

Ambulatory Luminaries

Did you ever notice that the numerous rooms off the Ambulatory of our church are named after (you might have guessed) various Unitarian or Universalist luminaries? This is the ninth of several articles that will attempt to shine a light on who these Ambulatory Luminaries were and why they merit the honor of being named to these locations.

Theodore Parker, 1810 - 1860 (Room 12) by Toni Gold

Theodore Parker was an American transcendentalist and reforming minister of the Unitarian Church. His words and popular quotations would later inspire speeches by Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. He is descended from a line of New England Puritan pioneers and patriots, graduated from the Harvard Divinity School in 1836, followed by a call to the ministry of the Unitarian Church in West Roxbury, Massachusetts.

In 1841 Parker preached a sermon establishing him as a firebrand. He said that the traditions of historic Christianity did not reflect the truth, thus making an open break with orthodox theology. He argues instead for Christian belief in which the essence of Jesus's teachings remained permanent, but the words, traditions, and other forms of their conveyance did not. He stressed the immediacy of God and saw the Church as a communion, looking upon Christ as the supreme expression of God, but rejected all miracles and revelation and saw the Bible as full of contradictions and mistakes. He suggested that people experience God intuitively and personally.

The debate over the nature and degree of Parker's "infidelity" caused Unitarians to adopt a liberal creed, which they had formerly declined to do, but their position still proved too orthodox for Parker.

He resigned his West Roxbury pastorate in early 1846; Parker's new congregation, the 28th Congregational Society of Boston, grew to 2,000—then three percent of Boston's population—and included influential figures such as Louisa May Alcott, William Lloyd Garrison, Julia Ward Howe, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

After 1846, Parker shifted from a focus on Transcendentalism and challenging the bounds of Unitarian theology to a focus on the gathering national debate over slavery. In Boston, he led the movement to combat the Fugitive Slave Act, which required law enforcement and citizens of all states—free states as well as slave states—to assist in recovering fugitive slaves. Parker called the law "a hateful statute of kidnappers" and helped organize open resistance to it. He and his followers formed the Boston Vigilance Committee, which refused to assist with the recovery of fugitive slaves and helped hide them. As a result of such efforts, from 1850 to the onset of the American Civil War in 1861, only twice were slaves captured in Boston and transported back to the South. On both occasions, Bostonians opposed the actions with mass protests.

He supported the abolitionist John Brown, whom many considered a terrorist. After Brown's arrest, Parker wrote a public letter, "John Brown's Expedition Reviewed", arguing for the right of slaves to kill their masters, and defending Brown's actions.

Following a lifetime of overwork, Parker's ill health forced his retirement in 1859. He developed tuberculosis, a disease then without effective treatment. He died on May 10, 1860, less than a year before the outbreak of the Civil War.
