

Meadowbrook Congregational Church
“Faith of a Founding Father – John Adams”
July 4, 2010
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Psalm 35

Of David.

¹ *Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me;
fight against those who fight against me!*

² *Take hold of shield and buckler,
and rise up to help me!*

³ *Draw the spear and javelin
against my pursuers;*

*say to my soul,
‘I am your salvation.’*

⁴ *Let them be put to shame and dishonor
who seek after my life.*

*Let them be turned back and confounded
who devise evil against me.*

⁵ *Let them be like chaff before the wind,
with the angel of the LORD driving them on.*

⁶ *Let their way be dark and slippery,
with the angel of the LORD pursuing them.*

⁷ *For without cause they hid their net for me;
without cause they dug a pit for my life.*

⁸ *Let ruin come on them unawares.*

*And let the net that they hid ensnare them;
let them fall in it—to their ruin.*

⁹ *Then my soul shall rejoice in the LORD,
exulting in his deliverance.*

²⁶ *Let all those who rejoice at my calamity
be put to shame and confusion;*

*let those who exalt themselves against me
be clothed with shame and dishonor.*

²⁷ *Let those who desire my vindication
shout for joy and be glad,
and say evermore,*

*‘Great is the LORD,
who delights in the welfare of his servant.’*

²⁸ *Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness
and of your praise all day long.*

Throughout the history of the United States, it has generally been accepted that the faith of our leaders, especially our Founding Fathers has had a remarkable impact on the American culture and character. There has been some intellectual debate about what kind of religious freedom these men were actually advocating. Was it freedom of

religion or freedom from the establishment of religion? Some have argued that many of our founding fathers were deists, honoring God as Creator but finding little of God in their observed human interaction. A few would even say these men were atheist, finding no place for the nonsense of religion and God's place in human experience. They point to Washington and Franklin, and to the chief religious skeptic Thomas Jefferson, who cut out all of the unreasonable words from the pages of his Bible. Others argue that the founders clearly established this nation on a belief in God and that all laws and actions stemmed from this belief. A few in this group would even say that the Founding Fathers were born again, Bible believers Christians, because each public pronouncement they made seemed to imply a reliance upon God and the Word of God. On this Fourth of July weekend, I thought it would be interesting to explore briefly the importance of faith in a man, a Founding Father that would later become President, a famous American that we as Congregationalists, we might claim. That man is President John Adams, the second President of the United States.

Adams was born in Quincy, Massachusetts in October, 1735. His father's ancestors were among those who were forced to flee from religious persecution in England during the reign of King Charles I from 1600 to 1649. Charles took extra steps to make certain that the liturgy and polity of the Church of England was strictly enforced even in the Puritan churches. Those individuals and congregations that did not meet these requirements were prosecuted and persecuted. Many came to the New World where they might worship as their conscience dictated. One of Adams' ancestors on his mother's side was John Alden, a passenger on the Mayflower.

Adams was raised within the Congregational church. Throughout his youth his father urged him to become a minister but Adams was skeptical of such an occupation. He was turned off by the controversy that raged within his home church in Quincy. The minister preached a sermon denying the Puritan doctrines of original sin, election, and salvation through arbitrary grace. Although Adams' father supported the minister, he voted to dismiss him from the church. John Adams did not like the behavior of clergy, church, or church councils during this episode. He thought a minister could only be happy and useful "if he reveres his own understanding more than the decrees of councils or the sentiments of fathers." In other words, he could only be a minister if he could maintain independence of thought. He was critical of clergy who seemed to have problem thinking for themselves. Adams had been part of church meetings where he had witnessed an inflexible attitude of dogmatism and bigotry prevailing among the clergy. He soon realized that he would have to compromise his personal beliefs and reason in order to fit into the ministry. He considered the practice of law to be more noble and appealing. Adams decided to study law which seemed a less contentious profession, and a profession where he could at least think his own thoughts.

Throughout his adolescence and early adulthood Adams referred to himself a "church going animal" and believed in the value of religion to be a force for good in the lives of individuals and in society at large. Yet he also had come to grow a bit cynical, seeing abuses in the churches themselves and questioning many of the fundamental beliefs of conventional Christianity including the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. Some twentieth and twenty-first century scholars have even labeled John Adams an atheist, quoting his comment that his fondest wish would be for the end of all religion. More likely, Adams was not denying a belief in God but simply commenting on the frustrating iron clad links between church and state in Europe and in New England. This relationship he saw as dangerous. Because of the abuse of Congregational clergy and because of the lack of individual thought in a state religion, Adams soon became a devout Unitarian.

In 1750 Adams heard a sermon preached by Jonathan Mayhew entitled, "Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to Higher Powers." He later claimed that

the sermon influenced him more than any other thing at the time of the Revolution. Mayhew was a strong supporter of freedom of thought and civil liberties.

