

**Mission Impossible**  
Preached at Follen Church  
October 8, 2017  
**Rev. Dr. Susanne Intriligator**

**Call to Worship**

Good morning.

This month our worship services explore the theme of mission. What are we, as individuals, called to do? What are we, as a faith community, called to uphold, to challenge, to change? What is our legacy, from the past, for the future?

I call us to worship this morning with the words of the English poet Stephen Spender:

I think continually of those  
Who were truly great.

Who from the womb,  
Remembered the soul's history.

What is precious is never to allow  
Gradually the traffic to smother  
With noise and fog  
The flowering of the spirit,

Never to forget

The names of those who  
in their lives  
fought for life,  
who wore at their hearts the fire's center.

Born of the sun  
they traveled a short while  
toward the sun  
and left the vivid air  
signed with their honor.

## Reading

In 1834, Rev. Dr. Charles Follen was invited to give the main address at the three-day convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society. The address was later published and circulated as a pamphlet, under the title “Address to the People of the United States on the Subject of Slavery.” A copy was sent to every member of Congress and to every “man of distinction” in the South. In this 1841 book, the address takes 30 pages.

This reading is from the conclusion of that essay. Warning: I have not removed its gendered language.

You, who discern the signs of the time, and are guided by them – do you remember how your fore-fathers left their father-land, to seek liberty among strangers? Do you remember how the sons of the pilgrims rather ventured their lives and their all in desperate fight, than consent to pay a paltry tax, because imposed by unlawful authority? Did your fathers not sign the Declaration of American Independence and human liberty?

You to whom the destinies of this country are committed, Americans, patriots in public and private life, on you it depends to **prove**, whether your liberty is the fruit of your determined choice, or of a fortunate accident. If you are republicans [with a small r], not by birth only but from principle, then let the avenues, all the avenues of truth and love be opened wide to every soul within the nation – that the bitterest curse of millions may no longer be, that they were born and bred in the “land of the free and the home of the brave.”

Here ends the reading.

## Sermon: Mission Impossible

“Your mission Jim, should you decide to accept it is . . . “

[Bum-bum, bum-bum, ba-ba, bum-bum . . . Theme from Mission Impossible]

Before it was a 6-part movie series with Tom Cruise, it was a TV show, when I was kid in the 1970s. Every week on “Mission Impossible,” the secret agent would find a package, a large envelope with photos and a tape recorder. Every week, the voice on the tape would say “Your mission Jim, should you decide to accept it is . . . “ and afterward, the tape machine would self-destruct. That was what **we** called “special effects,” and we thought that was really cool.

So you know I just couldn’t contemplate a whole month on the theme of Mission without that theme song coming up – Bum-bum, bum-bum, ba-ba, bum-bum.

But how to work it into a sermon? Hmmm . . . Good question.

Here's a thought. **Would** our lives be a whole lot easier if every week, our mission – like Jim's -- were delivered to us in a package? I mean, you know, what if God or the Boss or the Universe, just laid out the instructions for us, point blank? Would that help? How much?

In hindsight, it can seem that our founding minister, Charles Follen, had a clear-cut, straightforward mission just like that. According to our mythos he and the founding lay leaders were all abolitionists, standing right here, bravely on the right side of history, opposing slavery in the 1830s, 30 years before it was finally prohibited in the US. Of course.

But that's the myth. The reality is a lot more complicated, a lot more like the situation we find ourselves in today.

Did you know that although Follen designed this sanctuary, he never stepped foot inside it? And though his strong abolitionist stance was well known throughout the commonwealth even the country, and this congregation hired him **twice**, he never, as far as we know, preached to them about slavery? And did you know that after he died, though he was highly esteemed, no church in Lexington or in Boston – including this one – would agree to hold his memorial service?

And Jesus said to them: "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own town, and in his own house."

Why?

Let us travel back in time, to 200 years ago, to when Karl Theodor Christian Friedrich Follen was a doctoral student and instructor in theology and law in Germany. As a young soldier, he had already helped his country throw off occupation by Napoleon's forces, but now the old aristocracy was cracking down on political speech.

