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“My Position as an Abolitionist They Could Not Bear”:
The Brief Newburyport Ministry of Thomas Wentworth Higginson

Good morning! Thank you to Rev. Rebecca, Justin, and others for inviting and hosting me at this morning's service. I'm excited to be in Newburyport for my very first visit.

And I'm honored to be here on one of your Justice Sundays, an initiative that would have absolutely pleased my subject today, whose view on both the church leaders' and America's hesitancy toward social reform in 1847 is expressed on the cover of your program: “Lo! the work is not done—the world is not reformed, it is not regenerated.”¹ As we all well know, one hundred seventy-six years later, we are still at this important work.

At 23 years old, Thomas Wentworth Higginson was ordained to the Unitarian ministry here in this building, in September 1847. He resigned that position exactly two years and one day later.

But first, a bit of background on this long reformist life.

A native of Cambridge and the youngest of ten children, Higginson entered Harvard as an undergraduate at the tender age of 14. He taught school for a short time after graduating; enrolled in divinity school at Harvard, dropped out, but returned a year later, graduating in the summer of 1847.

Over the course of his long life, in addition to being a minister, Higginson was an abolitionist and a woman's rights activist, an Army officer, an author, an editor, and a literary

critic. Today he is usually best known as the first co-editor (with Mabel Loomis Todd) of the poetry of Emily Dickinson. In addition to antislavery and woman's suffrage, Higginson was active in many other reform movements—temperance, religious, labor, and, near the end of his life, supporting the formation of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society with a younger generation of writers—Upton Sinclair, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Jack London.

Notable moments in Higginson's life include being one of the ringleaders of a thwarted effort in 1854 to free Anthony Burns from the Boston courthouse, where he was being held under the Fugitive Slave Law (which had been passed in 1850, and which compelled northerners in some cases to aid in the arrest and return of their African American neighbors). Higginson was also one of the so-called Secret Six conspirators of abolitionist zealot John Brown, whose raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in 1859 is still cited by some as “sparking” the Civil War; and he served as a colonel leading the first army unit composed of formerly enslaved men—the First South Carolina Volunteers (later the 33rd Infantry in the US Colored Troops).

Higginson was married twice: to Mary Channing in 1847; and to Mary Thacher in 1879, with whom he was the adoring parent of their daughter, Margaret.

To our extreme good fortune, over his life, Higginson kept diaries and was a voluminous correspondent. These private writings give us an extraordinary window into every era of his life, including the time here in Newburyport.

Now back to 1847.

When the Newburyport First Religious Society (aka then as the Pleasant Street Church) invited Higginson to preach here multiple times before he graduated from divinity school, it had been without a regular minister for over a year, the rather low-key Rev. Thomas Fox having

resigned in April 1846.² Other young candidates for the job, including Higginson's friend Samuel Longfellow, had turned them down, "and now all their hopes are built on me," Higginson related to his mother. He was pleased with the turnout for his visits and judged "the Newburyporters . . . decidedly enamoured" of me.³

The parishioners might have felt otherwise had they heard the recent speech he delivered at the divinity school's Visitation Day proceedings in Cambridge. For the young generation of Unitarian clergy in the mid-1840s, reform and theology had coalesced. In "The Clergy and Reform," Higginson lays out his view of the "eternal antagonism" and jealousy between church leaders and "the progressive, thinking or literary class." It is "a new religious movement . . . [that] is taking possession of man's mind . . . the universal movement of freedom . . . the uprising of the church of the future."⁴ Higginson did not restrain himself in the sermons he preached here during his job candidacy, telling friends, "I want to show my worst colors to the Newburyport people" and "have preached my worst theological heresies. Yet "I . . . have heard nothing yet but applause," he reported.⁵

Higginson was ordained as a Unitarian minister here on September 15, 1847. Abolitionist and Unitarian minister William Henry Channing delivered the sermon, entitled "The Gospel of To-Day"; Channing celebrated the "beautiful sisterhood" of "the *Reforms*, a band of angels gladdening the earth," especially the antislavery movement. And he bemoaned that many churches had closed their doors to these speakers. "Christendom," he advises, "needs Christianizing at its core." Transcendentalist minister James Freeman Clarke offered the charge and the closing prayer. He advised the new pastor "to speak regardless of 'who is offended by that honesty.'"⁶

It was an uneasy fit from the start. The day after his ordination, the *Newburyport Daily Herald* described Higginson as “a young man of much intellectual and moral power,” who was nonetheless “tinctured with those radical and imaginative notions, which have become infused into a large portion of the Unitarian clergy.”⁷ Although an early history of the Newburyport church calls Higginson “an arch agitator for an unpopular cause” and contends that parishioners were predominantly proslavery in their sentiments, this seems overstated on both counts.⁸ As Ghlee Woodworth reminded us in her remarks here two weeks ago, Newburyport’s seafaring history did include human trafficking of people sold into slavery. And certainly, the retired seamen and others whose wealth and business interests connected them with shipping and with the newer steam mills embraced a conservative politics. But proslavery in the 1840s? That may take it a bit too far.

