

THE TRIAL OF THEODORE PARKER

A One-Act Play by

FRED KEEFE

Cast of Characters

(in order of appearance)

Judge

Woman

Man

Theodore Parker

Amos Truslow

Rebecca Dawes

Lydia Parker

Julia Ward Howe

Louisa May Alcott

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As the responsive reading ends, the church sanctuary becomes a kind of courtroom, with the podium a judge's bench. A man in a judge's robe comes up the aisle and takes his place at the podium. After scanning the congregation carefully, he raps for attention with his gavel.

JUDGE

Order, please. Order in the court. Are there any questions before we begin?

WOMAN IN CONGREGATION (standing up)

What kind of court is this?

JUDGE

The Court of Assessments and Re-Assessments, ma'am.

WOMAN

Assessments of what?

JUDGE

Assessments of character, ma'am. Of lives lived and deeds done. In short, the whole bit.

WOMAN

Is there a prosecutor?

JUDGE

I am the prosecutor, ma'am.

WOMAN

And who is the defense attorney?

JUDGE

I am the defense attorney, ma'am.

WOMAN

And I suppose you're the jury as well as the judge.

JUDGE

Your supposition is correct, ma'am. Now if you'll be good enough to sit down, we'll let the proceedings begin.

WOMAN

I never heard of such a court. (Sits down.)

JUDGE

You will, ma'am. In due time. (to congregation) Are there any other questions before we get under way?

(Silence in the congregation) As most of you know, we as gathered here this morning to make final judgment on a member of the church, one Theodore Parker. Mr. Parker, will you please come forward and face the congregation. (Parker steps up from the front row and stands to one side of the podium behind lectern.)

WOMAN (shouting)

Heretic!

MAN (standing)

As far as I'm concerned, this man has **never** been a Unitarian. (a few cries of "Aye" in congregation)

JUDGE (rapping for order)

Quiet, please. Remember where we are, ladies and gentleman. There is no need for raucous or disorderly conduct, and I will not put up with it. If you want to say something, please raise your hand, and when called upon to speak, identify yourself before saying what you have to say. Is that understood? Now, before proceeding with the hearing, our court clerks Amos Truslow and Rebecca Dawes will give you a few basic facts pertaining to Mr. Parker. (He nods at AMOS TRUSLOW and REBECCA DAWES, who are sitting in the front row. They get up and face the congregation, each of them carrying a clipboard and pencil.)

JUDGE

There are three charges against Mr. Parker: (1) heresy, (2) breaking the Fugitive Slave Law, and (3) slander and character assassination. A fourth charge of general misconduct has been dropped. What say you, Mr. Marker, to these charges?

PARKER

I'm proud of them all, your honor. (There are cries of "Shame!" from congregation.)

JUDGE (rapping for order)

Quiet! Anyone calling out again will be asked to leave the courtroom. (He nods at AMOS TRUSLOW) Please begin, Mr. Truslow.

TRUSLOW

Theodore Parker was born in Lexington, Massachusetts, on August 24, 1810.

REBECCA DAWES (quickly)

The same year Margaret Fuller was born.

JUDGE

That has nothing to do with the matter at hand, Mrs. Dawes. Please go on, Mr. Truslow.

TRUSLOW (after glaring at DAWES)

He was the youngest of thirteen children, the sixth generation of Parkers to be born on Massachusetts soil. His grandfather was Captain John Parker who commanded the local militia on the morning of April 19, 1775, when British troops marched into Lexington.

DAWES

The musket that Captain Parker used that day hung on the wall of Theodore Parker's study.

JUDGE

That is irrelevant, Mrs. Dawes.

PARKER (angrily)

My father venerated that musket, Your Honor, and so did I. It always reminded me of what the captain said that April morning: "If they mean to have war, let it begin here." Those words were a challenge that stayed with me for the rest of my life.

JUDGE (unimpressed)

Indeed they did. Proceed, Mr. Truslow.

TRUSLOW

At school he was quick learner, with a memory that was almost phenomenal, and a passion for reading and studying on his own.

DAWES

Homer and Plutarch. Latin and Greek grammar. There was nothing--

JUDGE (Interrupting)

Not pertinent, Mrs. Dawes. Proceed, Mr. Truslow.

TRUSLOW

By the time he was sixteen, Theodore had decided that he was not going to be a farmer. It was the ministry that attracted him most. After graduating from the Harvard Divinity School, he—

PARKER (interrupting)

Your Honor.

JUDGE

What is it, Mr. Parker?

PARKER

This summary makes it all sound so simple. It wasn't like that.