An admirer of the new American democracy, young Follen wrote political poems and songs advocating revolution, including violence, if necessary, against European tyrants. When one of Follen's closest friends assassinated a diplomat, he came under suspicion as an accomplice. Follen was arrested and then fired from his job. He moved to Paris, where met other radicals, including the Marquis de Lafayette, hero of the American revolution. Once again, Follen came under suspicion in connection with another assassination and he fled to Switzerland, where he taught Latin and law. But the Germans tracked him down and demanded the Swiss arrest him. Follen then fled to America.

Follen landed in New York City in 1824, where he changed his first name to Charles. Visiting from France, Follen's friend Lafayette introduced him to many influential people. Through them, in 1825, Follen became an instructor of German language and literature at Harvard. From there, he helped to introduce the Boston literati, including the budding Transcendentalists, to German Romanticism, which was quite trendy then, especially the works of Goethe, which had a deep influence on Emerson and Longfellow.

Around this time, Follen developed a bond with William Ellery Channing, the prominent Boston preacher who in the 18-teens and 20s first formally developed the tenets of Unitarianism and then helped to create the American Unitarian Association. Through Channing, Follen applied to become a Unitarian minister and he also met Eliza Lee Cabot, daughter of a prominent Boston family, who was 9 years older and became his wife.

They settled for a few years in Cambridge, in a house on what later became Follen Street, which is where they entertained the then-famous English writer Harriet Martineau. She wrote popular articles about the Follens' enchanting custom of decorating a Christmas tree.

But this happy settlement was not to last, for Follen never put his own happiness or peace before his morals and his mission.

Shortly after landing on American shores, Follen had happened to meet and talk with a former slave, and the experience changed him for life. Ever since, spoke out against slavery whenever prudent. He found slavery a direct contradiction to his Christianity, to his treasured egalitarian ideals, to the values America was founded upon. In 1831, along with his friend William Lloyd Garrison, Follen helped to found the New England Anti-Slavery Society, which published Garrison's pivotal periodical, *The Liberator*. The Society became the precursor to the American Anti-Slavery Society and all its local groups.

At the time, however, abolitionism was a deeply controversial and divisive opinion, even here in liberal Lexington.

Hancock, Reed, Muzzey, Bowman, Harrington, Bridge, Munroe, Stone, Estabrook, Fisk. All of these esteemed town founders had also been slave-owners. In 1754, there were 24 slaves in Lexington. In 1783, however, by action of the state supreme court, Massachusetts became the first state to completely abolish slavery. Other Northern states opted for a gradual end, freeing children but not their parents.

As a result, in the 1830s, when this religious society was gathered, slavery was just 50 years gone in Lexington, still a living memory to some, as close to them as the TV show "Mission Impossible" is to us.

And slavery was still a **living practice** as close as New Hampshire and Rhode Island. Moreover, Boston-area manufacturers of cotton goods and machinery profited directly from the institution of slavery; the whole US economy was intimately tied to it.

Even Unitarians were split on the matter; many upheld the status quo, arguing that abolition, especially the immediate and complete kind advocated by Follen and Garrison, would destroy the Union. In Boston, mobs attacked Anti-Slavery meetings; one mob grabbed Garrison and tied him to a cart. They dragged him through the streets, and he suffered serious injuries.

Still Garrison went on.

As did Follen. In 1834, Harvard warned him that anti-slavery talk would never be tolerated. Follen responded, "The question is, whether this is my duty. What will be the consequences, is a secondary matter." In 1835, the university declined to renew Follen's professorship.

It was then that a group in East Lexington invited Follen to preach and to assist them in forming a religious society, separate from the town church in the center. Led by the abolitionist Robbins family, the group had recently built a meeting hall for the East Village, now called the Stone Building next door, and Follen came there to lead services.

His wife Eliza described the results: "Dr Follen was pleased at finding among the people a fresh and hearty interest in religion . . . They too were pleased with his preaching and put their pulpit under his charge . . . It was from that time a favorite wish with him, that this little society should form a church upon a new better foundation than any that yet existed."

After six months, however, Follen had to leave, to take a better-paying job as a tutor in Watertown.

