

November 22, 2020

MEETING HOUSE SUNDAY

Mouth House, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, senior minister, Old South Church in Boston

This building has a nickname, *Sanctuary of Freedom*. It has another nickname, as well; one it shares with congregational meeting houses across New England: Mouth-house.

Mouth-house (from the German, *Mundhaus*) is a term used in the 1500's by Reformer, Martin Luther, to describe a Protestant Church, a protesting church, emphasizing that the undertaking of a church is a wordy affair, a verbose enterprise. Among other things, for Protestants, a church is a gathering and releasing of voices, a gathering and airing of ideas, of experiences and perspectives. We are a people of debate and deliberation, all in the service of discerning how best to serve and represent God.

In striking contrast to what transpired in protesting meeting houses like this, Roman Catholic and Anglican churches were orderly, compliant, muted ... a feat easily accomplished when a church privileges and elevates a single voice, a male, priestly voice, above all others.

Can you see the contrast?

Welcome to this old mouth-house. A lot has been said. Argued here. Debated and disputed here. Agreed and decided here.

It has not escaped my notice that, across the centuries, the most significant voices emanating from this mouth house – the most persuasive and consequential – were not those of the clergy who preached here, but of the lay women and men who orated here, whose poetry is associated with this house, whose speeches and lectures, pamphlets and broadsides, tracts and correspondence were the foundation, the groundwork and underpinning, the argument and architecture for a democracy in the making.

Among the most consequential of all the voices associated with this Mouth-house, is that of patriot and orator, James Otis. In the 1760's, in this house, Otis asserted that all people – women, persons of African descent, enslaved persons – are endowed with the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and property. Inalienable meaning, absolute, meaning unassailable.

It was James Otis who coined the phrase, "Taxation without representation is tyranny." Along with Sam Adams, John Adams, John Hancock, Paul Revere, and Joseph Warren, James Otis was among the Sons of Liberty.

In the Massachusetts State House there is a colossal memorial to James Otis; our James Otis, for he was baptized in this house on February 29, 1756 at the age of thirty-one. The State house mural depicts James Otis at the moment, many claim, birthed the American Revolution. Otis, a young attorney, faces white-wigged, red-robed justices of the Superior Court. For five hours James Otis trumpets against a hated, British practice: the Writs of Assistance. In essence, these

Writs permitted any royal official the absolute right, with or without cause – with or without the due process of a search warrant -- to invade your home, your person, and your place of business turning these inside out, on the off chance you had smuggled something to these shores without having paid a tax on them. The Writs of Assistance were arbitrary, intrusive, and led to abuses of power. The Writs were despotic and, to our forebears, insupportable.

The mural of Otis is enormous and commanding. The two murals that flank it – on the left, Paul Revere's ride, on the right, the Boston Tea Party – are half the size of the one depicting Otis.

James Otis' five-hour speech was, by all accounts, brilliant, persuasive, even intoxicating. It has been called the greatest oration delivered in the American colonies before the Revolution. Commenting on this epic speech, John Adams wrote "Otis was a flame of fire." And this: "There and then the child independence was born."

While Otis' speech inspired the patriots, whipping them into a revolutionary frenzy, it incensed the royalists. A reminder that one person's freedom is another's treason. In the aftermath of this heroic five-hour speech, an Otis' biographer writes: "The infamous Writs of Assistance were as dead as the mummies of Egypt". (J. C. Ridpath, p.56)

For some ten years James Otis labored and thundered thus in the cause of freedom. He was a leader in opposition to the Stamp Act, to the tax on tea, to the impressment of royal troops, armed and menacing in the streets of Boston. So committed was he to the cause that he gave up his work as an attorney and renounced all recreation for the duration. It was Otis, more even than Sam Adams, who threw himself into the fray. But, it was all too much. His intellect became overstrained and, at length, warped. He became excitable, irrational, eccentric, and pugnacious.

