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ROBERT COLLYER AND HIS CHURCH

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A  
DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH

IN PHILADELPHIA

NOVEMBER 12 1871

BY

W. H. FURNESS

MINISTER

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## DISCOURSE.

I take for my text what the Jewish elders said to Jesus when they went to him in behalf of the Roman centurion.

HE IS WORTHY FOR WHOM THOU SHOULDST DO THIS.

Luke vii. 4.

MY FRIENDS:

The religious societies of our denomination have all been invited to aid in building a new Church in Chicago for our dearly beloved friend and brother, Robert Collyer, whose beautiful place of worship was burned down in the great Conflagration.

It is proposed to raise fifty thousand dollars for the purpose. I have no doubt this sum will be raised.

Apart from Robert Collyer's peculiar personal claims, there is in the Unitarian denomination as in all religious denominations, as in all men associated for common objects, what the French call, a spirit of the body, which prompts the members of the body to liberal giving, and causes every proposal made in its name to be greeted with favor for the mere name's sake, letting alone the intrinsic merits of the proposal. Political parties as well as religious sects illustrate this spirit.

Even the greatest outrages upon liberty and common honesty are more than pardoned—they are accounted honorable and sacred, when perpetrated in the name of the party or the church.

But, thank Heaven! we have as striking instances, and most cheering instances are they, of the same spirit in the interest of good objects. Witness the great Rebellion, when, in the name of Our Country, which makes this multitudinous and diversified population one body, acts of the noblest heroism were done, and self-sacrifice became a luxury. Witness also the generous outpouring of effective sympathy in behalf of the suffering hosts of the West, in the name of the common humanity which makes all mankind one.

Seeing that this spirit is so strong, I have no doubt, I say, that attachment to the name, loyalty to the denomination, will be powerful enough among liberal Christians to rebuild Robert Collyer's church in Chicago.

I am very earnestly desirous, friends and brothers, that we of this church should take a prompt and generous share in this most worthy enterprise. But for the fulfilment of my ardent desire, I do not rely upon your zeal for the denomination.

If there is any one Church in our denomination in which there is less of a denominational spirit than in

others, it is this Church. I do not believe there is any associated number of Unitarian Christians less disposed than we are (to use a vulgar but expressive phrase), to go it blind for a merely denominational object. I have never attempted—I should most certainly have failed if I had—to use the Unitarian name to conjure money out of your pockets. I regard it as a very good thing that it is so, that there is among you so little of the denominational spirit that whatever solicits your coöperation must stand or fall upon its merits.

For this state of things amongst us of this Church, there are the best of reasons. For a long time we were, and we are still, geographically speaking, on the outskirts of the Unitarian communion, not in the closest and most vital connection with it. When I first became the pastor of this church, nearly half a century ago, scarcely a six weeks passed that some one of my brothers in the ministry from Boston or its vicinity—the headquarters of the Unitarian denomination—did not stand in this pulpit, and thus keep up a living connection with the main body. But my fathers and brothers have, one after another, nearly all disappeared. Their voices are heard no more. A new generation has sprung up. We have been left more and more alone.

Then again the advocacy of the cause of the slave,

which I was "driven of the spirit" some thirty years ago, in a humble way to undertake, tended still further to isolate us. I was regarded as endangering the interests of Unitarian Christianity, which it was pleaded, had as much as it could do to bear the odium of the Unitarian name without having the added burthen of Abolitionism. It was impossible that this plea should increase our zeal for nominal Unitarianism. What church, what religious organization on earth was not bound to go down if its members could not feel and speak for the oppressed as oppressed with them? What doctrines, however pure and simple, were of any value if they could not sustain the cause of Humanity, however obnoxious that cause might be? Is it any wonder that we grew lukewarm in the interest of mere Unitarian Christianity? Dr. Channing said a little while before his death that he cared little for Unitarianism, and this it was that gave occasion to a report that he had become a Trinitarian. The truth was that he cared less and less for a denomination, as he was growing to care more and more for Justice and Humanity.

In addition to the subject once so dangerous and hateful, the so-called theological opinions in which I have been interested, my views of the nature and miracles of Jesus, have also helped, perhaps, to set our little church here in Philadelphia apart by itself. We

live to see both of the great bugbears shorn of their terrors.

Once more. We have been led to stand by ourselves by the origin of our Society and by the materials of which it is composed. Almost all the Unitarian churches out of New England, with the solitary exception of ours, were, and, I suspect, still are, almost exclusively, made up of people of New England birth, New England colonists. Long after two Unitarian churches had been gathered in the city of New York, I was told by a leading member of one of them, that he did not believe that they had had a single accession from among the natives of that city. Our church, on the other hand, had its beginning, some five and seventy years ago, with persons exclusively from Old England, followers and admirers of Dr. Priestley, when the name of that eminent man was regarded with distrust by some of the most advanced minds in New England. In fact the autograph of Dr. Priestley appears on the records of our church, enrolled with the names of our earliest members.