JUDGE

Has something been said that is inaccurate?

PARKER

No, but so much has been left out. The years I spent teaching in district schools. In Quincy, in North Lexington, in Concord, in Waltham, in Boston, and in my own school in Watertown. Weren't they worth mentioning?

JUDGE

History is the art of omission, Mr. Parker. For our purposes a few facts are enough.

PARKER

But what has *not* been said is important, too. The bare facts are so cut and dried.

JUDGE

That is the way history is, Mr. Parker. Proceed, Mr. Truslow.

TRUSLOW

After graduation, Theodore Parker spoke at a number of parishes before accepting an invitation from the First Parish Church in West Roxbury, to become minister there.

DAWES

At the same time he married Lydia Cabot, whom he'd been courting for more than four years. (At this point, LYDIA, who is sitting in the congregation, raises her hand.)

JUDGE

What is it, ma'am?

LYDIA (getting up)

I'm Mr. Parker's wife, Lydia, and I just want to say that we were engaged to be married in a little over a year after we met. It didn't take four years for me to know that I loved him. (Sits down)

JUDGE

Thank you, ma'am. (To AMOS TRUSLOW) Proceed, Mr. Truslow.

TRUSLOW

Shortly after taking over the West Roxbury parish, Mr. Parker became involved in the controversy that was taking place in the Unitarian church over Waldo Emerson's address to the students of the Harvard Divinity School. Mr. Emerson charged that the church preached miracles and dogma instead of the soul.

PARKER

It was the most inspiring lecture I ever listened to. It—it was like a call to arms, and I was determined to have my say in the controversy that followed.

JUDGE

You wanted to alter Unitarianism?

PARKER

It was bogged down in the past, choking on ritual and dogma. I wanted a natural religion—call it intuitive or transcendental, if you will—a religion based on the great moral truths, not on the divinity of Jesus and the miracles of the Bible. What I was saying really was no more than what Waldo Emerson had already said—Unitarianism was a corpse-cold

religion. Why was everyone so mortally offended when I merely echoed his opinion?

WOMAN

Because Mr. Emerson at least had the decency to leave the church. You refused to leave, even when told you would no longer be allowed to preach.

PARKER

Yes, I refused to leave.

MAN

I'd rather have every Unitarian congregation in our land dissolved and every church razed to the ground than have someone who thinks as you do in one of our pulpits.

WOMAN (shouting)

You're an infidel!

JUDGE (rapping for order)

Order in the court! If you insist on flouting the rules, this hearing will be adjourned. Is that clear? (Judge looks at PARKER) So you refused to leave the church, Mr. Parker.

PARKER

Yes, and church after church refused to welcome me as speaker, all except my faithful first congregation in West Roxbury. If the day ever came when I had no pulpit, I decided, I would go about and preach and lecture in the city and the glen, by the roadside and the fieldside, wherever men and women could be found. I would go eastward and westward, northward and southward, and make the land ring.

LYDIA

Even preachers who were his friends refused to exchange pulpits with him. Some even demanded that he be thrown in jail for his heresy. It just broke my heart.

PARKER

Things *were* dark for a while. Then, as word of my notoriety spread around I began to get invitations again, and before long I was asked to deliver a course of lectures in Boston. It was what I'd been waiting for. At last I'd be reaching the wider audience I wanted to reach. Was I reaching too far? Would people come to hear what I had to say? (JULIA WARD HOWE raises her hand)

JUDGE

Yes, ma'am.

HOWE (getting up)

I'm Julia Ward Howe—Mrs. Samuel Gridley Howe—and I just want everyone to know what a spellbinding speaker Mr. Parker was. Would people come to hear what he had to say? They certainly would – and they did – by the scores, by the hundreds, then by the thousands. I was a staunch Episcopalian until I heard him speak. At that time it was considered an offense against fashion in Boston to attend his lectures. “What are you looking for?” friends would ask me. “Is it atheism you want?” “No, not atheism,” I told them, “but a *theism*.” I found that theism in Theodore Parker. And I was the only one. The hall where he spoke soon became too small to hold all his admirers, and he began to speak at the brand-new Music Hall, a much larger place. Then that, too, was soon filled to overflowing. I remember one occasion very well. There were chairs for 1500 on the main floor and for 500 more on the stage, 700 more in the balconies and along the sides, and 300 more standing in the rear, making a total capacity of at least 3,000. That's quite an impressive turnout, I'd say, for a man denounced as a heretic.

JUDGE

What say you, Mrs. Howe, to the charge that Mr. Parker curried the favor of women?

