

“The Choices We Make”

Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

March 20, 2022

This church was incorporated with the name The First Religious Society in 1794. In its history it had been the Third Parish of Newbury, founded in 1725, and the First Parish of Newburyport from 1765 until 1794 when it claimed its current name, only seven years after James Madison wrote what we now call the U.S. Constitution. Indeed, ours is a history steeped in meaning and legacy.

I have had the pleasure of immersing myself in our earliest church history over the last ten days by reading Minnie Atkinson's volume, *The First Religious Society in Newburyport*, which was awarded the best parish history by the Unitarian Historical Society in 1932.

Oh, I have learned such interesting and revealing facts. For example, we did have as Associate Minister at one time, the Reverend John Andrews, who was hired when the esteemed Reverend Thomas Cary fell ill twenty years into his ministry in 1788. I also learned that the first two ministers of this church, Reverends John Lowell and Thomas Cary, both died at the age of sixty-four after long tenures of ministry.

As well, I learned of the legacy of prominence our beloved parish has held in this city since its inception nearly three hundred years ago, a legacy that we have the honor and privilege of upholding and forming today and in the years to come.

One quarter of the way through the book I realized I was reading slowly, savoring every word, hungry for more information.

I wonder whether the earliest members of our congregation knew they were leaving a legacy as they voted to build a new meeting house, erected in 1801; give parishioners the right in 1818 to install stoves for heat at their own expense; and lower the pulpit during Rev. Fox's tenure in the 1830s or early 1840s? Could they have imagined us reading their history today and what we might look like?

Author and writer Pat Schneider, who supported all types of writers including women in prison, offers the following meditation. Imagine yourself going back to the house where your great-great grandmother or grandfather lived. It's okay if you

don't know their names or anything about them. They were there. It may very well have been in the late 1700s around the time this sanctuary was under consideration of being built.

Arriving at this house you find only a stone foundation. You *"move the stone and find only a small sheathe of papers. On these pages your great-great grandmother has written in tiny letters. It isn't fancy writing. She's writing what your great-great grandfather said when he came in to tell her that the potatoes had all rotted. She's writing about the baby that just died."* *"Wouldn't that be a treasure?" "Then so will your (life) be a treasure if you tell the truth about your life. All of us – every person – has that treasure... your life – no matter who you are – has significance."*¹

Like our forbearers, we are creating our part of the legacy of the First Religious Society, in addition to our own lives. The priorities we establish and choices we make as a congregation are guided by the values, mission, and ends we approved in the fall of 2020. It's inspiring to see how far we've come on those goals and exciting to imagine what lies ahead.

The values, mission, and ends team has prepared an update for us to review to see the progress made and be aware of the decisions and path ahead. You will receive a copy of this report on your way out of the sanctuary today. It is also available online. I hope you'll reach out with questions and ideas and participate in conversations that come out of this report.

We all leave a legacy in many areas of our lives, regardless of whether we leave financial legacies. Our lives are our legacies, and they matter. We cannot avoid leaving an imprint on the universal web of existence. The question for all of us is what kind of an imprint we choose to leave.

We don't know how our words and actions influence others, but they do. Though we may have little control over the legacy that lives on after we die, there is much we can control. We can control our actions and our words, how we

1 Pat Schneider, *Writing Alone and with Others*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 67.

“The Choices We Make”

March 20, 2022 *page 2*

invest our gifts, and how we treat other people.

Many of us are blessed with some degree of control over how we spend our time and where to focus our attention. In the more tender of topics, we also get to choose if, who, and how we forgive. We get to ask that our wishes are granted for a celebration of our life. We get to decide who enters that most sacred of circles called our innermost heart.

It all comes down, I believe, to intention, setting intentions, then focusing on what we can control and making a life of meaning consistent with our heart's song and our values. It is something we do many times over the course of our lives. Lived this way, our life can be akin to taking a hike. Here I draw on John Mercer's poem.²

Consider the season...

Consider the route...

Consider what to carry in your head...

Consider what you'll pass through...

And be ready, with the first step, to give up control and let the journey unfold on its own, as it most certainly will.

What are the themes of your legacy? What do you want people to recall when they remember you? What traits, actions, and characteristics will make up your legacy?

Let's sit for three minutes with those questions.

Amen and blessed be.

2 John Mercer, “Preparing for a Hike.”