

March 19, 2017

## **Sunday Sermon: “P.T. Barnum, Universalist”**

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Phineas Taylor "P. T." Barnum

Last fall after the election I made a statement that our president was a modern-day PT Barnum. About a year before that candidate Trump said in Meet the Press that he takes the comparisons to the grandstanding showman as a compliment. “We need P.T. Barnum, a little bit, because we have to build up the image of our country.” It started me thinking about Barnum. Then in January the CEO of Ringling brothers and Barnum and Bailey circus stated they would hold their final performances in May of this year. This was brought about by the decline of ticket sales and made circuses an unsustainable business in this country. This unsustainability was brought about when they transitioned elephants out of the circus program for humane reasons. Then Sarah, while doing our archives, found the signature and quote by Barnum that she brought to us today. The Ringling Circus, I noted, will be in the XL Center at the end of April as part of their farewell performances. I’m going to try to attend, because I remember as a child going to one of those Ringling three-ring circus performances in the tent and Venice, Florida where my parents retired was for many years the winter home of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum& Bailey Circus. You could regularly go to their practice sessions in their winter home.

So I started my study of Phineas Taylor Barnum and discovered how his evolution to universalism paralleled this congregation’s and the evolution of universalism into the landscape of Connecticut religion. Barnum’s grandfather, Phineas Taylor, was an early universalist. In the town where he was raised, Bethel, there was one Church and it was congregational. At that time, the Congregational Church was the state church and tax money went to support it. If there was another church in town that a person was supporting, the tax dollars would be diverted. The doctrines of the Congregational Church at the time, we’re very non-forgiving. The confession of faith was known as the Saybrook platform and adopted in 1708. In the platform we hear about the innate depravity of man and the ineffectiveness of all good works because if you weren’t among the elect, you are damned to eternal misery. There was a prohibition against marrying “Infidels, popeists, or other

idolaters.” The pope was referred to as the antichrist. So in Barnum’s world, there are only two distinct classes of people; the elect, who are destined to spend eternity in heaven, and the doomed to “dishonor and wrath” in another place.

The church platform stated, “by the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined onto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death... and their number is so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.” PT recalled, “When I was from 10 to 14 years of age, I attended prayer meetings where I could almost feel the burning waves and smell the sulfurous fumes... I remember the shrieks and groans of suffering children and parents and even aged grandparents... Many a time have I returned home from the evening prayer meeting frightened and even smelling, feeling and tasting those everlasting waves of boiling sulfur... Certainly I could not truly love such a god. Professing Christians of that day would say, ‘I hope I love God. I tried to love him. But they could not love him.’” Shortly thereafter Baptists, Methodists and Episcopalians were tolerated in his town. Coming with them was the itinerant Universalist Hosea Ballou and a small society was established when PT was 12 years old in 1822, a year after this church was founded. A young PT Barnum was clerk to this early Universal society whose platform stated, “We believe that there is one God, whose nature is love, revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.” This is the Winchester New Hampshire profession of faith. It seems we really haven’t strayed from this very far in 200 years. The great psychologist of religion, William James, would term Universalism as a religion of “healthy-mindedness.”

The religion of universalism was challenged by the Congregational Church declaring universal salvation a “censurable heresy,” and eventually the Connecticut courts decided on the legitimacy of the free-will liberal religions.

While this was going on PT Barnum was working to establish his fortune. Barnum was adept at arithmetic, but hated physical work. As a teen, he worked in his family store and then opened a weekly newspaper, “the Herald of freedom and gospel witness.” As an editor and chief contributor, Barnum’s paper dealt with politics and religion. And wrote against the orthodoxy and the orthodoxy’s approval of slavery. He was so forceful many referred to him as the Reverent PT Barnum as he was apt to sermonize in his paper and in public. While you owned

his newspaper, his main source of income was lotteries. When the state outlawed these, Barnum moved to New York. In 1834, giving up the "Herald of Freedom," he moved his family to New York City and became a showman. At the time, he joined the Church of the Divine Paternity, which became the Fourth Universalist Society. He established an entertainment troop which was called "Barnum's Grand Scientific and Musical Theater", and soon after purchased a museum which he named Barnum's American Museum. In the museum, he had a theater that he called a lecture hall in which he presented moral plays against slavery and for temperance. At that time being a showman or an actor was one step above being an owner of a tavern of their day. The occupations were not looked on favorably. At its heyday, Barnum's American museum had proportionally as many visitors as all the Disney sites do in modern America. It contained America's first aquarium and wax-works. Barnum had become famous.

Now the exhibits that he displayed were what he referred to as humbug. For example, he had Black slave who was reported as Washington's nursemaid and 160 years old, and a dead monkey which was attached to a fishtail that he called a mermaid. The phrase, 'there is a sucker born every minute,' which is contributed to Barnum, was not his. He admitted his exaggerations and lies as he said in our second reading, but also said that no one left his museums or shows that wasn't satisfied. He also said of himself, "I am a showman by profession...and all the gilding shall make nothing else of me", and his aim was "to put money in his own coffers".

