke out into a debate about the meaning of the word “planet.” A vibrant mind is constantly adapting and changing.

In fact, we will change our minds often. We will gather new information or reconsider previous information; we may come to new or nuanced conclusions about what we believe about life, truth, and mystery. We age and experience suffering. Loved ones die, and we discover the real limitations of our common lot. We will begin to discern the difference between information, knowledge, and wisdom. We will change our minds often and I trust that we will not change the custom of thinking.

Let me give you a personal example. Many people of a variety of religious persuasions affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. For many years I subscribed to that principle. But it is something that I have changed my mind about to some degree. I am no longer an absolutist on that principle. What do we mean by inherent worth and dignity? I believe that a person’s inherent worth and dignity is founded on their capacity as moral agents to make ethical choices and act responsibly toward other human beings. This understanding is rooted in

the long Jewish and Christian appraisal of the human condition. We find in the book of Genesis, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

(Genesis 1:27 NRSV) This is a sacred assessment of the human mind to think and make moral choices. This is what it means to be made in the image of God. Our worth and dignity come from the capacity for moral agency.

Moral agency does not mean that we do not make mistakes. We certainly do. But even when we are in error we are capable of recognizing our poor choices and can make restitution for them. We can learn from our mistakes and become wiser moral agents. Basically I still believe that. But I have also concluded that the moral agency in some people is so diminished or outright destroyed that they have lost their worth and dignity as human beings. They cannot or will not function as moral agents. This is not condemnation on my part, but an observation of their diminishment as a human being.

There are some people who, for whatever reason, sacrifice their moral agency. Serial killers like Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer come to my mind. Dahmer not only murdered his victims but also ate them. I wonder about the moral agency of suicide bombers who take the lives of

civilians in market places, outdoor cafes, and skyscrapers. I understand that there might be factors in these cases such as psychopathology, childhood abuse, or economic-religious-political extremism complicated by factors such as poverty and other forms of tyranny. But for whatever reason these people have abandoned or slain their own character the moment that they chose to murder an innocent human being with malice and forethought. With the death of moral agency comes the loss of worth and dignity.

Now I have not said that all people who commit murder have forever lost their inherent worth and dignity. I have not said that a soldier who kills an enemy combatant has lost his or her inherent worth, even the soldier who inadvertently kills civilians. I am not making the case for cruel and unusual punishment or capital punishment. I am saying that unbridled unethical behavior destroys human moral agency, the very power that gives our lives worth and dignity. Within the parameters of such definitions I cannot affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It is something I have changed my mind about. And, it is quite possible that I might change my mind on the issue again.

Welcome home if you are seeking a faith community that is challenged to think and think again. Join us in the labor and joy of critical

reflection. Celebrate with us the life of the mind and the Spirit of life that challenges it. You will find that thought and ethical reflection is a social process. Ideas do not form in a void, but are rooted in the loam of history. And history is always communal. And so we welcome you to the community of University Congregational Church.

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