

On this Memorial Day Sunday, we remember those who gave their lives in service to this country. This parish remembers its sons who died in the Civil War. You can see the marble plaque to them in the dining room. The oldest was 40 and had children of his own. The youngest was 17. We remember those who died in the two World Wars and that memorial is here at the front of the sanctuary, all those who served and those who died with gold stars next to their names. These people fought on behalf of our nation's highest values, including the value of freedom. Our country is founded on freedom: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, freedom to make moral choices, freedom to vote, freedom to establish our families as we will, freedom to live a dignified life without coercion or tyranny. Can we say that we have achieved these freedoms? Not yet...Not yet. And we cry with the psalmist "How long Oh, Lord." How long until a little child going to school has the freedom not to be shot or terrorized? How long until the person has the freedom to go to their neighborhood market and not be killed for the color of their skin? How long until those living in our nation's cities have the freedom not to be targeted with gun violence? Oh God, be with us. For our nation has elevated the freedom to own a gun over the freedom to be alive. We have failed to protect the precious lives of our children. Forgive us, loving Spirit and put us on the path toward peace.

The story of our nation and our faith is a story of freedom. But we are not free. I want to take us back, not to the founding of our country, but to the founding of our commonwealth. Massachusetts ratified its constitution in 1780, seven years before the United States ratified its Constitution, and Worcester County was avidly anti-slavery at the time. In fact, Worcester County's delegates to the United States Constitutional Convention voted against it because it did not abolish slavery in the country. In 1781, Worcester attorney, Levi Lincoln, took the case of Quock Walker, an enslaved man who was suing for his freedom under the new Massachusetts Constitution. Quock Walker was born in Massachusetts to Ghanian parents, who were enslaved by James Caldwell in Barre. Caldwell promised young Walker his freedom at age 25. But Walker lived longer than Caldwell did. Through a series of re-marriages, deaths and inheritances, Walker came to be owned by Nathaniel Jennison, who also promised him freedom at age 21. But when young Walker turned 21, Jennison refused to give him his freedom. Walker ran away from Jennison and returned to the Caldwell family. He had become friends with the sons of that family, and those grown sons, Seth and John, offered Quock Walker paid employment on their farm. Jennison went after him, captured Walker, took him home, beat him and Walker sued Jennison for assault and battery. Levi

Lincoln and Caleb Strong argued that, because Walker had been promised his freedom at age 25, and was now 28, he was free, and they took this case all the way to the Supreme Court of Massachusetts, and they won. But at the same time, Jennison, Walker's putative owner, also sued Seth and John Caldwell for stealing his "property." Levi Lincoln and Caleb Strong also represented the Caldwells in this case. Jennison won in lower court, but the Caldwells appealed to the Massachusetts Superior Court. The judge ruled that slavery was incompatible with the Massachusetts Constitution. He wrote (the judge): "Whatever sentiments have formally prevailed in this particular or slid in upon us by the example of others - because slavery was not mentioned in the Massachusetts Constitution-A different idea has taken place with the people of America more favorable to liberty, with which Heaven without regard to color, complexion, or shape of noses, has inspired all the human race. And upon this ground our constitution of government by which the people of this Commonwealth have solemnly bound themselves, sets out with declaring that all men are born free and equal; that every subject is entitled to liberty, and to have it guarded by the laws, as well as life and property. In short, is totally repugnant to the idea of being born slaves. This being the case, I think the idea of slavery is inconsistent with our own conduct and constitution. And there can be no such thing as perpetual servitude of a rational creature in this Commonwealth." So Levi Lincoln is a hero of civil rights, not just in Massachusetts, but in the country.

Levi Lincoln also helped to found this parish, the second parish, still part of our long name: now we are called the First Unitarian Church because by the time of the Civil War, there were several, so we were the first. But at the time of our founding, we were called the second parish because there was one other, the single parish of Worcester. That parish found itself without a minister. And there was disagreement in the community about what kind of ministers should be called to serve the congregation next. Levi Lincoln was one of those leaders in Worcester who wanted to see the congregation led by a minister who would preach Free Will from the pulpit; would preach the notion that people were free to make moral decisions with their lives. The Conservatives - we might call them orthodox Congregationalists- they believed in predestination. They wanted a minister who would preach that God had ordained everything from the beginning of time: who would go to heaven and who would go to hell. And all people could do, was to worship God. There was no real opportunity to make moral choices. This became the crux that distinguished Unitarianism from Congregationalism at the beginning of the 19th century. Worcester was a little bit ahead of the curve, having this insight in 1785. And the congregation, the Orthodox Congregationalists, couldn't

