

THE CHURCH OF OUR FATHER

At a cost of nearly \$60,000, the First Universalist Society of Brooklyn have completed a splendid church edifice with a commodious chapel for Sunday school and week day meetings. The church was dedicated to its high purposes on Sunday, and beside the pastor, the Rev. A. J. Canfield, the leading clergymen of the Universalist denomination in Brooklyn and New York, as well as from distant cities, and Mayor Low took part in the proceedings. It is not inappropriate that the chief magistrate of Brooklyn should be invited to participate in the opening of a new church of any school of Christianity. As Mayor Low well said, the work of the churches is a public interest, because they are the centers of moral thought and enterprise, that do good to the whole community. They have a conservative influence upon the particular neighborhood, and so upon public conduct as a whole. They keep alive in the community humane action and high thinking. They gather the children into their Sunday schools, and there are thousands of successful men and women in all our great cities who can trace to the Sunday school the first moral impetus of their life. They bring before the minds of adults, week by week and year by year, the solemn responsibilities of life, teaching them patience in tribulation and directing them in that conduct which, as Matthew Arnold says, is nine-tenths of life. They disperse every Sunday the mists and clouds of merely secular occupation and display to our busy and bread earning citizens "a city that hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God"...They make young and old feel neighborly toward the families around them and keep warm and active that social sentiment which knits men [sic] together for the common weal. The music of the organ and the hymns sung by the congregation refresh the weary spirit and lighten care. If religion were all a dream, it would still be worth the dreaming. It is an anodyne to wounded spirits, the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. Christianity humanizes us and gives us pictures of heroism and virtue, of faith, hope and charity which have never been excelled. One can always learn something from a sermon, if only patience, as George Herbert said. But, as a matter of fact, many of the best thoughts and most eloquent truths needed for the time come from the pulpit. It is well that a body of right living and studious men [sic] should be set apart in every community to evolve in their leisure and deliver on the Sunday the history, duties and prospects of our higher nature. A city or republic without churches would die of moral inanition. Hence Napoleon, although not scrupulous in conscience, made it his first business to repair the broken altars and rehabilitate the religious teachers of France.

The Universalists, as a denomination, do not compare in numbers with the older churches, but the building of this beautiful Church of Our Father should inspire them with fresh enterprise and lead them to adopt the promise, "Fear not, little flock, for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Some of the older churches seem to be losing their kingdoms, but the Universalists have their kingdom yet to gain. In this lies their advantage. It has been said that they have no distinct platform apart from other churches, that they build upon negations, and that a positive creed, even if erroneous, has more vitality than a system which consists chiefly in toning down and watering the creeds of others. It is true that Universalism was started in the Church of England by a clergyman who ventured to deny the dogma of everlasting punishment for the wicked. But that negation had a positive quality, inasmuch as it was based on the Fatherhood of God. The Christian Church had gradually ceased to be the church of Our Father and had become the church of our tormentor, our persecuting Czar. Its symbols and emblems, its books and pictures were full of hell. The imagination of the uneducated laity was kept in constant terror by the clergy, not only by the thought of present disfavor but of future reprobation with God. Some ministers still keep the cauldron of wrath smoking and burning. Mr. Spurgeon tells us that this body, "asbestos like," shall rise again to everlasting torments, that these feet of ours shall travel unceasingly the roads of pain, that we shall thirst forever where there is no water, and hunger forever where there is no food, and that, when myriads of ages shall have passed, this unpleasant state of body shall only be the beginning. The preacher himself is noted for conviviality; his pulpit jokes will probably be the only light reading and relief permitted

THE CHURCH OF OUR FATHER

to his beloved hearers in a future world. But this can only be accounted for either on the supposition that he does not believe what he preaches, or that he does not care for [e.g. about] the eternal torments of his supporters, because by Calvinistic election he is himself exempted from them. He even goes further, by picturing it as one of the joys of the saints in heaven to behold their relatives and bosom friends in hell.

...The Universalists started with a wholesale denial of all this superstition and revived among Christians the forgotten truth that God is our Father and we are His children, although sometimes disobedient. The other churches have caught up the strain, and *Pater Noster* is oftener heard than *Dies Iræ*. The occasion of their succession from orthodoxy, their *raison d'être* [reason for being] as a separate religious society might seem, therefore, to have ceased especially when...hundreds of the ablest clergymen of the orthodox churches, have avowed the same principles upon which Universalism were founded.

But, in our opinion, there is a field and a straight track before the Universalists which is not covered or claimed by other churches. The Unitarians have swerved of late years more and more from the religious sentiment and the conscience, involving duty and worship, into the devious and unsatisfying secularity of mere literature and philosophy. But men who ask for bread will not be satisfied with a stone. Cold human systems of mere abstract thinking will never draw men [sic] to church, because they can be thought out in privacy and have no warming and stimulating influence on the affections of the heart and the aspirations of the soul. Intellect, culture, the taste, the logical faculty are splendid furniture, but they do not make a home for the sorrowful and heavy laden. They make life worth living for those who are physically healthy, financially free and have plenty of mental resources and diversions. They do not make life worth living for the sick, the overburdened and the poor. Hence, when moral and social law had been revealed from Sinai, and Greek philosophy had discussed the soul as an entity with sublime possibilities and powers, the carpenter's son of Nazareth created an intenser interest than either by preaching glad tidings to the poor and deliverance to the captives. This is the mission that is still open in rich promise to the Church of Our Father in every city and country upon earth.

We doubt not that this fatherhood of God which inspires so many hopes while it destroys so many fears, involving as it does the brotherhood of man—the blending of the two forming the whole duty of man as Christ defined it when He named the two chief commandments as love to God and love to one's neighbor—will be ably and amply set forth by Mr. Canfield, the respected and popular pastor of "the Church of Our Father," in Brooklyn. It is fourteen years ago since we numbered him among the preachers of Brooklyn, and described his faithful ministry and preaching in the EAGLE. Since then he has been busy in other fields of labor as the pastor of Universalist churches in other cities. He is a worthy follower of Chapin and the other lights of American Universalism. Their mantle has fallen on the new generation of preachers. Mr. Canfield has a fair field before him, and if we mistake not he will find in Brooklyn an increasing number of intelligent and earnest men and women to whom the gospel of Christ divested of Calvinistic superstition, is as dear as their political citizenship and their own homes.

Brooklyn Daily Eagle, New York NY, Tue. 19 Jun 1883

Transcribed on 12 Aug 2009 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY