

**Stained Glass Talk
Francis G. Hutchins**

Sunday, March 6, 2016

**First Parish of Brookline
382 Walnut Street**

I'm delighted to welcome the Brookline Historical Society here this afternoon. I have long been a member both of the Historical Society and of this Church. In fact Brookline and this Church are closely connected historically. The official name of this Church is First Parish in Brookline. This reflects the fact that this was once the only church in Brookline. In colonial Massachusetts, each town had just one officially recognized Church. The town church, the town school and the town office often shared one building, called simply the Meeting House. Brookline became an organized town in 1705. It then took poor little Brookline twelve years to build its first Meeting House. This was finally done in 1717. So Brookline's First Parish is now 299 years old.

I became aware of the three-century-long history of Brookline and of First Parish when I started coming to First Parish in 1988. But since some of you here today may not be aware of this background, let me begin with a few highlights. Today this Church seems tucked away in a rustic corner of South Brookline. But Brookline's Town Center was right here for about a century and a half. The little triangular patch of grass in front of the Church is what is left of the original Town Green. In April of 1775 when Brookline men mustered before marching off to fight in Lexington and Concord, they gathered out front. The original Town Cemetery is down the street. A structure built in 1825 to house the Town offices and the Town school is now a part of the Church complex. And even in the early twentieth century, the Town was still subsidizing the Church to ring its bell three times a day at 7 a.m., 12 noon and 9 p.m., so that Town residents could order their daily schedules accordingly.

The American Revolution led to a separation of church and state at the federal level, and American states and towns eventually followed suit. This resulted in the legal formation of numerous other religious congregations in Brookline, and then in the mid-nineteenth century to the migration of the town civic center to its present location. But First Parish has carried on right where it began, in what was once the center of Town.

This Sanctuary is actually the fourth structure in which members of First Parish have worshiped. First Parish's first Meeting House was a crude clapboard structure measuring only 44 by 35 feet. This was replaced in 1806 by a large white Federal-style edifice similar to ones still surviving on many New England town greens. But in Brookline, this classic structure was torn down after only four decades because so many parishioners left to join other newly organized churches in other parts of town. First Parish's third building, erected in 1848, was so small that it too was torn down after only four decades and replaced by our present large Gilded Age Sanctuary, constructed of local Roxbury puddingstone and completed in 1893.

This was an opportune moment to be building a new church because the great American architect H. H. Richardson -- who lived nearby -- had popularized a radical new style of architecture that championed the use of indigenous materials. Richardson himself died in Brookline in 1886 but his firm carried on and seven years later designed this structure in his distinctive style, a style that came to be known as Richardsonian Romanesque. This style featured rounded, Roman-style arches rather than the pointed arches associated with medieval Gothic architecture. The result is less vertical, more horizontal, as evidenced for example here in the chancel. Originally, our chancel windows with their rounded Roman-style arches were all on a single level. Raising up the central

window was a later idea, perhaps inspired by an effort to make the Sanctuary seem less severely horizontal.

I'm now going to ask that the interior lights in the Sanctuary be turned off. This will give a greater sense of what the Sanctuary felt like when it was first built because the walls in those high Victorian days were painted a dark red or green, and there was not much interior lighting. This meant that stained glass windows would stand out as strong, colorful accents.

From the outset, stained glass was an important part of the aesthetic of our Richardsonian Romanesque Sanctuary, as had been true, for example, in Richardson's most famous edifice, Copley Square's Trinity Church. But when Trinity Church was completed in 1877, it had been necessary to go to Europe for Trinity's original stained glass windows. In the interval between 1877 and 1893, American stained glass had emerged for the first time as a major creative force. By being built in the right place at the right time, First Parish had the good fortune to acquire over a period of fifty years -- from 1895 to 1945 -- a spectacular assemblage of stained glass by major American artists who were experimenting with new techniques. This makes First Parish a uniquely felicitous place to learn about that first great era of American stained glass.

In many churches with stained glass, a single company produced all or most of the windows in a short period of time in a single uniform style. Here at First Parish, entering our Sanctuary is a bit like entering a large gallery in a museum where you can look around and see achievements by a range of artists working over a period of time and often in intense competition with one another. And in the case of one famous maker, Louis Comfort Tiffany, you can compare his early style with his later style. Our seven chancel windows were made by Tiffany in 1895 in his early style. At the back of the Sanctuary are two other windows in a much later style, the last dating from 1920. Our early Tiffany Windows have no human figures. Our late Tiffany Windows have large, almost life-size human figures. As a young man, Tiffany traveled extensively through North Africa from Egypt to Morocco, and came back enthusiastic about Islamic art, with its emphasis on ornate patterns and proscription on representing human figures. The result can be appreciated in our chancel: Islamic-influenced Church windows.

