

The Two Annes

A sermon given at the First Church in Boston on Charter Day, Sunday, 23rd

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When you arrived this morning, you walked past an exhibit on women of the 17th century curated by historian Miriam Butts, who notes that, from this era, there are more paintings of ships than women!

So perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that neither one of our now-famous Annes is commemorated in a portrait painted from life. Their original gravesites lie unmarked. Yet from an era when women had no legitimate public status, voice or vote, their words reach us relatively intact via two different pathways: the poems and diaries of the decorous Anne Bradstreet, and the courtroom transcripts from the infamous civic and religious trials of the complex and charismatic Anne Hutchinson.

Today, Anne Bradstreet is celebrated as the first published American poet. Her poems are regularly anthologized

And Anne Hutchinson? Well, it would be an oversight at minimum were we to invoke the principles of free speech, religious freedom, or equal rights, not to acknowledge her influence on the evolving culture that gave rise to these fundamentals of democracy.

This Charter Day, it is fitting that we pause to reflect on the lives and influence of these founding mothers and consider their legacies to our free faith, freedom of expression, and the practice of dissent.

But the word "impossible" comes to mind.

It would be impossible to give you a full and proper account of even one of these women in so short a time, much less of two. So, I recommend two exceptionally engaging biographies for your reading pleasure: Charlotte Gordon's lively *Mistress Bradstreet: The Untold Life of America's First Poet* (Little Brown, 2005), and Eve La

Plante's vivid portrait, *American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson, the Woman Who Defied the Puritans* (Harper San Francisco: 2004). Great reads, both.

I am humbled and honoured to add my welcome to our distinguished guests. Your presence today is a cautionary reminder that whenever a preacher stands to deliver a sermon, there is *always* someone in the congregation who knows more about the topic than she does. Thank you for your kind indulgence. I welcome gentle corrections for any errors in the remarks that follow.

Grace and justification

To imagine the New England of Anne Dudley Bradstreet (1612-1672) and Anne Marbury Hutchinson (1591-1643) is virtually impossible for a modern mind. Impossible, that is, to comprehend the state of anxiety that was baseline normal for faithful Puritans. We can begin to imagine the harsh physical realities of life in the near wilderness. But the mind boggles at how that harshness was compounded by an internal anxiety and sense of danger. You see, everything from drought and flood, to poverty and illness, childlessness and death were viewed as outward signs of an internal, spiritual state of depravity or the absence of grace. A child's death, a fever, a house fire were correctives for impiety or signals that one is not saved, one of the elect, one of the "justified."

From time to time, you and I might experience self-doubt, feel insecure, or cringe at the voice of our inner critic. That is merely a glimpse of the obsessive self-doubt, guilt, and fear - real fear - our forbearers had about the eternal fate of one's immortal soul.

Professor Anne Mills King observed, "The colony was experiencing in those years a trauma of the mind as severe as the winter frostbite...[Constant] self study resulted in a complex pattern of 'piety' ...requiring a 'precarious balance' of dependence on the Bible, 'hidden rationalism' and 'deep, emotional longings for personal encounter and direct communion with God.'"¹

Under the heavy weight of external circumstances such as devastating winters, and disease-ridden summers, not a few women broke. Despite the relative equality of women in marital relationships and the important role they played in a pioneer economy, the spiritual demands of such contorted examination of conscience was often more than a soul could bear. King cites the horrible illustration of Dorothy Talbye, who “falling into a melancholy,” broke the neck of her three-year old daughter, [named] Difficult.” After a painful trial at which she gave every evidence of unsound mind, ‘distracted’ about the uncertainty of salvation for herself and wishing to save her child from the ‘misery’ of a women’s life in Massachusetts, Dorothy Talbye was hanged in Boston in 1639.²

This was the atmosphere in which Anne Dudley Bradstreet and Anne Marbury Hutchinson lived. Both Annes arrived at these shores suitably married and well-educated. Both were taught by their fathers to read and write in a time when formal schooling was reserved for boys. Both had ambitions: young Bradstreet to write poetry; the midwife Hutchinson to teach and preach from her biblical knowledge and innermost experience.

Both for a time were congregants of the First Church in Boston. Bradstreet was 18 when she sailed here on the *Arbella*, along with her husband Simon, her mother and her father Thomas Dudley, the Rev John Cotton and John Winthrop. Anne Hutchinson, 43, and her husband William and family followed her beloved minister, John Cotton, four years later. (By the time the Hutchinsons arrived, the Bradstreets had moved to New Towne (Cambridge, MA) and later to Ipswich.)

The Antinomian controversy

And both exemplified the precarious piety-balancing act: Hutchinson in her close study of the Bible, and Bradstreet in writing her scholarly, metaphysical poetry.

But before too long, Anne Hutchinson would become the cause and centre of the most notorious upheaval of the 17th century: the Antinomian controversy. It was a conflict so embedded in the Commonwealth’s consciousness that when Nathaniel

Hawthorne mentions a Mrs. Hutchinson nearly 200 years later, he doesn't have to explain who she is or what happened to her.

Now, on the one hand, I wish I could honour my Harvard Professor David Hall, author of a significant book called *The Antinomian Controversy*, and take time to explain it to you. On the other hand, a) we don't have that kind of time, *and* b) I find myself agreeing with Charles Francis Adams who said about the nature of theological controversies: They are "among the most barren of the many barren fields of historical research and...so far as the reader of to-day is concerned, best...described by the single word impossible."

We cannot overlook, however, that what was at stake in this controversy was of fantastic concern: the fate of a soul! Moreover, for Winthrop and company, there was also the essential commitment to preserving the newborn colony - an outward and visible sign of God's grace - which was established as a covenantal community.

A covenant is an expression of the mutual relationship and responsibilities between parties. In the case of Massachusetts Bay, that covenant is understood - like the covenant at Sinai - as being between God and the entire community, not with individuals. Each individual has an enormous responsibility to protect the whole through individual piety and conformity. Such piety and conformity would insure the success of the enterprise of the Mass Bay Colony. It was, in its way, an expression of how to protect the social fabric, the web of interdependence.

So what happened?

Risking error, I will be exceedingly brief. Along comes the intelligent, respected, competent, mature midwife and spiritual advisor to women, Anne Hutchinson. A devout, close reader of the Bible, she provides physical *and* spiritual succour to women in childbirth, which, you can imagine, was a mortally dangerous enterprise. Women laboured literally on the edge of life and death - worried for their unborn children and for themselves. Children born alive and healthy could be interpreted as a sign that the mother is "saved." But should one or both of them die,

what would that signal for the woman's eternal soul? Hutchinson helped calm their deepest fears.

Many women, grateful for her skill and support, grew close to her. Imagine them cheered to be in her good company at her home - across the street from John Winthrop - where she led "gossipings" - private fora approved by ministers and magistrates - where women could study bible-based teachings and sermons, the powerful underpinnings of their covenantal society.

BUT! Anne Hutchinson's charismatic teachings and preaching soon reached beyond the gendered circle and attracted men. John Winthrop and his councils perceived a threat to everything they valued and believed. Hutchinson's voice and influence were pushing into the public sphere, upsetting the very order of nature.

When she taught that the commandment 'Thou shalt not murder' should be a prohibition against killing unconverted native peoples, men convinced by her reason and faith refused to take up arms against the Pequot Indians, thus further threatening the defence and survival of the new Jerusalem.

Challenging convention

And when she challenges some ministers' teachings on theological grounds, saying that they were preaching a covenant of works (being saved by deeds) against a covenant of grace (the core Puritan belief that only God's grace could save), she went too far. Finally, asserting that justification could be based on a direct experience of the indwelling spirit that could not be tested? Well, that was over the top.

Because she is articulate. Because she is rational. Because her teaching is scripturally based. And because it challenges the orthodoxy of the power structures that undergird the new colony, she is dangerous. She must be silenced. She must be stopped. And she is.

A long and dramatic story unfolds from here. I don't know why a movie hasn't been made about her! (I'm not counting *The Scarlet Letter*.) I'm not going to

outline the many charges laid against her, or the brilliant retorts she makes during her trials. But let this picture form in your mind: Hutchinson is 46 years old and quite possibly pregnant for the 16th time. She stands for hours in the winter cold of the Cambridge meeting house, while her male judges sit, interrogating her. Far removed from her numerous supporters in Boston, she has her intelligence, biblical knowledge, wit, courage, and faith alone to defend her from the fates of excommunication and exile - punishments that “hung like a death sentence” in the air.