Then, in 1836, in his inaugural address, the new Governor of Massachusetts agreed with the state attorney general, that anyone who advocated abolition was guilty of a punishable offense. He requested that the state legislature enact laws to that effect, and a committee of enquiry was formed in the state House of Representatives. In response, the anti-slavery society formed a committee to meet with them, and Dr. Follen was asked to serve on it.

Along with Garrison and Samuel May, Follen spoke up. "You cannot censure freedom of speech in Abolitionists," he said, "without preparing the way to censure it in any other class of citizens who may, for the moment, be obnoxious to the majority. The question therefore, is not whether you will put down the Abolitionists, but it is whether the legislature of Massachusetts will suppress freedom of speech for ever."

Follen also spoke powerfully to the Boston anti-slavery society that spring, taking controversial stands in favor of full participation by both women and African Americans.

Though he was a well known activist, from the pulpit Charles Follen preached mainly about universal human rights. According to his wife Eliza, he only preached openly about slavery once, during his year at First Unitarian in New York, which is now All Souls. The sermon caused an uproar, and two very powerful parishioners walked out during it. Follen then declined to ask for settlement there.

In 1839, the tiny society at East Lexington called him back, and Follen came, for meager pay. A trained architect, he helped them to design a radically egalitarian new Sanctuary, with a wide octagonal shape and a hand-carved pulpit – not elevated as all the others and as now, but

down on the floor. At the ground-breaking he preached once again obliquely about “oppressed humanity” and then he traveled to New York for a lecture tour.

On January 13, 1840, Follen prepared to leave his sick wife Eliza in New York and return to Lexington for the dedication of the sanctuary. He told Eliza what he planned to preach about.

“I shall explain to the people the meaning and use of symbols in general, and then explain the meaning of those carved in the pulpit. . . .

I shall tell them that the candlestick is the symbol of the light that should emanate from the pulpit and from the life of every individual. The crown of thorns represents the trials and sufferings the faithful person must endure for conscience sake. The cup symbolizes spiritual communion we share with all humanity.”

Charles Follen never gave that sermon. On his trip back to Boston, on the steamship Lexington, sparks from the smokestack ignited the ship’s cargo, which was ironically, tragically, 150 bales of cotton. The ship went down in Long Island Sound, and Follen died. At age 44.

The Anti-Slavery Society wanted to hold a large public memorial service that January with Rev. Samuel May preaching. But all the churches in the Boston area (including this one) refused. Parishioners feared that May would “broach the subject” of abolition.

So, while this congregation was bold enough then to employ a known abolitionist, it was not bold enough to honor him in death, to take a public stand in support of his life’s work.

Are we different today?

From the story of Charles Follen I take two lessons, for which I am profoundly grateful.

First is the example of an individual so clear-eyed and strong-hearted, that he faced arrest, emigration, censure, termination, poverty, humiliation, defeat. And he did not waiver.

Follen was, in the words of Stephen Spender, “one of those who in their lives fought for life, who wore at their hearts the fire’s center, who left the vivid air -- **this** vivid air -- signed with their honor.”

Second I am grateful that we no longer have to stand alone for our values, as Follen often did. I am grateful that we, as a congregation, have worked to create pathways for resolution, that now we know how to build group conversations on difficult topics, that we can listen to one another and over time, come to some sense of agreement. We **can** take a stand.

Next week, we debut our Black Lives Matter banner. Yes, 180 years later, it is still necessary for us, as a congregation, to proclaim to the world that our brothers and sisters matter, that we can see injustice and we cannot abide it.

Like Charles Follen, we live in a time of great division, when controversy surrounds, when strife and cataclysm loom before us.

Come what may, let us draw strength from his actions and from his words, his strong honor, which is built into these very walls:

“You to whom the destinies of this country are committed, American patriots, on you it depends to **prove**, whether your liberty is the fruit of your determined choice, or of a fortunate accident.

If you are **true** republicans, then let the avenues, **all** the avenues of truth and love be **opened** wide to every soul within the nation – that we may become once and for all, ‘land of the free and the home of the brave.’”

Amen.

### **Benediction**

I share these words by the UU minister Wayne Arnason.

Take courage friends  
The way is often hard, the path is never clear  
And the stakes are very high.  
Take courage.  
For deep down, there is another truth:  
You are not alone.