

The Other Side of My Soul – Summer Saints Series: Ralph Waldo Emerson
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 9, 2024
Friendship Presbyterian Church

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”
(Acts 2:14-21, NRSV)*

Finally – the *Summer Saints* worship series is upon us! Running for a total of six Sundays, from June 9 to July 14, we will take up a “saint” in worship each week ... though not anyone officially canonized, and not necessarily someone you would expect. To be a “saint” in our sense is not to be a paragon of perfection, but simply someone from whose life we can learn something valuable about what it means to live faithfully today. I suppose it’s unavoidable that at least some of these chosen saints are those who have deeply influenced my *own* walk and struggles with faith. And so it is today.

I have spoken often of my debts to our Reformed tradition, and particularly the Reformation theology of John Calvin, and of how that tradition has long held a significant place in my soul, shaping me in ways that I still am discovering to this day. Its vision of the Divine and of what life is finally about, has been with me as long as I can remember. The answers I was given to the great questions of my youngest days concerning ultimate truth all finally derived from *this* tradition and its read of scripture, and its faith in a majestic, sovereign God, who has ordered all things to His glory.

But as I grew up and expanded my horizons still further, I discovered that there has always been another side of my soul, that bucked up against the many ways in which even such a tradition as ours – one born, I believe, of authentic insight and spiritual genius – have a way of ossifying into things that can imprison the human spirit as easily as they can set it free.

This other side of my soul looks for the mystery of the Divine in *other* places, not just in established, time-honored traditions and practices, not just in the very high or the very noble, (all of which the Reformed tradition excels at), but also in the very unexpected, unlikely places ... in the simple, the very ordinary ... the very natural and earthy ... places that may not appear particularly holy ... even deep inside here, in this yearning, stumbling heart.

The poem adapted into our Call to Worship this morning puts the sentiment perfectly, as does Mary Oliver when she taught us that to look, to listen, for that which can evoke sacred joy, one need not talk about

*the exceptional,
the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant—
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,
the daily presentations.*

(from “Mindful,” by Mary Oliver)

This week, our focus is on one who may remind you of some other summer saints we have learned from in the past – like Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, or as just mentioned, Mary Oliver. Today, we dive into the life and mind of one who impacted all three deeply, the great 19th century American essayist and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, best known as the leader of the New England-rooted Transcendentalist movement of the 1830’s and 1840’s.

It is no exaggeration to say that Emerson is one of the truly towering figures of American intellectual history, having had an outsized influence on so many in his own time, and after. He had a remarkable role in shaping the American mind and consciousness ... in this country taking its first steps *beyond* a purely English or European identity or deference to Old World traditions, and *into* something authentically *New World*, something quintessentially *American*.

Emerson (known to friends and family as Waldo) was born in Boston in 1803, into a family with roots going back seven generations to the Mayflower and the earliest Puritan settlements in Massachusetts. With this heritage came something else too – a rich *religious* foundation, standing as he did in a long line of congregationalist and Unitarian clergymen.

With his father, a minister, dying when young Waldo was but 7 years old, he was raised by his mother Ruth, with the help of other women in his extended family, particularly his aunt Mary Moody Emerson who would come to have a profound influence on him, especially as he developed his unique religious and spiritual identity in some creative tension with her own.

His formal schooling began when he was nine, when he was enrolled at the Boston Latin School, and then at 14, went on to Harvard. Strangely, given what he would do and achieve over his life, he did not particularly stand out as a student, graduating in 1821 in the *exact middle* of his college class of 59. School teaching, punctuated by poor health, followed for a few years, until he began studies at Harvard's new Divinity School to train for the ministry, a career that was very much in keeping with family expectations, though one might detect in Emerson's writings from the time some subtle (and not-so-subtle) misgivings stemming from his budding doubts about institutional religion and his emerging sense of personal vocation and purpose.

Getting married and starting a family was also in the cards at this time, and Waldo wedded young Ellen Louisa Tucker in 1829, and in the same year accepted a position as junior pastor of Boston's Second Church, served a century earlier by the eminent Puritan divine Cotton Mather. With this role of some prominence, he also took on other responsibilities, such as serving as chaplain of the Massachusetts Legislature and as a member of the Boston School Committee. All this work kept him busy, though during this period and facing the worsening condition of his wife (who had contracted tuberculosis soon after moving to Boston), his very personal doubts intensified.

It was Ellen's death only two years later, in 1831, that proved to be a watershed moment in Emerson's life. It affected him deeply and led him to express his issues with the established church much more openly, ultimately resulting in his resignation from his pastorate in 1832. Writing in his journal, he mused, "I have sometimes thought that, in order to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the ministry."

And leave he did – and more than just his job! Shortly after, he left these shores aboard a brig on Christmas Day 1832, and retreated to Europe for what would be just short of a full year abroad. There, he embarked on a grand adventure, from Malta, to Italy, to France, and ultimately to England, and he had the opportunity to meet and befriend some of the most brilliant minds of the age, including the philosopher John Stuart Mill, and the great literary giants William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and most significantly for his later life, the Scot Thomas Carlyle.

