

My Favorite UU - Thomas Starr King – “The Orator Who Saved the Nation”

Sermon May 31, 2009 UUCB Bill Lakin

My favorite UU

So how does one pick a favorite from the likes ofNewton, Darwin, Paul Revere, Susan B Anthony, Florence Nightengale, Charles Dickens, Alexander Graham Bell – we could go on ---- Albert Swietzer--- Abigale Adams-- Pete Seeger?

We are proud of UU who have lived their believes --- deeds not creeds --

My favorite UU is not very well known today

And not an imposing figure .. barely five feet tall and 120 pounds--- he died when only 40 years old.

Yet he was probably the most poplar and influential person in California during the civil war period, and later named one of two persons selected as California’s greatest heroes. But today --although UUs are familiar with the name because a West Coast Divinity School was named after him --- few know who Thomas Starr King ...known as – “The Orator Who Saved the Nation” --- was.

Thomas Starr King, was born December 17, 1824, in New York City, he was forced to leave school, because of the death of his father – a Universalist Minister -- and at 15 became the sole support of his family. He worked as a bookkeeper at the Charlestown Navy Yard and took courses at Harvard and began a program of self-study for the ministry. King never finished college; reering to himself as a ‘Graduate of the Charlestown Navy Yard’

When he was 20 he took over his father's former pulpit at the First Universalist Church of Charlestown, Massachusetts.

In 1848, at age 24, he was appointed pastor of the Hollis Street Unitarian Church, Boston, where he became one of the most famous preachers in New England. Asked about changing denominations he said ”The one (Universalist) thinks God is too good to damn them forever, the other (Unitarians) think they are too good to be damned forever” And according to King the reason Unitarians and Universalists had not joined is because they were, “too near kin to be married.”

King’s reputation as a noted orator had led the San Francisco congregation to ask him to come West, with little hope he would agree. During his 11 years as minister of Boston’s Hollis Street Unitarian Church, King increased the congregation to five times its original size and pulled the church out of bankruptcy. Ralph Waldo Emerson said after hearing one of King’s sermons, "That is preaching!" Churches in Chicago and Brooklyn sought King as their minister, but this popular Boston pastor rejected them. San Francisco, he decided, offered the greatest challenge.

In 1860, When Thomas Starr King first walked to the pulpit of the San Francisco Unitarian Church, the eyes of the congregation turned to this small, frail man. Many wondered, "Could this youthful person with his beardless, boyish face be the celebrated preacher from Boston?"

King laughed and replied. "Though I weigh only 120 pounds, when I’m mad, I weigh a ton."

That fiery passion would be King's stock in trade during his years in California, from 1860 to 1864. Abraham Lincoln said he believed the Rev. Thomas Starr King was the person most responsible for keeping California in the Union during the early days of the Civil War.

California in Crisis

California was heading into a crisis in 1860. Nationally, a showdown was brewing between the free states of the Union and the slave states. California's governor and most members of the state legislature were sympathetic to the Confederacy. The only effective voice against slavery had been killed in a duel the year before.

The San Francisco congregation's initial disappointment about King's slender, boyish appearance soon gave way to wonder, and then delight at his rich, golden voice. Not only did King establish his reputation as an orator and preacher that first Sunday in San Francisco, but the news soon spread statewide, attracting worshipers from Stockton and Sacramento.

Less than a month after King arrived in California, the Republican National Convention met in Chicago and nominated Abraham Lincoln as its presidential candidate. (Remember back then they were the good guys) In the following election, Lincoln carried California by only 711 votes.

After Lincoln's election, Southern states abandoned the Union. The crucial question on the minds of many Americans was:--- Would California join them and deliver the state's immense natural resources into the hands of Confederacy? Support for secession was strong in southern California, where the Confederate flag had flown over Los Angeles' main plaza on the Fourth of July.

Congress was so convinced of a secessionist plot-- that it required Easterners to secure passports for travel to California. Justifying Congress' fears was a secret paramilitary California secessionist organization of about 16,000 members, called the Knights of the Golden Circle.

On George Washington's birthday in 1861, King fired an opening salvo in support of his country. He spoke for two hours to over a thousand people about how they should remember Washington by preserving the Union.

Pledging California

"I pitched into Secession, Concession and Calhoun, right and left, and made the Southerners applaud," King recalled. "I pledged California to a Northern Republic and to a flag that should have no treacherous threads of cotton in its warp, and the audience came down in thunder. At the close it was announced that I would repeat it the next night, and they gave me three rounds of cheers."

Speaking up and down the state, King visited mining camps and said he never knew the exhilaration of public oratory until he faced a front row of men armed with Bowie knives

and revolvers. His friend, And Unitarian, Edward Everett Hale, who made a similar contribution to saving the Union through his moving story, "The Man Without a Country," said,

"Starr King was an orator no one could silence and no one could answer."

King covered his pulpit with an American flag and ended all his sermons with "God bless the president of the United States and all who serve with him the cause of a common country." At one mass rally in San Francisco, 40,000 turned out to hear him speak. A group of Americans living in Victoria, B.C., sent him \$1,000 for his work to preserve the Union. King was beginning to turn the tide.

In 1861, he threw himself into the gubernatorial campaign of his parishioner, Leland Stanford. King and author and parishioner Bret Harte often accompanied Stanford on speaking tours. Stanford won an overwhelming victory and King sighed with relief.