And furthermore, while, from time to time, individuals and families from New England have joined us, many of those whom we have had the happiness of welcoming to our communion have come from the denomination of Friends; and if they were not here, they would be, if any where, in Quaker Meeting.

All their associations are with Quaker ways, and they have been moulded by the influence of that eminently Christian denomination. It is not any attraction of Unitarian formularies, whether of doctrine or observance, but the liberal spirit of our mode of faith that has drawn them to us. The Friends are not a proselytizing people. Accordingly, those of you who have come to us from them have no special interest in the methods adopted for the diffusion of liberal views, in spreading Unitarianism, popularly so termed. You put faith rather in the spirit than in collecting money and building churches, looking for moral and religious results, not to be manufactured by costly machinery, but to flow from individual effort prompted by the inner light, the spirit of Truth.

On all these accounts, friends, there is no strong denominational feeling among us, no burning zeal for what are termed Unitarian movements, such as, for instance, the plan recently proposed by our Unitarian brethren of building a so-styled National Unitarian Church in Washington.

We are all learning, I trust, to put less and less faith in mere organizations, and the mechanism of sects, in measures rather than in men, in making religion by the collection of money and the distribution of the written word; not that money and tracts may not be serviceable to the good cause, but the man-made letter



is not the God-inspired spirit, although it is constantly mistaken for it.

In soliciting, therefore, your pecuniary aid to the rebuilding of Robert Collyer's church, I am not disposed to lay any stress upon the advantage it will be to Unitarian Christianity. The object proposed stands before you upon grounds broad and strong of its own.

*He is most worthy for whom we should do this*, most worthy of the special regard of this church. This was the first liberal church, I believe, which Robert Collyer ever entered. It was the first certainly in which he preached. As a minister of a liberal faith, here was where he first drew breath. Here was he born into our sphere, our son, our brother.

Somewhere about fourteen years ago, I met one evening at the house of a friend, some seven or eight miles from the city, a young Englishman, a workman in a neighboring hammer factory, and a Methodist class leader, accustomed to exhort in the religious meetings of his denomination. I was impressed by his thoughtful air and by his acquaintance with the intellectual topics of the day. He was evidently a man who was subsisting on food which his fellow-workmen knew not of, constantly growing, taking into his blood whatever nourishment books afforded him. He was a reader, they said, of the Encyclopædia Britannica.

Through the influence of Lucretia Mott he had

become interested in the Anti-slavery cause ; and, as was almost always the case with orthodox men in those days, when they touched that great living Cause, Robert Collyer's orthodoxy began to slough off like a dead skin, and he became interested in liberal religious views.

It was not long after, that he came one evening to this church. The weather was stormy, and there were so few present that, contrary to my wont, for the first and only time, I spoke that evening entirely without notes. I suppose, this being in accordance with the custom of the Methodist church may have increased whatever of interest the services of that evening had for him.

Shortly afterwards I went to Cincinnati to the marriage of my brilliant friend, Moncure Conway, now and for some years settled in London. He too had been a few years before at the early age of nineteen a Methodist preacher, in Virginia, his native State, and although we were then personally strangers to each other, he had at that time communicated to me the story of the painful doubts through which he was gasping for a freer air. The letter which I received from him then, appealing to me for spiritual help, breathed great distress of mind, and touched me very deeply. When, after withdrawing from the Methodist communion, he took charge of the Unitarian church

in Cincinnati, I accepted his urgent invitation to go thither, and take what part in marrying him the laws of Ohio might permit. Of course this pulpit was to be provided for; I invited Robert Collyer to take my place for the one Sunday I was to be absent. Upon arriving in Cincinnati I desired to prolong my visit another week. I telegraphed home in reference to a supply for the second Sunday, and received for answer that you were well content and more than satisfied with my substitute. It is now more than thirteen years ago, and I doubt not that many of you remember with pleasure Robert Collyer's preaching at that time. It was not to be soon forgotten.