A few days after his ordination, Higginson married his fiancée, Mary Elizabeth Channing, and moved with her to the parsonage at 18 Essex Street. They loved being close to the sea; they loved their gardens; they inhaled the nearby Artichoke Mills landscape—“so lovely with the fields of snow & the dark shadows & the two white rivers.” Before long Higginson reported “the people thus far much more pleasing than I expected.” Even the wealthy magnate John Porter complimented one of his sermons. When Porter brought up “the dangerous subject of Slavery” and attacked the abolitionists’ extreme views, Higginson enjoyed giving him a private “lecture . . . to which he had little say . . . and seems to respect me more for having stated my position.”⁹ An odd balance prevailed for a time, with most in Newburyport, from Higginson’s perspective, deciding not to take offense at his reformist sermons. As he soon learned when speaking at local antislavery meetings, though, angry hecklers continued as in prior years to disrupt the events.¹⁰

In his autobiography, Higginson remembers that “during all this period I was growing more, not less radical.”¹¹ His correspondence and diaries present his hesitancy that he is cut out to be a minister. While he enjoys “speaking to men” as well as pastoral care, visits, officiating at weddings—to the central part of his job—preaching the christian message—he did not necessarily feel called: “I must sometimes transcend.” Letters also reflect Higginson’s unsure sense of how things here were going. He had been in Newburyport a brief five months when some parishioners complained that his “sermons are too much . . . lectures” and not enough preaching. He agreed but “finds it impossible to take a wide enough range in my sermons; I have to restrict myself in thoughts & illustrations.” Why must preaching always be religious, he laments.¹²

The Sunday sermon should address a wide variety of social concerns (again, as you’re doing with Justice Sundays and other programs, including the anti-racist initiative). We must also keep in mind that it was not simply the Newburyport church Higginson wanted to reform; it was the entire christian relation—what he called “the eternal problem of each age as to each institution.”

Attending a Unitarian conference in June 1848, Higginson voiced these concerns directly to the church hierarchy. Claiming that divinity school had ill prepared his generation for the challenges of their time, he shamed the older ministers for not having “encouraged [them] . . . to think freely & speak freely!”¹³

Higginson and his wife threw themselves in to the social obligations of their roles. They took part in amateur theatricals, attended Monday night “Teacher’s meetings,” Tuesday evening Reading Circles; and Friday nights with the “Debating Society.” In addition to exchanging pulpits with other area ministers, he invites lecturers for evening services. In June 1848, the formerly enslaved William Wells Brown spoke here, followed by Higginson’s own antislavery diatribe.

Given that visiting abolitionists had not that long ago been subjected to sticks and rotten eggs, Higginson took pride in “some progress.”¹⁴

The Newburyport years also served as an incubator for Higginson’s reformist sensibility on issues other than Slavery. The town’s several steam mills cultivated his sense of the need for labor reform, especially for reducing (to ten hours) the long work-day of “these factory girls.” And though he was not successful in putting an end to John Caldwell’s local rum distillery, three alcohol-serving businesses apparently did close the year after Higginson arrived, whether as a result of his temperance preaching I can’t say. Capital punishment also drew his attention. When a Cambridge man George Hunnewell was sentenced to death for setting a fire that destroyed his childhood home, killing his mother and brother, Higginson judged that Hunnewell was to a “great extent . . . the victim of circumstances”; surely, if his situation were “investigated & set before the public . . . commutation of his sentence might be obtained.” He met with the Anti-Capital Punishment Society, agreeing that “the proper place for this poor man . . . is a moral hospital.” Higginson’s and others’ efforts succeeded. Hunnewell’s sentence was commuted to life imprisonment by the Massachusetts governor a few months after the conviction.¹⁵

His lifelong woman’s rights activism was also well underway at this time. In December 1848, Higginson scolded poet James Russell Lowell for “unfairly maligning” Transcendentalist author Margaret Fuller in his recent satire, *A Fable for Critics*. “Being a woman,” Fuller “has at every step in her literary career been exposed to insult & annoyance . . . She has dared to study, think, talk & write, though a woman.” Yes, of course, like any writer, Fuller is open to criticism, he realizes. But not to Lowell’s “undiscriminating solely contemptuous criticism.”¹⁶