Miles away, young Anne Bradstreet, pregnant with her third child, is probably not attending the civic trial. But surely she hears conversations between her father and husband who were there, and the gossip that is fluttering in every town surrounding Boston.

A bright woman whose education was nourished by her father’s library, Bradstreet must have grasped the risk she took to write her poetry:

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits...

With the fervour of the Hutchinson trial rocking the Puritan community, Bradstreet knew she had to be even more cautious. But she did not stop writing. Indeed, literary critics say her best poetry emerged after this time.

Commentators are in general agreement that Anne Bradstreet protected herself from dangerous criticism by the way she comported herself *within* the confines of the feminine ideal of dutiful daughter, wife and mother. In the forward to her book of poetry published with the support of her Ipswich minister and the efforts of her admiring brother in law, her honour is defended. Her book

is the work of a woman... esteemed where she lives, for her gracious demeanor, ... her pious conversation, her courteous disposition, her exact diligence in her place, and discrete managing of her family occasions, ... these poems are the fruit of but some few hours, curtailed from her sleep and other refreshments.

Bradstreet inks her carefully chosen words onto precious parchment for generations to discern her pattern of resistance and compliance, the push and pull between the ashes of doubt and sparks of faith, the suffering “woe” and the joyful “bliss” of a Puritan woman in search of surrender to her God’s will and some assurance of her soul’s salvation.

Anne Bradstreet, died at the age of 60, having seen 7 of her 8 children survive her, and a book of her poetry published in England.

Anne Hutchinson was killed – scalped - along with several of her family by marauding Indians while living in exile because of her dissent from the orthodoxy of her community. One daughter survived and, interestingly, is the ancestor of former president George W. Bush, who as you recall won an election in 2004 when running against Senator John Kerry, a descendant of John Winthrop.

Today, a romantic statue of a pious Hutchinson looks heavenward from the grounds of the Massachusetts State House, and a river and parkway that run near the area where she was killed are named after her. The Rev Peter Gomes, late of Memorial Church, thought that Hutchinson should be credited with the founding of Harvard a week after her first trial and banishment. "As a result of her heresy, the colony determined to provide for the education of a new generation of ministers and theologians who would secure New England's civil and theological peace against future seditious Mrs. Hutchinsons," he wrote.

A marker in the North Andover cemetery commemorates the 350th anniversary (in 2000) of the publishing of Bradstreet’s book, *The Tenth Muse* (1650). That site and the Bradstreet Gate at Harvard may be the only two places in America honouring her memory.

Legacies

Befitting their struggles and their times, their greater legacies are perhaps less

material than spiritual. Just as they held deep concern for their eternal souls, so we cultivate a concern for the unique voice within each of us. I mean that still, quiet voice that is always speaking - if we could just hear it.

Call it soul. Call it spirit. Call it conscience. We all have it.

And we are most faithful to the sacredness of the life we have been given when we attend to it, acknowledge it, and honour it by living true to it. How we do that might be a public path, as advocates for the voiceless, warriors for justice, protectors of this good earth, as artists in our media. It may be in our private dedication to spiritual practice, or quiet acts of kindness, or walking gently on the planet.

This, too, is an age of anxiety. All around us we can hear the shrill threats that emerge from orthodoxy, the clash of conscience, the shouting that attempts to silence difference.

In honour of the two Annes whose voices could not be suppressed, let us grow ever mindful of the ways we speak and the ways we listen to ourselves and to one another. Let us remember that dissent is a legitimate practice of reason and conscience in a democracy - a practice we can engage in with “civil sentiments that do not destroy the social fabric”³ even as walk together in all our diversity, with compassion, for the sake of freedom and justice for all.

That’s not so impossible to imagine, is it?

¹ Anne Mills King, International Journal of Women's Studies 1.5 (1978): 445-467.

² Quoted by King from John Winthrop’s *History* 1: 379.

³ Nadia Urbinati, “Democracy and Dissent,” Reset—Dialogues on Civilizations, 11Mar2009, 21Sept2012 < <http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000001270>>.