Upon my return home, wishing to share in your pleasure, I invited our friend to preach for me. He came again from his place of work to give me a labor of love. I was taken ill, and so far from being able to come to church, I was not able to leave my room. I had a day or two before received a letter from Chicago, where a Unitarian Church was already established (now under the charge of Robert Laird Collyer), inquiring about a remarkable blacksmith, of whose rare gifts my correspondent understood that I had had much to tell, and asking whether he would not make, what they greatly needed in Chicago, a good "minister at large," to go among the poor, and preach to them. The letter, if I thought him the

right man, invited him to that city, offering him twelve hundred dollars a year. Of course there could be but one answer. When Robert Collyer came up into my room on that Sunday morning, before going to Church, I handed him the letter, merely hinting at its purport. He refused to read it then, and put it in his pocket. In the afternoon he came up into my room again to see me, and handed me back the letter. I told him to take it home with him and let me know his decision. He replied that he had already decided. He should go to Chicago. He had mentioned to me in the morning that he had received the evening before his month's wages, thirty-nine dollars and some cents. In a few days he quitted the hammer factory forever, and moved with his little family to Chicago.

There he ministered to the poor, rising so rapidly in the respect of the community that when the terrible Iowa tornado occurred, Robert Collyer was chosen by acclamation at a public meeting of his fellow citizens to go to the scene of that calamity and distribute their benefactions there. He soon gathered so flourishing a church in Chicago that a few years ago a large edifice was built for him and his congregation. I suppose it was quite impossible for our friends in Chicago to resist the genius of the place which could tolerate only the big and the costly. A city, whose growth was hardly outdone by the most extravagant stories of

California vegetation, expanding so rapidly to giant dimensions, must have a Unitarian Church in proportion. Consequently, Robert Collyer's Church, Unity Church as it was named, was built at a cost of nearly two hundred thousand dollars, including an organ that cost ten thousand dollars.

Although on the day of its Dedication, the members of the Church subscribed with a grand liberality towards the payment of it, it left, when it perished, what the flames could not consume, a debt of sixty-five thousand dollars. So powerful, however, was the attraction of the preacher, that people flocked to the church, so long as it was there, and stoutly bore the burthen.

But the terrible Fire came. And "when," writes Robert Collyer, in his account of the burning of his church "we had fought it fairly as it came on us from below, and beaten the infernal beast so that it could never burn us up, but then found that it had set its fiery teeth away up in the roof out of our reach, and I knew that all was over, I crept up stairs alone to my pulpit, where I had stood the night before and spoken to nearly a thousand men and women; I took one last long look at it, the church and the dear, sweet, noble organ, then I took the Bible as it lay where I had left it, got out at last and locked the door and put the key in my pocket and went away, for by that time the

roof was ablaze, and I thought my heart was broken. That Unity has gone up, like Elijah, in a chariot of fire, she is not dead to me,—she never will be dead,—or to those who loved her as I did, my hope and joy and crown of rejoicing, for I held her for God and Christ, God knows.”

The church was insured. And it is expected that the insurance will cover the whole or nearly the whole debt. Whatever of the debt shall remain, Robert Collyer says must be paid, if they all have to go to work and earn the money. Not a dollar of debt is to rest upon the church that is to be built. Taught by this most severe experience, our friends in Chicago have no desire now but for “a plain, simple building,”—not a dollar for ornament, except, as Robert Collyer writes, where use is ornament.

Now, dear friends, in praying you, as I do most earnestly, to unite with all the churches of our faith in building a Church for our rarely gifted friend and brother, I do not introduce him to you as a mendicant who must perish miserably if we do not give him this assistance. Do I need to tell you of his rich gifts, his winning graces? Is not his praise in all our churches, nay, is it not sounded everywhere at home and abroad? Can he preach anywhere where the English language is spoken, where people do not flock

to hear him, whether he speak from the pulpit or in the lecture room?

How well, by the way, does he stand the trial of his great popularity! It is no feeble test to be put to, to be so suddenly raised from the anvil to the pulpit, to pass from the obscure drudgery of hard manual labor to a position, commanding the admiring attention of multitudes, and among them the most enlightened in the land. It has been finely said that, while "the prospect of the applause of posterity is like the sound of the distant ocean, which elevates the mind, present applause, flung directly in one's face, is like the spray of the same ocean tost upon the rocks, and—requiring a rock to bear it." That Robert Collyer has been animated, elated, if you will, by his great and well merited success, I do not doubt. It would argue an insensibility in him if he were not. He is no rock in this respect. But notwithstanding the seductive trial, he stands like a rock by his flock and his work in Chicago.

Shortly after the great calamity, I wrote to him and told him that he, Robert Collyer, could rebuild the city, to say nothing of his church. And is it not by "the Orpheus-like music of the wisdom" to which such as he give utterance that cities are built and nations led up the loftiest heights of humanity? You have all read the words which he spoke the Sunday after the

fire, standing upon the ruins of his dear church. A Chicago paper tells us that his voice had cheered not only his own flock, but all the people of the city, thus justifying my assurance to him.