His commitment to equality led Higginson in 1849 to oppose Ralph Waldo Emerson who along with Bronson Alcott had proposed a new “scientific, literary and philanthropic” club in Boston. To Higginson’s understanding, this “Town and Country Club” would admit members on the basis of interests and accomplishments. Period. To his dismay, Higginson heard otherwise directly from Emerson, who removed from the list of proposed members the names of the two women, including Transcendentalist Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, whom Higginson had recommended. Emerson explained that he regarded “the names of two ladies standing there upon our roll as quite fatal to the existence of our cherished Club.” Higginson thinks on this for a few days before responding that while he understands Emerson’s position he “makes no apologies” for what is clearly an “unaccountable difference in our view.”¹⁷

We need to pause for a moment and appreciate this remarkable moment. Age 25, Higginson stood his ground against not only a man whose writings he had long admired but one who was at that time the most respected intellectual in the country. Later that year, Higginson broached the possibility of proposing Frederick Douglass for membership in the Town and Country Club, feeling strongly about “the precedent of admitting [what he called] colored persons.”¹⁸ Neither Douglass nor other African Americans—nor women—became members of this short-lived club.

The situation in Newburyport as well as his own doubts unraveled fairly early in Higginson’s ministry here. At six months, he describes “The last two months’ experience, perfectly prosperous as it has been, has yet fanned brighter a good many of my doubts . . . The more clearly I see, the more fervently I wonder to myself to, the new impulse that is come on the world, the new dawning Age of Faith, . . . the more I find everywhere ground of discontent in all our existing

religious & ecclesiastical forms. . . . had I known beforehand what they would be & how irksome, oftentimes, I think shld. never have been permanently settled.”¹⁹

The presidential election of 1848, and Higginson’s sermon that followed, sped up the inevitable break. Higginson had supported the third party candidacy of Martin Van Buren, while nearly all in his congregation went for the candidate who won, Whig Party nominee and Mexican War hero Zachary Taylor. It probably did not smooth their relations when Higginson exchanged pulpits just after the November election with the despised radical Theodore Parker, nor, perhaps that he had recently hosted an African American man who was in town to “raise money for an excellent Manual Labor School he has started (for fugitive slaves & others) in Michigan.”²⁰ In his “Thanksgiving Sermon” at the end of the month, Higginson let loose: Accusing parishioners of being willing to vote for “the necessary evil”—a man who enslaved others could be tolerated as long as he protected their wealth with a popular tariff. “You are now to be held accountable,” Higginson admonishes. “You knew that he was a man . . . of not the smallest political knowledge, a mere warrior, a mere slaveholder, and never could have been nominated or chosen, but by this ultra-slavery influence. . . . And yet, when the time came, and this so humiliating . . . you accepted it as your triumph.” To say that this direct censure in the form of a sermon unsettled many parishioners is an understatement.

Higginson remained as the Newburyport First Religious Society’s minister for another ten months, but by spring 1849, the situation was quickly deteriorating. To his mother, he cautiously admitted a growing “dissatisfaction with my professional life.” To his brother, he declared his readiness to depart the ministry itself, at least for a time.²¹

A few months later, an elderly parishioner, Mr. Wood, apprised Higginson that “several of the leading & richest men” were resolved to leave (and thus divide) the church, at which point the young minister recognized “the case was hopeless,” with only one ethical course of action—to “at once offer my resignation.” Wood assured Higginson that the parishioners liked and respected him; his politics, however, were another matter. Surprised that it hadn’t come to this sooner, Higginson affirmed: it was “My position as an Abolitionist they could not bear.”²²

Some parishioners were prepared when Higginson stood here on September 16, 1849, and tendered his resignation; but “the young men, the poor men, the Democrats & the women,” according to Higginson, were taken by surprise. Personally, he was relieved: “I especially have longed for this release from a life which did not content me.”²³

Assessing his congregation overall, Higginson departs the pulpit by complimenting them: “No people ever listened better”; he’s especially confident in the “influence I have had over the young people.” The Higginsons remained in town for another two years; they moved to board rent-free with his distant relation, Mary Curzon, at Artichoke Mills. During these years he started an informal school for girls, lectured at the lyceum and to other groups, preached in other towns, briefly edited the *Newburyport Union*, and was, as he later put it, “as acceptable a citizen of the town as could be reasonably expected of one who had preached himself out of his pulpit.”²⁴ In 1852, Higginson accepted an offer to serve as the minister of “a new society recently formed in Worcester, upon an anti-sectarian basis,” where he and Mary remained for over a decade. The local Free Soil Party wished him well but nonetheless regretted “a severe and an irreparable loss” to the community with his departure.²⁵