It is here that the story of James Otis takes a terrible turn. One fateful evening in September of 1769, Otis entered a Boston coffee house. A royal Custom House official, who had grown weary of Otis' bellicosity, struck Otis with his cane. Otis lunged at him. The fight became a brawl. Otis sustained a grave head injury. His mind which had grown irrational and excitable, seemed to have snapped that night. He suffered a mental collapse. Otis never fully recovered.

And so it was that just as the curtain was rising on the great drama of Liberty and Independence, a drama in which this Meeting House played a leading role – a drama for which Otis had written the script – just as the curtain was rising, Otis was off stage, his great oratory silenced. As John Hancock, Samuel Adams, John Adams, and Phillis Wheatley rose to prominence, the consequential contributions of James Otis faded into memory.

In his waning and enfeebled years, a friend took pity on James Otis: inviting him to the country, to live out his days with their family in a farmhouse in Andover. These were placid years for Otis. Far from the battle field, in the rural countryside, he achieved a measure of equanimity.

It was there, at that farmhouse, that he who “ran swinging a torch in the early dawn of the American Revolution”, would quit the stage of life, but not without a most dramatic and startling exit.

It was on the 23rd of May, in the year 1783 – just a few months before the royal troops would finally leave our shores. A grand thunderstorm was rolling over the rural farmhouse in Andover. Sheets of rain. Howling winds. Crashes of thunder and bolts of lightning convulsed the night.

James Otis, drawn to the storm as a moth to light, opened the farmhouse door. He stood there, leaning against the lintel, witnessing the impressive storm: the heroics of heaven flashing and thundering. There was a sudden crack of thunder. A lightning bolt zigzagged from heaven to earth. It made a direct hit on the body of James Otis. Instantly he died. Yet, there was not found a mark on his body. Yet, his facial expression in death was serene. He sleeps now, this great patriot and orator, our brother, not far from here, in the Old Granary Burying Ground.

James Otis did great justice to this Mouth House, to the cause of freedom, to the rights of all.

We chose to record today’s service, and the past two Sundays here, in this mouth house, during *this* election season as a reminder that democracy is messy and costly. James Otis lost his mind. Sam Adams’ home was burned to the ground. This meeting house was seized, desecrated, and damaged. Phillis Wheatley’s books of poems were held captive with the hated tea on the ship, the *Dartmouth*. Democracy is messy and costly. Justice is not easily won. The rights of those out of power – the voiceless, the disenfranchised – are not easily protected. What our country faces today – its divisions, its contests, the shrill and ugly conflicts over truth – is not new. As a Christian pastor I would remind you that the forces of good and evil, justice and tyranny, generosity and greed, are real and potent. They are forever at play among us.

James Otis, shaggy prophet of freedom, was a forerunner to the debates this church has undertaken across the centuries ... some of the most recent involving equal marriage, interreligious relations, offering sanctuary to those under threat of deportation; the climate crisis, and America’s original sin of racism. We take up these matters with words, with speech. For better or worse, words shape our society, make our laws, define our aspirations, decide who is in and who is out, are as stakes in the ground declaring what we stand for ... and for what we refuse to let stand.

Let this old mouth house, and the congregation now called Old South Church, never tire of the struggle, never flag in zeal for what is right. For I, too, assert, that while the arc of the moral universe is long, it surely bends toward justice.

SOURCES

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The Character of James Otis, by Charles k. Edmunds

An Essay on the Patriot, by G. Mercer Adam

Three Men of Boston: Samuel Adams, Thomas Hutchinson, James Otis, by John R. Galvin (1976)

Historical Catalogue: Old South Church in Boston 1669-1882, by Hamilton Hill
History of the Old South Church, Volume II, by Hamilton A. Hill

BENEDICTION

May God shine upon us, and be gracious unto us. May God give us courage never to sell ourselves short; courage to resist evil, courage to risk something big for something good; courage to remember that the world is too dangerous for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love. So, may God take our minds and think through them; may God take our lips and speak through them, may God take our hearts and set them on fire.