HOWE

If by “curried” you mean “patronized” I say “Fiddlesticks.” (At this point she sits down, and LOUISA MAY ALCOTT raises her hand)

JUDGE (nodding at her)

Yes, ma’am.

ALCOTT

I’m Louisa May Alcott, and I’d like to say that I agree with Mrs. Howe completely. I remember the first time I heard Mr. Parker preach. And the way he prayed. It was unlike any prayer I had ever heard. Not cold and formal, like most prayers are. It was like a quiet talk with God—our Father and our Mother God, he said—and he seemed to make every listener a part of the prayer. I know it helped me in my writing, and I tried to show my gratitude by putting him in one of my books. He was the Reverend Mr. Power in my novel, *Work*. “you made him too saintly,” someone told me. “he was meaner than you made him.” “Not for me,” I said. “He helped me find myself as a writer and as a woman.” If kindness and solicitude are a part of heresy, then I am for it. (She sits down)

PARKER

To make one half the human race consume all their energy in the functions of a housekeeper, wife, and mother, is a waste of the most precious material God ever made. I made that statement in one of my sermons, Your Honor, and I see no reason to retract it.

JUDGE

No retraction is necessary, nor was one asked for.

LYDIA

There was an insinuation, Your Honor.

JUDGE

None was intended, ma'am.

LYDIA

A sweeter, gentler man than my husband never lived.

JUDGE

He was a man who broke the law, ma'am.

PARKER

If you're referring to the Fugitive Slave Law, Your Honor, it became law only because Daniel Webster stooped low enough to compromise himself. But for him, it never would have been passed in the first place.

JUDGE

Nevertheless, it *was* the law, and you broke it.

PARKER

Were the laws of Massachusetts never broken? The usury law forbade the taking of more than six percent on money lent. Was that law kept? There were hundreds of brothels in the city of Boston, scores of shops where rum was sold. All of them were illegal, but did anyone disturb them? Of course not.

LYDIA

I was as guilty as he was, Your Honor. I helped him hide runaway slaves in our house. I helped him see to it that fugitives were smuggled to Europe or taken safely to Canada. I fed and clothed them while they were under our roof. Can you imagine what it was like, sitting quietly at

night, waiting for a dreaded knock on the door, my poor heart thumping like a trip-hammer, while my husband sat calmly at his desk composing a Sunday sermon, with a loaded pistol by his side? What frightened me most was that I knew he'd use it if necessary.

JUDGE

I can understand apprehension, ma'am. (Turns to PARKER) You were the leader of a Vigilance Committee in Boston. Is that correct, Mr. Parker?

PARKER

Yes, that is correct. There were 200 or more of us whose sole purpose was to prevent the deputies of slaveholders from seizing fugitives and returning them to their owners. Some of the fugitives had been living here for twelve to twenty years, Your Honor.

JUDGE

But in defying the deputies you were breaking the law!

PARKER

A law that was breaking a greater law embodied in our Declaration of Independence – "All men are created equal."

JUDGE

There were many people who thought you went too far in your interpretation of that law, Mr. Parker.

PARKER

All laws are subservient to one great moral law.

JUDGE

The law of God?

PARKER

Some people call it that.

JUDGE

And you spoke for God?

PARKER

I spoke for myself.

JUDGE

People took offense at your almighty attitude, Mr. Parker.

PARKER

Yes, I considered myself the most hated man in America.

JUDGE (consulting his papers)

You were called a “rabble-rouser” and “agitator.” Were they terms you considered appropriate?

PARKER

I preferred “reformer” myself.

JUDGE

Let us turn to the attack at Harper’s Ferry led by John Brown. You were acquainted with Mr. Brown, were you not?

PARKER

Yes, I was. I thought of John Brown as a friend. We both considered slavery and abomination.

JUDGE

Do you feel that JOHN Brown may have been influenced in any way by your sermons against slavery?

PARKER

I hope I influenced someone.

JUDGE

John Brown, perhaps?

PARKER

John Brown had a mind of his own, Your Honor. He needed no prodding from anyone on the subject of slavery.

JUDGE

So I have heard. He was considered an abolitionist fanatic by many people. Claimed he was fulfilling the word of God. Isn't that so?

PARKER

Yes, he felt that way. He was a man consumed with one abiding purpose.

JUDGE

Do you consider the massacre Mr. Brown led in Kansas fulfilling the word of God? Do you consider the rebellion he led at Harper's Ferry something ordered by the Lord above?

PARKER

As I've already said, Your Honor, I can't speak for God, any more than I can speak for John Brown. I can only speak for myself.