agree on a candidate. Meanwhile, the liberals found Aaron Bancroft. The two parties couldn't agree. So the Liberals decided to found their own parish hall, Aaron Bancroft as their minister, and eventually petitioned the Commonwealth to create a second parish in the town of Worcester, which is who we still are today. Free will-freedom of belief and understanding-that was the rallying cry that united religious liberals at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. Our spiritual ancestors believed that we were free to make ethical choices, free to interpret the Bible using reason and in light of our experiences, free to have our own unmediated relationship with the divine. So, I'm struck that this is one person, one person who was instrumental in founding this parish in the name of freedom of belief and freewill, and the same person who helps to free Quock Walker from slavery and end the institution of slavery in Massachusetts. I'm struck when I hear Levi Lincoln's argument on behalf of Quock Walker. Exactly what kind of freedom he is supporting because he is not supporting the slaveholders right to keep his property, or his right to receive an inheritance, or to realize an investment. He's not supporting the right, the freedom, to honor a contract. Lincoln is supporting Quock Walker's right to be a free whole and equal person. Lincoln argued for freedom that respected relatedness and allowed more people to be fully human. Massachusetts law was silent on slavery at that time. Yet rather than argue that Jennison had the freedom to do whatever he wanted, just because he could, Lincoln argued instead that Quock Walker was a person, and that his freedom of existence mattered more than Jennison's freedom of ownership.

We're still wrestling today with what it means to honor freedom. Those virtues that our church and our nation's founders espoused the freedoms defended by our service members. They are still today open for debate. You can see this just in recent years. Do people have the right to be free from sexual harassment and assault in public life and in the workplace? That's what the "Me Too" movement has been debating. Do people have the freedom to live in safety from the police as black people in this country? That is the work of Black Lives Matter. Today, as we expect the Supreme Court to end the right to have an abortion nationwide, we wonder if people have freedoms to make decisions for themselves about reproductive health care and pregnancy. Even the argument about cancel culture is an argument about freedom. What do we have the freedom to do and say in the public square?

But this week, especially, our hearts are breaking for the freedom simply to remain alive. Freedom for children to survive the school day. Freedom for black people to do their grocery shopping in peace. Freedom for worshipers to attend church or synagogue. Freedom to go dancing. Freedom to serve on a military base. All of

these are places that have seen mass shootings in recent years. Freedom simply to continue living a freedom that must matter more than the freedom of some people to own some weapons. Levi Lincoln argued for human rights over ownership rights. And we, as a nation, must reclaim that moral clarity. The right of children to grow up is greater than the right to own an assault weapon. Americans can continue to hunt, shoot for sport, and even defend themselves, without assault rifles and high-capacity magazines. We can strengthen background checks and red flag laws without violating the Second Amendment.

I was reminded recently about the purpose of a sermon. "To speak to the person in the church whose life hangs in the balance," wrote one writer. I preach for myself, too. Isn't it all of us when it comes to our cherished hopes for our own children? I know that's where my heart is today. That's where I feel my life hanging in the balance. And you know if we're actually thinking about the very children of this church, they're safer than they might be in some other places. Our children, grandchildren, our nieces and nephews and young friends are safer here in Massachusetts than almost anywhere else in the United States when it comes to gun violence, because we have active laws to stop it. We have some of the nation's strictest laws and many of our neighboring states also have strict laws. With the United States Congress unlikely to pass any gun reform, even in the wake of this grotesque tragedy, it is left to individual states to make the difference. Our country only becomes more polarized, and the nation our ancestors founded and defended, only becomes more fragile. It is not enough. It is not enough for the children here in this church or this city to be safer. We need children in New Town in Columbine, and in Uvalde to be safer too. Even here, we need young people in Worcester to be safer from gun violence and from traffic deaths and from all forms of violence that is preventable today. Our nation must respond to the anger and will of its citizens. How long, Oh lord. It could be today. If only our leaders would listen. I love you all. Amen.

#### References:

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