Returning to Massachusetts in October 1833, with so much in his mind and soul to share, he came to see a possible career path forward as a public lecturer, unconfined to the limits of an institution or a tradition, through his exposure to the budding Lyceum movement, which offered adult education opportunities to the public in ways not unlike OLLI today. And it didn't take him long to move from idea to practice. Less than a month after his return, he made in Boston the *first* of what would eventually, over his lifetime, be some 1,500 lectures. It was a public talk called "The Uses of Natural History," an expanded account of his especially rich experience in France. In this lecture, he set out some of his most important early beliefs and ideas which later he would develop into his first published essay, "Nature."

Inside two years then, he had re-married to a young woman named Lydia Jackson, whom he met through a speaking engagement, and bought a house in Concord, Massachusetts, open to the public still today as the Ralph Waldo Emerson House. Very quickly, he became one of the leading citizens of the town, and the Emerson family would grow. From this point, his life and career took shape in the ways for which he would become most famous.

By the Fall of 1836, primarily through Emerson's energy and inspiration, a circle of like-minded writers, intellectuals, and social reformers was formed that would soon be known as the "Transcendental Club." As an intentional (if occasional) gathering of incredibly gifted people, including a very young Henry David Thoreau, it hardly has an equal in American history, and not just for all the grey matter in the room, but also for the presence and contributions of several women, including Sophia Ripley, Elizabeth Peabody, Ellen Sturgis Hooper, Caroline Sturgis Tappan, and Margaret Fuller – all light years ahead of their time in promoting women's rights and education.

Over the following eight years, the output of this group – and particularly of Emerson himself – was remarkable. What began as lectures eventually took shape as his first collection of essays, released to the public in 1841, which included "The Over-Soul," "Circles," "Compensation," and of course the iconic "Self-Reliance," that essay that I discovered as a student as I was seeking to discover my *own* gifts and calling and unique identity, *beyond* what I inherited by osmosis. I found that its words were like sweet honey to a young man awakening to the other side of his soul, for as Emerson put it, "We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents." And so, he urged us, "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events."

I was coming to discover – in his words on those pages – that he was right, that there was a deep dimension of truth, a glimpse of the divine, that I couldn't get from *any* tradition, or from anyone else ... that I had to discover for myself and that would be my own, just as there is truth, a part of the divine, for *you* to discover and that will be your own. And that to see it, one must, as Emerson wrote,

[arrive] at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better [or] for worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till.

A second collection of similarly impactful essays would follow in 1844. These two volumes together, more than anything he had published before or would after, laid the foundation for his fame and his coming to be known in time as the "Sage of Concord," and serve as a definitive influence on the work of many younger writers, most notably Thoreau and Whitman.

His later life, of course, would unfold in the context of deepening sectional conflict and the national debate over slavery, and unsurprisingly, Emerson grew louder and bolder in his

denunciation of evil laws such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and came to see emancipation as “the demand of civilization.” To that end, he supported the activities of the radical abolitionist John Brown and the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, though he was often critical of what he saw as a hesitancy on Lincoln’s part to specifically make emancipation a principal aim of the Union war effort (at least until it was made so in 1863).

Emerson’s last years were quieter as his health began to decline, though he did manage a long trip on the transcontinental railroad, met Brigham Young in Salt Lake City, and visited California and what would become Yosemite National Park, there meeting a young and then unknown John Muir, an event which would be hugely formative for the budding naturalist and environmentalist.

Emerson died in April 1882 as one of the famous and revered people in America, and was buried in Concord’s Sleepy Hollow Cemetery – one of many famous Concordian writers to be buried there including Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s legacy is a complex one, and as with any great life, one can trace both positive and negative effects of his work on subsequent generations. It certainly would be easy to see him much as many of his own contemporaries saw him, as one merely destructive of established traditions and conventions, and to be fair to those traditions and conventions, that is not always an unambiguous good. But whether seen as good or bad or somewhere in between, there is no question that he championed an abandonment of slavish dependence on received authority, and a radical opening to the unique divine truth implanted and discoverable, without mediation, in every human soul.

In this, he is reacting to what he fairly experienced as the worst instincts of Calvinism in its Puritan expression, which saw the human soul in its fallen nature as utterly corrupted by sin. But what his received tradition saw as depraved and lost, Emerson saw as the very locus of divine revelation and inspiration, a veritable playground for the Holy Spirit who is always present, always at work in the heart, always there to be discovered in unexpected ways and surprising places.

In this way, Emerson’s unorthodox insight is born of the same inspiration that moved the prophets of the Bible and of every age – critiquing *not* genuine faith, but *dead forms of it*, and seeking to revive and renew awareness of the sacred in the heart of ordinary life, and in the life of the ordinary heart. The entire direction of biblical faith is a movement from the merely external to the whole ... from the set in stone to the enfleshed and lived ... from something far off and inaccessible, to something *near* and *real*.

And when that takes hold, when ordinary people re-connect to that which always has been within, conventions and traditions and laws and rules which constrain the human spirit will break and fall, and the Spirit of the Lord shall be poured out upon all, and our sons *and* our daughters shall prophesy, our young shall see visions, our old shall dream dreams – to the glory of God! Amen.