He has not, he cannot have, any anxiety on his own account. As he himself says—and I suppose he is prouder of the fact than of any sermon he ever preached—that, if the worst come to the worst, he can make as good a horseshoe as any blacksmith in Chicago. I do not know about his horseshoes. I am no judge of the article. But I do know what good hammers the young blacksmith was wont to make by scores every week. They sent the nail home, even as their maker sends home the truth, only he does not, like a hammer, break in pieces the hard and stony heart; by his rare pathetic power he melts it into smiles of hope, into tears of penitence, and sympathy and aspiration. But the worst will not come to the worst with him. There is no likelihood that he will ever be reduced to the necessity of manual labor, although it is no wonder if amidst that wide ruin he felt for a moment that it might come to that. What church is there, what community, that would not gladly welcome him? He has not the slightest concern for his bread.

This then must command for him our warmest approbation and respect, and insure our bountiful aid,



that while he may choose his place, sure of a lucrative position wherever he may go, the thought of leaving his flock and the desolated city, seems never to have occurred to him. After the death of Theodore Parker, he was invited to be the successor of that able man, and preach in the Music Hall in Boston. But, while, for obvious reasons, the invitation was very tempting, he chose to remain in Chicago. And now he has no thought but of devoting himself and all that he is to the building up again of all good interests in that most afflicted city.

Believe me, dear friends, I am not using the empty language of eulogy, nor only giving utterance to the promptings of personal friendship. You all know that Robert Collyer is a man of peculiar gifts. Coleridge seems to be describing just such a man as our friend, when he says that "to find no contradiction in the union of old and new, to contemplate the Ancient of Days with feelings as fresh as if they then sprung forth at his own fiat—this characterizes the minds that feel the riddle of the world, and may help to unravel it. To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood, to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day, for perhaps forty years, has rendered familiar,

With Sun, and Moon, and Stars, throughout the year  
And Man and Woman—

this is the character and privilege of genius. And so to present familiar objects as to awaken the minds of others to a like freshness of sensation concerning them—this is the prime merit of genius and its most unequivocal mode of manifestation.”

When a man thus endowed with “the vision and the faculty divine” gives all that he is with generous ardor to the service of the highest truth, shall we not give of what we have, and uphold him with our hearts and hands? Shall any loss befall him that we are not eager to repair? You are sending food and clothing and money in boundless quantities to the devastated West. But, believe me, you can render the people there no more solid and enduring service than to do and to give all that you are able, even to the stinting of yourselves, for such a creative centre of beneficent influence as our friend, that he may have a place where he may stand, and, with the arm of the spirit stronger than the arm of flesh, which made the anvil ring again, lift the thoughts and aims of men above the material interests to which they cling as all in all—lift them up into communion with the Invisible and Everlasting, and with the blessed spirit of the Lord Jesus. For his own dear sake, for the sake of the gracious influence which he has, and for the sake of Religion, pure and undefiled, of which he is so powerful an advocate, I pray you, dear friends, let

us all help, and help generously this good object,—to build him a church.

It has been proposed by the American Unitarian Association, which has its centre in Boston, that collections be taken up in all our churches for this purpose on this the second Sunday in November. I do not, however, suggest a collection to-day. There is no pressing need of haste. I wish to commend the matter to your most thoughtful consideration. You may think it advisable to take up a collection shortly. In the meanwhile, I shall be happy and proud, as I always am, to receive for my friend whatever you may be prompted to give. The appeals, recently made to you, first in behalf of our brother from Paris, and then for the sufferers of the West, to whom there are few who have not given more than once, have been so cheerfully and liberally met that they create the faith that, so far from accounting it a burthen, you regard it as a privilege, as it assuredly is, to give for a good purpose, and that you are grateful to the Bountiful Giver for the means that he has blest you with, and for every new opportunity. By giving, you receive more and better things than you give, and thus become rich before God.

In conclusion, let me say that I trust I have not offended against propriety in speaking so freely in

praise of our friend, as is customary to speak only of the dead. But I have spoken thus not to flatter him, but for the simple truth's sake. And if I have failed in regard to the truth, it is not in going beyond it, but in falling short of it. If there is any alloy in the sense of truth which moves me to speak of him as I have done, it comes from the fact that he has, more than once, as I have been told, allowed the kindness of his heart and the warmth of his friendship to carry him away and alluded in his pulpit to his old friend, the pastor of this church, in such terms as have been, I confess, not without weight among the reasons moving me to decline his repeated and most urgent invitations to visit him and preach for him in Chicago. I own to the weakness of not caring that his people should find out, as they surely would if I went there, how far beyond the truth their minister had been carried in the ardor of his personal regard. Let me confess to you, dear friends, *between ourselves*, that I am not without a feeling of satisfaction in having this opportunity of speaking of him in a way that necessarily squares a private account of mine with him.