

FLOWERS AND LIBERTY

Ednah Dow Cheney, the Unitarian reformer, leaves us her memories of the 1850s church of Theodore Parker, the dynamic forward-thinking Unitarian minister. The congregation had to hire the Music Hall, which could seat thousands, for worship services, as Parker's radical ideas of theology that transcended the Unitarian Christianity of the time and his radical sense of human worth and equality and his social activism drew in ever-larger numbers of worshipers. Here is a sample of Cheney's memories.

“When the Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society was formed to give Theodore Parker a chance to be heard in Boston, my sister, Mary Frances, and I were among his first parishioners, and soon after mother joined us and we became his warm friend and admirer. We gave out of our small allowance of pocket-money five dollars a year, which now (1889) seems exceedingly small for such a glorious privilege; but we were faithful attendants, and good hearers of the Word, if not mighty doers.”

“On the day of the installation we sent a bouquet of flowers for the desk. This was not at all customary then; but Mr. Parker seemed so pleased, lightly and reverently passing his hand over them as he drew some beautiful lesson, that we never felt a service complete without them. We formed a committee, who paid a small sum every little while to Miss Caroline Thayer, who bought and arranged the flowers in winter. But when summer came, we often devoted our Saturdays to searching for wild flowers, and brought them to decorate the desk. Thus many of the audience, confined to the city, saw the columbine or the laurel or pond-lily for the first time. Mr. Parker always took the flowers to some sick person.”

“When the first fugitive slave, Shadrach, was arrested in Boston, at the opening of the prayer Mr. Parker said, ‘When I came to you I expected to have many hard things to do; but I never expected to have such a note as this to read from one of my parishioners.’ He then read the note. ‘Shadrach, a fugitive slave, in peril of his liberty, asks your prayers that he may not again be returned to bondage.’ ‘But,’ said Mr. Parker, ‘thank God he does not need our prayers; for he is now safe, far on his way to freedom.’ (He had been rescued from the Court House by a company of friends.) For a moment the hush from that great audience was as if life had stopped. Then come a burst of applause, the relief of which it is impossible to describe. It was like opening the doors of a dungeon.”

Ref: Ednah Dow Cheney, *Reminiscences*, pp. 106-107, 110.