

## 1 Sermon, September 22, 2013

Texts: Jeremiah 46:27-28, Romans 8:1-6

Title: "American Faith: Anne Hutchinson"

In 1638, the first heresy trial took place in Massachusetts. It was just ten years after the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and just 18 years after the landing of the Mayflower. The Salem witch trials would be 50 years later.

Let me set the context.

The puritans who first settled in New England were called Pilgrims because they came for religious reasons, to set up a theocratic state. They wanted a nation where God was the ruler, and they followed Calvinist doctrine. They believed that all truth was contained in the Bible, that God had everything planned out from the very beginning, and emphasized obedience to God's commandments.

They were so concerned about obedience they set about writing laws almost from the very beginning.

In 1641, the following laws were enacted in Massachusetts Bay Colony:

"Every married woman shall be free from bodily correction or stripes by her husband, unless it be in his own defense upon her assault.

"No man shall exercise any tyranny or cruelty towards any brute creature which are usually kept for man's use."

"If any man after legal conviction shall have or worship any other god but the lord god, he shall be put to death."

Adultery was punishable by whipping, and then making the person wear the letters A and D.

I could go on, but you get the idea. The 1641 document lists 98 laws or liberties, all enacted within 13 years of the founding of the colony. Most of these laws had a basis in the Bible.

Into that religious context came Anne Hutchinson.

Anne Hutchinson was intelligent, well-read, and the daughter of an English clergyman. When she and her husband, William, came to Massachusetts, it was because they followed John Cotton, a charismatic puritan preacher who was forced to leave England.

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In Massachusetts Bay Colony, Anne led the life of a trusted midwife, a housewife, and mother. Her charisma, her gentle nature and exceptional powers of mind drew others to her. She started a weekly women's group that met in her home. At first the women discussed the previous Sunday's sermons given by Rev. Cotton or the Rev. John Wilson, but before long Anne began telling them of her own beliefs, which differed from those of the Boston ministers. She denied that conformity with the religious laws were a sign of godliness and insisted that true godliness came from inner experience of the Holy Spirit.

Anne Hutchinson's gatherings in her home started out with just women, who otherwise had little opportunity for intellectual conversation. As time went on, the groups got bigger and bigger, and men came as well. Soon, Anne's weekly meetings were transformed into heated discussions about the church and state. Anne irritated local leaders by claiming that only two Boston ministers were "elect" or saved, John Cotton and her brother-in-law, John Wheelwright.

What had started with innocuous discussion about sermons became a direct challenge to the leadership of certain men in the colony. Anne, with the aid of Governor Vane and Rev. Cotton, attempted to have her brother-in-law, John Wheelwright installed as minister of the Boston church, and most of the congregation supported her.

But then the pastor of the church, and the new governor, John Winthrop, launched a campaign against Anne and her brother-in-law. They branded Anne's ideas as the heresy of "Antinomianism" (a belief that Christians are not bound by moral law).

In her eventual trial, one of the charges against her was that her meetings were "not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God, nor fitting for your sex." So part of the issue was that she was a woman.

At this trial, she parried all questions so well that Edmund S. Morgan, a biographer of Gov. John Winthrop, was led to comment that Anne Hutchinson was the governor's "intellectual superior in everything except political judgment; in everything except the sense of what was possible in this world."

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Answering deftly, Anne came close to clearing herself of all charges. But suddenly, she mentioned that she had had several revelations. The Lord revealed himself to her, she said, "upon a Throne of Justice, and all the world appearing before him, and though I must come to New England, yet I must not fear nor be dismayed," she said. "Therefore, take heed. For I know that for this that you goe about to doe unto me," she threatened, "God will ruin you and your posterity, and this whole State." Winthrop immediately replied, "I am persuaded that the revelation she brings forth is delusion." The court voted to banish her from the colony, "as being a woman not fit for our society." (Crawford 144-146)

Even Rev. Cotton turned against her, so she had no option but to leave Boston. Anne Hutchinson with her husband, 13 children and 60 followers settled in the land of Narragansetts, from whose chief, Miantonomah, they purchased the island of Aquidneck (Peaceable Island), now part of Rhode Island. In March 1638 they founded the town of Pocasset, the Indian name for that locality.

The group of banished Bostonians gathered on March 7, 1638, and agreed to the following Compact for their new colony:

"We whose names are underwritten do here solemnly in the presence of Jehovah he shall help, will submit our person, lives and estates unto our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and all those perfect and most absolute laws of his given us in his holy word of truth, to be guided and judged thereby."

What, then, were the doctrines taught by Anne Hutchinson that were so loathsome to the Bostonians?

Well, first of all, that "the Law and the preaching of it, is of no use at all to drive a man to Christ."

To a society set up on the basis of law and obedience, this was perhaps the worst teaching. She taught that it was the Holy Spirit working within, and not obedience to external law that justified a person. "A man is united to Christ only by the work of the Spirit upon him, without any act of his."

Second, she insisted that you could tell if you were justified by the work of the spirit. This was not a matter of receiving Christ, but a discerning that you have already received him.

When you had discerned this, you had "assurance." If you had this assurance, you would never doubt again. If you question your assurance, you never had it.

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Good deeds might not prove a person's assurance, but bad deeds would disprove it.

Two hundred years later, John Wesley would struggle with the idea of assurance.

Third, she said that God loves the sinner as much as the saint. Now this is certainly Biblical; Jesus loved the outcast and the upright.

Fourth, she said that a Christian is not bound to pray unless the Spirit moves him. So no outward form of prayer was useful.

This was not only troubling to the puritans, it is troubling to any Christians who come to worship and use any sort of liturgy. To Anne Hutchinson, even praying the Psalms was not useful unless you were moved to do it by the Holy Spirit.

Lastly, she said that the whole letter of the Scripture is a covenant of works. This means that she regarded the Bible, which she knew well, as a document that was useless if we took it as a rulebook. Instead, it was only useful if the Holy Spirit moved you to read it.

There is much that I agree with about the teachings of Anne Hutchinson, and just as much that I disagree with.

She was part of the debate between faith and works has gone on since the time the Bible books were written.

Her questioning the authority of the church is one that is very current, with Pope Francis contradicting statements of some of his own bishops.

So the debates in which Anne Hutchinson was involved are debates that span the life of the whole Christian Church.

But in a couple of ways, Anne Hutchinson set the scene for faith in America.

First of all, one of the hallmarks of American faith is that the average person has access to God.

I believe it; you believe it. You don't need the church to mediate between you and God. You need the church to *support* you in your pursuit of faith. There's no one standing in between you and God.

Second, Anne Hutchinson believed that a person's *experience* of God was central. She believed that a person's experience of God was more important than the Bible itself.

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We in America value a person's individual spiritual experience. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, we're all engaged in the "pursuit of happiness." People change churches because they want a different kind of experience. They become "spiritual but not religious" because they think their experience is more important than the fellowship and support and challenge of the Christian community.

As you are listening to this sermon, you are making up your mind whether or not you agree with Anne Hutchinson. That is very much in the tradition of Anne Hutchinson, who didn't let anyone else tell her what to believe.

Yet there is something to be said for those Puritan leaders of Massachusetts, too. If you don't allow your religious ideas to be tempered by the prayerful opinions of others, you can wind up cast out of the community of faith. If you don't look to the Bible and tradition, you lose an anchor; you can drift who knows where.

Thanks be to God who gives us both the ability to think for ourselves *and* the grounding influences of the Christian Community and the Bible.

Amen.