We can talk about the windows one at a time in a few minutes as we walk around the Sanctuary. Let me first differentiate our windows into three broad categories and describe why their makers thought of themselves as rivals championing different techniques as well as different aesthetic and even religious commitments.

The first category, including at least five of our twenty-one windows, can be termed Traditional. These are windows made in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century using techniques that had remained little changed for almost a thousand years. Flat pieces of clear or colored glass had applied to them materials rather like the slip-glazes applied to pottery. Then also like pottery, the slip-glazed glass was placed in a kiln and fired. In this firing process, the slip-glazes softened and adhered to the slightly melted glass to form a permanent bond. If a piece wasn't fired enough, the slip-glazes didn't adhere properly and later peeled off. But if a piece was fired too much, everything melted. Moreover, as with pottery, glazes applied to glass changed color after firing. The finished product would look very different after firing. Obviously, it took long experience to achieve the desired result.

For a thousand years, these processes had been evolved and perfected in Europe. And for many years prior to 1893, American churches had been importing fine specimens of European glass. Here at First Parish, one section of one of our twenty-one stained glass windows -- the central panel of our Weld Window -- was imported from Europe, everything else being made in the U.S.A. Having one example of fine traditional European stained glass is instructive, helping us gauge just how far American makers diverged from European

prototypes.

Our second category of windows is totally American and totally new. These windows are usually termed Opalescent because like opals they reflect light back rather than getting their effects from the passage of light through. This new type of window generated a great deal of excitement and much creativity. But Opalescent windows also provoked a lot of opposition reflecting a wide range of concerns.

Eleven of our twenty-one windows can be categorized as Opalescent, nine of the eleven being by Tiffany, the best-known maker of Opalescent stained glass. But our other two Opalescent Windows are arguably even more interesting than our Tiffany Windows because of their rarity and religious distinctiveness.

American Opalescent stained glass was made possible by the development in the 1870s of a new type of glass of varying thicknesses and multihued colors first used in housewares such as jugs and vases. Because this new glass was lustrous, supple and sparkling, glass designers could employ it to depict with great naturalism subjects such as sunsets and floral bouquets. Stained glass flowers and trees looked a lot like real flowers and trees. Sunsets could contain all the colors of the rainbow.

Using Opalescent glass was also in some ways simpler than the old Traditional method, in which almost every square inch of glass had to be laboriously hand-glazed. In the Opalescent style, applying glazes was limited mostly to hands and faces, with everything else done by using unadorned glass in myriad hues. Traditional slip-glazed windows were dull when no light was pouring in from outside, and more or less disappeared after dark. Opalescent windows glittered at all times, and at night shone luminously in reflected interior light.

With most slip-glazing eliminated, the Opalescent style could also employ plating, attaching additional glass panes one on top of the other. In this way, artists could tinker endlessly to achieve just the right effect. And layers could be added selectively, in just one section. Our big Opalescent Window by Sarah Whitman, for example, has nine layers of glass in some parts.

The American-invented, American-developed Opalescent style became all the rage in the late nineteenth century. An entire wall of Opalescent glass was for example installed in the White House. Then came the reaction. The Opalescent style always had critics who preferred the long-established Traditional style. But it took a while for a full-blown alternative to develop. By the 1920s, a third style of stained glass had been evolved as a self-conscious rejection of everything Opalescent. Our Sanctuary has five windows in this post-Opalescent style, so we have a great opportunity here to study these competing styles and come to understand why the artists who created these windows felt so strongly pro and con.

One complaint about Opalescent windows was that they blocked or at least strangled natural light from outside. One critic complained, for example, that windows "of the type known as opalescent...do not admit light, rather they keep it out like a curtain." (Charles Connick). Opalescent windows were compared to paintings hanging on blank walls, and were criticized as failing to meet the basic requirement of any window, that it enhance architecture.