John Adams met Abigail Smith in 1759 and they were married in 1764. Abigail was the daughter of a rather controversial Congregational minister. William Smith's beliefs were quite liberal for his day. He did not hold the traditional Protestant beliefs of predestination, original sin, or the full divinity of Christ. Rather he emphasized the importance of reason and free will in matters of morality. Abigail embraced the views of her father. After their marriage, both John and Abigail became active participants in the First Parish Church in Quincy. Although Congregational in name, the church was Unitarian in practice. John officially signed the membership book but Abigail did not. But both attended the church faithfully and supported its ministry.

For my rather limited reading, I believe that there were several aspects of John Adams' faith that influenced his action as a statesman. He believed that religious law should be written on the hearts of humanity not on pages of statute and followed through the dictates of conscience not enforced through bishops and kings and the state. Reason was the only sure guide to knowledge and reason can be easily overcome by passion, especially the passion evoked by religious fundamentalists. He lived in a period called the Second Great Awakening, a time of evangelical fervor, mass conversions, and attempts at moral reform. Adams saw danger in such things and urged a complete separation of church and state. Early in his life he was deeply suspicious of Catholics.

Adams was always suspicious of those who carried power, especially in religion. He referred to the Roman Catholic church as "the monster." Again, Adams suspicion was probably more tied to the European states where monarchs and churches ruled as one to enslave the freewill of people. Adams was also quite negative toward the Anglican Church for its' attack on personal liberty. Even in colonial New England, Adams spoke against Puritan churches which seemed to enjoy a special relationship with the state. He saw government as corrupting religion and was fearful of any kind of link.

Thirdly, Adams also came to value tolerance in matters of religion. He was disturbed by the growing religious strife in several states following the American Revolution. He considered religious discord the most dangerous threat to public peace and warned that people could turn religious passion into something that would suit their political ends. While others would disagree with his rather Unitarian beliefs, Adams would counter with a blunt philosophical statement, "You will say that I am no Christian. I will say that you are no Christian. There the account is balanced." He wasn't willing to engage in matter of correctness. He was more interested in the person's attitudes and actions than their religious tenets. Adams once avoided attending his own Unitarian Church in Philadelphia for a whole year because he did not like the personality of the minister and the speculation about the end of the world passages the congregation used from Daniel and Revelation. He preferred the more gracious spirit of another local Presbyterian congregation. Later in life he became even more charitable saying, "I believe all honest men among you are Christians in my sense of the word." Adams truly believed that love of God and love of neighbor, made manifest in living, made for a true Christian. In a letter to Benjamin Rush he wrote, "I have attended public worship in all countries and with all sects and believe them all much better than no religion, though I have not thought myself obliged to believe all I heard."

John Adams did not believe in what most of his fellow New England Protestants did- predestination. He believed not in godly fate but in responsible conscience. He was troubled by people of his time who claimed to be prophets, fearing they would destroy the spirit of enlightenment upon which the nation was founded. He thought the doctrine of Trinity to be a superstition saying, "two and one make three, one is not three

nor can three be one.” For Adams, the value of religion was not so much in fervent feelings or in developing a sense of security about heaven, but in developing a moral compass for use in society.

Yet John Adams believed in immortality. Later in life, much of his correspondence with former enemy Thomas Jefferson had to do with this subject. He thought that if there were nothing beyond a mortal life, you would be ashamed of your Maker. He believed that he would forever be under the care and guidance of the one who designed and governed the universe and was not afraid to trust and confide in it. Heaven was not a reward but a continuation of what a person had started on earth.

Despite a self-professed intellectual faith, John Adams seemed to have a keen sense of the presence of God in his work and his service. Perhaps the other founding fathers did as well, but Adams' words and thoughts are actually recorded in his letters to his wife. Adams wrote of the first meeting of Congress in September of 1774 and of how the meeting was opened with prayer and the reading of the 35th Psalm. He mentioned that it seemed that heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read that morning. As the first occupant of the new Executive mansion in Washington D.C., Adams walked among the construction and wrote down a prayer of blessing for the house, a prayer that was later engraved on a plaque in the State Room of the White House.

It seems that faith in God drove John Adams to service, to personal sacrifice, and to courageous action. Adams was a Congregationalist Puritan, valuing duty, perseverance, integrity, and responsibility. He believed that God had put him on earth to do a great thing and he was not a person to look the other way when God called. Yet he reasoned his way to many of his beliefs about God and human nature, rejecting doctrine that did not fit his view of the world. At the age of 80 he wrote that his extensive study of theology had made no change in his moral or religious creed. For his entire life he lived by four short words, “Be just and good.”