But to understand PT Barnum, you really have to understand how his mind worked. For example, when he owned the Herald of Freedom, Barnum was persecuted three times for libel. Most of the libel accusations were against this criticism of actions of religious zeal in Connecticut. He lost to a local church elder for accusing him of "taking usury of an orphan boy." He was sentenced to 60 days in jail. For those 60 days, he ran his business from a jail cell which he had furnished as an office. When you got out of jail, he converted his release to a media event and a personal triumph. Engaging a band and a series of carriages and organizing a large dinner. At this dinner and he had the participants make him a martyr for the calls of freedom and the rights of common Man. The Rev. Theophilus Fisk delivered the dinner oration on freedom of the press. Barnum had effectively reframed his loss into a triumph. You might say Barnum was a master at the soft con.

In New York, he was doing similar things. While looking for new acts and respectability, he took some of his entertainment troop to Europe and even performed for Queen Victoria. In 1850, he invited to Swedish nightingale Jenny Lind to tour America with him for a contract of \$1000 a night for 150 performances. Jenny Lind used her performance money to finance Christian charities in Sweden. Barnum publicized this unashamedly, but successfully. Barnum made about a half a million dollars with the Jenny Lind Tour.

After earning a degree of respectability within Jenny Lind Tour, on the advice of his friend an editor of the New York Tribune, Horace Greeley, in 1855 Barnum wrote his autobiography; the Life of PT Barnum written by himself. It was sort of like the Art of the Deal if you will; an entire book given to Barnum's self-aggrandizement. It was highly successful, but not like any autobiography of the day. Autobiographies of the day were sober and full of moral lessons. All the critics panned his book. Barnum's was not, it was full of fun, and antidotes, and described many of his cons which he calls humbugs. Humbugs were minor deceits like false advertising like the mermaid in his museum. The religious press was particularly critical, one critic wrote of Barnum's fondness for hiring his own competition stating, "it is wrong; it is obtaining money on false pretenses, and a deliberate, protracted employment of falsehood." The critic described the mermaid scheme saying, "can any special pleading conceal the infamy of so deliberate and complicated a falsehood?" He further added;

"Thus we have rapidly traced the outline of a career which is one of marvels of the times. We have spoken plainly because we wish to be truthful; because we believe that the influence of his character, baptized, as it is, with pecuniary success and newspaper accommodations, is baleful and yet fascinating; because, while we remember, with due honor, industry, economy, perseverance, and earnestness, we cannot sanction duplicity, nor praise persistent deception. The most we can say is, that Phineas Taylor Barnum has been an unscrupulous and successful manipulator the public gullibility; but he has some redeeming traits of character. if he had not, he would be a monster."

Barnum had various money troubles while in New York. His museum burned to the ground twice and he had some bad investments. So in the late 1850s, he took to the lecture tour mostly he was a temperance speaker to eliminate his debt. (Similar

to hosting a TV show today) He moved his primary residence to Bridgeport, Connecticut and served two terms as a Connecticut legislator. He had become a Lincoln Republican over slavery and African-American suffrage. He spoke at the legislature in favor of ratification of the 13th amendment saying, "A human soul, 'that God has created and Christ died for,' is not to be trifled with. It may tenant the body of a Chinaman, a Turk, an Arab or a Hottentot – it is still an immortal spirit". While in Hartford as a legislature, he became associated with this church, and would've been a regular attender when the assembly was active. In 1875 he was elected mayor of Bridgeport, and worked diligently for the town, bringing water and gas lighting to the streets, founding Bridgeport Hospital as its first president and enforcing temperance.

Late in life, he established "P. T. Barnum's Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan & Hippodrome", a traveling circus, menagerie and museum of freaks " and he went into partnership with Bailey. During the entire time, Barnum lived in Bridgeport, he sponsored the local Universalist Church. Though he was active in many Universalist churches throughout his life, this was the first one he joined. This he details is because his life as a showman would reflect badly upon his universal's faith. As a member of the Bridgeport Universalist's he supported the ministry of Rev. Olympia Brown when she ministered to the church for 4 years. Throughout his life, he contributed significant amount of monies to Universalist endeavors. He was a trustee the Universalist college, Tufts and contributed a museum that became the biological department. When his great elephant, Jumbo died, he contributed its stuffed body. The elephant became the school's mascot. He also contributed significant monies Lombard college and St. Lawrence University, and was the principal support of his Bridgeport congregation. He died in 1891 was buried in Mountain Grove Cemetery which he designed.

President Trump felt his comparison to PT Barnum was a compliment, one could do much worse then follow Barnum's public example. In an ever-evolving and never-ending world, Amen.