"What a privilege it is to be an American!" he said. "What a year to live in!

Worth all other times ever known in our history or any other!"

A New Front

The battle to keep California in the Union won, King now turned to the needs of its soldiers. The Union Army lacked provisions and medical personnel. Much of its food was rotting because of spoiled goods sold to the Army by war profiteers. Soldiers lacked sheets and blankets, and disease took a greater toll than Confederate bullets.

In response, the Rev. H.W. Bellows of New York organized the U.S. Sanitary Commission, a forerunner of the American Red Cross. Starr King immediately pitched in to help. Out of \$4.8 million the commission raised throughout the U.S., King raised \$1.25 million in California. About \$200,000 came from San Francisco, a figure all the more impressive because of a series of natural disasters in the state, including a massive flood that turned the Sacramento-San Joaquin Valley into a vast lake and a drought that wiped out the wheat crop.

Now King found himself raising funds for flood and drought relief.

He also carved out time to work for the rights of San Francisco's African Americans and Chinese.

"We know," said Edward Everett Hale of King, "that here is a heart as large as the world, so that you can not make it understand that it should hold back from any service to be rendered to any human being."

Because of King's success in patriotic and charitable causes, powerful friends encouraged him to run for the U.S. Senate. But he refused, saying he feared it would lead to political compromise and impair his ability to speak forthrightly. "I would rather," he said, "swim to Australia."

Relaxation and joy came from exploring California's wilderness. He was among the first 100 Euro-Americans to visit Lake Tahoe. To King, the blue lake and green pines seemed in harmony with the deepest religion of the Bible.

Yosemite Valley and its giant trees gave him special delight. Back when he lived in New England, he enjoyed exploring the White Mountains of New Hampshire and wrote a book about them, "The White Hills—Their Legend, Landscape and Poetry."

On entering California's great valley, he said, "The Ninth the Yosemite of music!

Great is granite and the Yosemite is its prophet!" He climbed above the falls, attracted by a dome of granite towering 13,600 feet over the valley. Today it bears his name, Mt. Starr King.

San Francisco Church

Despite his many commitments in California, King always put his church first. When he arrived in San Francisco in 1860, the congregation struggled with a \$30,000 debt. Within the first year, King managed to raise the funds to pay it off. Now he turned his attention to an expanding congregation in a too-small church. In October 1862, he set an \$80,000 fundraising goal. By December of that year, the cornerstone of a new church was laid. In January 1864, King and his congregation celebrated the completion of the new building on the corner of Franklin and Starr King streets in San Francisco, where the [First Unitarian Universalist Society](#) church still stands today. (drove by it last month)

His congregation now prosperous, the Union Army driving to victory and the Sanitary Commission on solid footing, King decided to take a much-needed sabbatical. He planned to rest, travel and write a book about the Sierras.

Declining Health

But his efforts had taken a toll. Only devotion to what he considered God's will and "being mad" kept him going. On Feb. 28, 1864, he came down with diphtheria, then pneumonia. A few days later his doctor told him he had only a half-hour to live. King glanced at a calendar.

"Today is the fourth of March," he said. "Sad news will go over the wire today."

He dictated his will and turned to his wife. "Do not weep for me," he said. "I know it is all right. I wish I could make you feel so, I wish I could describe my feelings. It is strange. I see all the privileges and greatness of the future. It already looks grand, beautiful. Tell them I went lovingly, trustfully, peacefully."

A State Mourns

Across San Francisco, flags dropped to half-mast. The state legislature in Sacramento adjourned for three days of mourning after passing a resolution stating that King had been a "tower of strength to the cause of his country."

As King lay in state, wrapped in an American flag, a military honor guard stood by his casket. Twenty thousand people came to his church to pay tribute. Cannons boomed a memorial tribute and Bret Harte composed a eulogy, "Relieving Guard."

King's body was buried in the front lawn of his newly completed church, where it remains today. To my knowledge, the only person in San Francisco history ever to be buried on the street.

Tribute

In 1913, the state legislature voted Thomas Starr King and Father Junipero Serra, the Catholic missionary, as California's two greatest heroes and appropriated funds for King's statue at the U.S. Capitol. In the 1960s, the state designated King's church and tomb as a historical monument.

As a post script, in 2008 the California Legislature voted to replace King's statue in Washington with (bit your lip) Ronald Reagan.

In addition to Yosemite's granite mountain, one of the great trees within the park that King admired was named after him. Another mountain in the White Hills of New Hampshire is known as Mt. Starr King, and several schools throughout California bear his name.

In 1941 the [Starr King School for the Ministry](#) , in Berkeley, California, was also renamed in his honor. King's church and tomb in San Francisco are designated historical monuments, and two streets in the city (Starr King Way, on which the church is located, and King Street in the Mission Bay neighborhood) are named for him. There is also a statue of him in [Golden Gate Park](#), facing JFK Drive, quite close to the [De Young Museum](#)

King had a vision of the emergence of a unified and liberal Christianity: "Our mission is to hasten the time when the church in general shall modify her creeds and grant more freedom to thought and organize more charity, and receive again into fellowship the needful forces which her narrowness has spurned."

Thomas Starr King--- was truly a U U who lived his values ..

A self-made man in the mold of a Horatio Alger figure (Another Unitarian)

He was a Pastor, Patriot, humanitarian, advocate for human rights, environmentalist . . .

And a really funny guy

– My Favorite UU