JUDGE

You not only spoke out; you also acted on occasion. Isn't that so?

PARKER

Whenever action was called for, yes.

JUDGE

Did action include aiding and abetting John Brown?

PARKER

Up to a point, yes.

JUDGE

When you say “up to a point,” does that mean helping to finance Mr. Brown’s activities?

PARKER

He was always in need of money, and it was only natural that he appeal to his abolitionist supporters. We did what we could.

JUDGE

You did what you could indeed. Even to the extent of sending him arms and ammunition. Is that correct, Mr. Parker?

PARKER

We felt we had to keep Kansas from becoming a pro-slavery state.

JUDGE

You keep saying “we,” Mr. Parker.

PARKER

There were many people who hated slavery, Your Honor.

JUDGE

Including a group known as “The Secret Six”?

PARKER

There was such a group.

JUDGE

And you were one of the six?

PARKER

I was.

JUDGE

Six upright citizens, six so-called pillars of the community, devoted to breaking the law by promoting a massacre in Kansas and a slave uprising in Virginia.

PARKER

We had no control over John Brown. He was his own master, and he did only what he felt he had to do.

JUDGE

Including cold-blooded murder in Kansas. Is that when you realized, Mr. Parker, that John Brown was out of control?

PARKER

He was an impatient man, Your Honor. At times too reckless and foolhardy, perhaps. He refused to listen when we advised him to hold off on Harper's Ferry.

JUDGE

And when the Harper's Ferry venture turned into a disaster, is that why "The Secret Six" abandoned him?

PARKER

I was out of the country when John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry took place, Your Honor. If I had been here, I hope I wouldn't have abandoned him.

JUDGE

Where were you at the time, Mr. Parker?

PARKER

In Italy, Your Honor.

LYDIA (bitterly)

He was dying. Dying from years of overwork that were taking their toll.

PARKER

It was tuberculosis, Your Honor, and it had reached the point where I was too exhausted even to preach. Sometimes I could hardly stand up. When I began to cough up blood frequently, I knew I hadn't much longer to live. And there was so much more I had to do. (He suddenly looks stricken and begins to cough. LYDIA gets up quickly, goes to her husband and gently leads him away from the lectern.)

JULIA WARD HOWE

Dr. Howe and I both felt that the best thing for Theodore would be a trip to a warmer climate. We were going to the West Indies then, so he and Lydia came along with us. First, Nassau and Cuba, then Santa Cruz, where they were to embark for Europe. Our parting there was a sad one. Embracing Theodore in farewell, I had the feeling that I would never see him again, and for years afterward I carried my mind the picture of his serious face with those penetrating eyes I knew I would never forget. I loved his fighting spirit, his vehemence, the deep music of his voice.

TRUSLOW (Standing up)

At the age of 50, Theodore Parker died in Florence, Italy on May 10, 1860, and was buried in the Protestant cemetery there. Two headstones mark the grave—one with the dates of his birth and death- the other which simply says “The great American Preacher.”

DAWES (standing)

Several months after his death the Massachusetts State Legislature was presented with a gift bequeathed to the people of Massachusetts by Theodore Parker. It was one of the most precious things he owned: the rifle his grandfather had used in Lexington.

JULIA WARD HOWE

In July 1861 the war that Theodore Parker knew was coming began. One of the songs connected with it was “Glory Hallelujah,” a camp-meeting song that Union soldiers sang when marching. It was odd, I thought—Union soldiers marching to music by a Southern composer. It was stirring enough to make a hymn, I decided, and so I wrote words for “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” I liked the idea of words by a Northerner, music by a Southerner—prophetic, I hoped – a way of saying we would somehow get together again as a nation. And I liked to think of it as a tribute to Theodore Parker, too. His truth did march on. (She begins to hum softly)

“He has sounded forth the trumpet

that shall never call retreat.

He is sifting out the hearts of men

before His judgment-seat;

O, be swift, my soul to answer Him!

Be jubilant my feet!

Our God is marching on.”

(As she sings, someone at the piano joins her, then another person and another. By the time the chorus begins, a whole group has joined in.

Glory, glory, hallelujah

Glory, glory, hallelujah

Glory, glory, hallelujah

His truth is marching on!

JUDGE (using gavel)

Case closed. This court is adjourned.

END

Written by Fred Keefe, Palm Beach Unitarian Church, FL who had retired as a staff member of THE NEW YORKER magazine, probably in the late 1980's or early 90's. Given to Patty Jantho who was then a member of the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore, MD. Jantho's sister was a member of the Palm Beach Church.