Not surprisingly, such criticisms were more accurate with regard to less imaginatively conceived Opalescent windows. The best artists in the Opalescent style anticipated and tried to deflect such objections. Here in our Sanctuary we have side-by-side two Opalescent Windows, one of which can be said to ignore our Sanctuary's architecture and to resemble a picture hung on a wall, while the other triumphantly transcends all such criticisms. Our Train

Window makes no reference to its architectural setting because it was actually created for exhibition elsewhere and then modified to fit into an opening in this Sanctuary. On the other hand, Sarah Whitman's large, elaborate Opalescent Window is profoundly sensitive to its architectural setting, for which it was specifically designed. The faux marble columns in the two side lancets are perhaps the clearest indications of this. On the other hand, the comparative blockage of light coming from outside is undeniable, and this provided a more than sufficient basis for the emergence of a post-Opalescent style. This can be termed the Medieval Revival school of stained glass, spearheaded by Boston's own Charles Connick.

The pre-Opalescent Traditional school of stained glass had evolved slowly over the centuries, quietly absorbing new influences. All our Traditional Windows are thus clearly late nineteenth or early twentieth century windows. Our Saint Agatha Window, for example, shows early nineteenth century Wedgwood influence. Our Sir Galahad Window shows the influence of the mid-nineteenth century William Morris Arts and Crafts movement, and our Goddard Window shows early twentieth century Colonial Revival influence. In contrast, the new school of Medieval Revivalists rejected not only the Opalescent school but almost anything done after the twelfth century. Medieval Revivalists such as Charles Connick believed Chartres Cathedral had got it right, and nothing made since was worthy of emulation.

Our Sanctuary became a proving ground for Connick. His greatest early triumph here may have been ripping out an Opalescent window that he particularly disliked -- the Train Window -- and replacing it with one of his own. The Train Window was relegated to a less prominent location and in its place came the Kay Window. This Window -- Connick's first at First Parish -- makes clear his radical commitment to the twelfth century. The two main figures are two-dimensional. They float in air with no visible means of support. There is no hint of depth perspective. Almost every square inch is hand-glazed. But the most important feature of the Medieval Revival school is its theory of color, and this is also very much in evidence in Connick's Kay Window. For Connick, color was a symbolic language more important to his overall compositions than their nominal subjects.

Connick despised observational naturalism, with its subtle gradations of hue. Above all, he disliked weak, watery pastels. He termed the two Tiffany windows next to his "pink horrors." He believed colors spoke a symbolic language and, to be properly understood, had to be strong and bright. Red symbolized Divine Love. Violet symbolized Humility. Emerald Green symbolized Youth, Hope and Victory. Silvery White symbolized Faith, Serenity, Innocence and Joy. Blue symbolized Loyalty, Understanding, Salvation. Bright gold symbolized God as well as the Sun. Pale Yellow symbolized Evil.

Connick thought in terms of eternal truths beaming strongly down from above. His Windows were simple vehicles for their transmission from outside to the worshiper within the Sanctuary. It seemed entirely appropriate to him that when there was no light from outside, his windows should go dark. Sarah Whitman, the most thoughtful and spiritual of the Opalescent artists, had an entirely different understanding of the way stained glass mediated between a worshiper in the Sanctuary and eternal truths beyond. While Charles Connick wanted to confront people with bold, bright, strong colors animated by light from an eternal, external source, Sarah Whitman preferred a quieter, gentler approach.

Whitman seems to have been what might be termed a Swedenborgian Transcendentalist. She wanted to help people become centered within themselves, explore their own sensory capacities, and then orient these capacities in an uplifting direction. She believed that spiritual inspiration and enlightenment arose inside individual human beings as they groped outward, first perceiving the natural world through their senses and then gradually moving toward comprehension of eternal verities. This was a process that could be best encouraged by an artist who could subtly coax viewers beyond ordinary concerns one step at a time. This meant starting with familiar surroundings such as realistically

rendered leaves and flowers and then, when viewers were beginning to feel somewhat comfortable, challenging them to contemplate life's ultimate meanings.

In her huge Window, a real-looking morning glory vine sparkling as if with morning dew is a sensitively affirming symbol for the tragically brief lives of three young people, who are shown transitioning in stages to the status of angels. The two newly-arrived angels' wings are astonishingly tactile, and their garments brightly colored, whereas the angel welcoming them, who died earlier, is less colorfully garbed, more mystically remote.

I have sometimes described this Sanctuary as a Stained Glass Battleground. Fortunately, as twenty-first century individuals, we don't have to take sides. Rather, we can enjoy them all, along with their different ways of thinking about and contemplating things beyond ordinary day-to-day comprehension.