Five years after leaving Newburyport, in May 1854, Higginson joined other radical abolitionists in attempting to rescue Anthony Burns, who had escaped from slavery in Virginia, and who was held in the Boston courthouse under the authority of the Fugitive Slave Law. During the attack, a courthouse guard was killed, leading to arrest warrants for several, including Higginson, which were later dropped.²⁶ The sermon he delivered in Worcester's free church, "Massachusetts in Mourning," two days after Burns was pronounced guilty and hauled down the militarized streets of Boston to the harbor by his enslaver, lets loose Higginson's rage. Thirty years of a radical antislavery movement had brought no change. "Here is the simple fact: *the South beats us more and more easily every time.*" Harking back to their Revolutionary-era forebears, he shames his listeners: "Is it all gone . . . that old New England heroism and enthusiasm? Is there any . . . love of Freedom left in Massachusetts?" We can imagine this ardent young man leaning forward and looking out to the audience to offer a "word of counsel": "Learn this lesson thoroughly," he surely shouted, "*a revolution is begun!* Not a reform, but a Revolution!"²⁷

Thomas Wentworth Higginson spent but a brief time here in this very pulpit. But you can be proud that they were two critical years that fostered this young minister's conviction and his understanding of what it was going to take to bring an end to slavery in this country.

Note that HM abbreviates the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

¹ Higginson, "The Clergy and Reform," in Howard N. Meyer, ed., *The Magnificent Activist: The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1823-1911* (Da Capo Press, 2000), 324-330.

² Minnie Atkinson, *A History of the First Religious Society in Newburyport, Massachusetts* (Unitarian Historical Society, 1933), 1: 67.

³ Higginson to Louise Storrow Higginson, 5 Mar 1847 (HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784).

⁴ Higginson, "The Clergy and Reform," in Howard N. Meyer, ed., *The Magnificent Activist: The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (De Capo P, 2000), 324, 328,

⁵ Higginson to Louise Storrow Higginson, 13 Apr 1847 and 5 Jul 1847 (HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784).

⁶ William Henry Channing, *The Gospel of To-Day. A Discourse Delivered at the Ordination of T. W. Higginson, as Minister . . .* (Wm. Crosby and H. P. Nichols, 1847), 16, 10; Clarke quoted in Tilden G. Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm: A Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (Yale UP, 1968), 76.

⁷ "Ordination," *Newburyport Herald*, 16 Sep 1847.

⁸ Atkinson, *History*, 1: 66, 67.

⁹ Higginson to Louise Storrow Higginson, 5 Mar 1847 and 20 Jul 1847 (HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784).

¹⁰ Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm*, 80.

¹¹ Higginson, *Cheerful Yesterdays* (Houghton, Mifflin, 1898), 114.

¹² Higginson to Louise Storrow Higginson, 8 Feb 1848, 16 Nov 1847 (HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784).

¹³ Higginson to Louise Storrow Higginson, 8 Feb 1848 and 6 Jun 1848 (HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784).

¹⁴ Higginson to Louise Storrow Higginson, 26 Jan 1848 and 6 Jun 1848 (HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784).

¹⁵ Higginson to Mary Channing [later Higginson], 26 Jul 1847 (HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784); Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm* 73; Higginson to James Russell Lowell, 23 Jan 1848 (HM, James Russell Lowell Additional Papers, MS Am 1484.1); *Worcester Massachusetts Spy*, 2 Feb 1848.

¹⁶ Higginson to James Russell Lowell, 5 Dec 1848 (HM, James Russell Lowell Additional Papers, MS Am 765).

¹⁷ Martin Duberman, *James Russell Lowell* (Houghton Mifflin, 1966), 187; Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Letters of RWE*, ed. Eleanor M. Tilton (Columbia UP, 1991), 7:212-13; Higginson to Ralph Waldo Emerson, 19 May 1848 (HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784).

¹⁸ Higginson to James Russell Lowell, 5 Jul 1849 (HM, James Russell Lowell Additional Papers, MS Am 765).

¹⁹ Higginson to Samuel Johnson, 16 Mar 1848 (HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784).

²⁰ Mary Channing Higginson to [no name], 14 Nov 1848; Higginson to Louise Storrow Higginson, 23 Nov 1848 (both in HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784); Higginson, *A Thanksgiving Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Newburyport, 1848), 6.

²¹ Higginson to Louise Storrow Higginson, 6 Sep 1849; Higginson to Waldo Higginson, 18 Sep 1848 ((HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784).

²² Higginson to Louise Storrow Higginson, 6 Sep 1849 (HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784).

²³ Higginson to Louise Storrow Higginson, 6 Sep 1849 (HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784).

²⁴ Higginson to Louise Storrow Higginson, 6 Sep 1849 (HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Correspondence and Papers, MS Am 784); Higginson, *Cheerful Yesterdays* 130.

²⁵ Mary Thacher Higginson, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson: The Story of His Life* (Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 117; Higginson diary, 22 Aug 1850 (HM, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Journals, MS Am 784).

²⁶ Sandra Harbert Petruionis, *To Set This World Right* (Cornell, 2006), 99-100.

²⁷ Higginson, *Massachusetts in Mourning*, 3, 10, 12.