



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Dancing at the Margins,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 19, 2013

Does anyone remember those days in elementary school, on the playground picking sides for a game, and how it felt if you were in that group of those not yet chosen? Didn't you say a silent plea: “Please, don't let me be one picked last”? Anyone remember wondering if you were going to have a date for the prom, or, when you walked into coffee hour here for the first time, if anyone would talk to you? You parents, don't you worry about your children--if they will have friends and fit in?

It's natural to want to belong, to want to be welcomed and included, to be part of a community. I believe in community, whether it's the kind of community Pat and Sandy created here last night with their music,¹ or the church community we are working to build.

Last week I talked about my new understanding that individualism is not the enemy of community; that it is only as healthy, self-possessed individuals can we enter into relationship and commitment with others. Today I want to think about where we locate ourselves within the communities we inhabit.

It may be part of our evolution to want to join a group, to seek the safe middle of the herd. But instincts can lead us the wrong way. Today, I speak in praise of the margins.

But I grew up learning the margins were not the place to be. I was taught to want to fit in. Our language reflects this bias: if something “is marginal,” is that ever a good thing? The thesaurus on my computer says marginality can mean “eccentricity,” and has synonyms like “oddness, weirdness, and peculiarity.” It says the antonym of marginality is “normality.” There's a linguistic bias toward the center. But that can change, and it's great the LGBT folks have reclaimed, with pride, the word “queer.”

A book called *Marginality*, where our first reading came from, helped me to see the margins not as something to be avoided, but rather, a place of energy and creativity. We're attracted to the center, Jung Young Lee says, because it's “the locus of power, wealth and honor.”² Our inclination toward the center helps build civilizations, Lee says, but at the same time this orientation creates injustice for those left outside.

¹ Pat Humphries and Sandy O, of Emma's Revolution, played the previous night at the church coffeehouse, and this morning in worship.

² Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

It's in our nature to seek the center. But if we care about justice, we should orient ourselves toward the margins. That's what good religion tells us to do. The Buddha was not born an enlightened one. He was a prince, who led a privileged and protected life. His journey toward enlightenment began when he left the sheltered walls of his family's palace and was exposed to the reality of illness, death and suffering.

In the book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible, Moses tells the Israelites that God is the one who "...executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing." Then Moses says, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10:17-19). In that patriarchal culture, the orphan and the widow represented those who were the most vulnerable. The Hebrew scriptures say God is partial to those at the margins, and therefore people of faith are called to care for them too.

Likewise, in his ministry, Jesus was oriented not toward those with religious or political power, but rather toward the poor and the outcast, those he called, "the least of these."³

It's in our nature to seek the center, but we are called to turn toward the margins. One thing you can do is share what you have with those less fortunate. This is what's known as charity, and all religions commend it. But one problem with charity is that it does nothing to change the way things are. Community Meals and food pantries help with the problem of immediate hunger, but do nothing to address the systemic issues that create poverty in the first place.

In our country, the gap between rich and poor, between CEOs and factory workers, is widening. No amount of charity will change that. What we need is justice. And if you want to make ours a fairer and more just society, a good place to start is with awareness of your own social location.

Where you were born, and to whom; what kind of resources your family had access to, what your skin color and gender and ethnicity and social class are; what your sexual orientation, and educational level, and physical abilities are--these are all part of your social location.

These different aspects of who we are can make life easier or more difficult. It's pretty obvious, isn't it, that people of color have generally had a harder time in our culture? When Barack Obama was elected president, some people said, "We can be colorblind now," as if everything had changed. Though things are better, there's still discrimination based on race. It's still easier to be white in America. There are more women in the UU ministry now than men. But few women have been called to our most prominent pulpits. Being male is still an advantage.

Anti-oppression work begins with understanding your own social location--where you're privileged and where you're marginalized. This is not about making the privileged feel guilty and the marginalized feel like victims. It can actually be liberating and empowering to acknowledge your social location; to name and claim this reality, to think about ways to use your privilege, and your experiences of life at the margins.

³ Matthew 25:40: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

I'm someone who belongs to all of the major oppressor groups. I'm white, male, Anglo, heterosexual, married, middle class. I'm able-bodied and middle-aged--at least for now. What am I to do with all this privilege? I hope I'm being an ally to those at the margins. Rather than feeling guilty, the invitation is to use your privilege to make ours a better world.

Liberation theology takes seriously what the Bible says, that God is partial to widows and orphans, to strangers and exiles. Liberation theology says those at the margins actually have a clearer view of how things really are; that privilege tends to blind those who have it. So I can't stand up here and tell you about what it's like to be gay or a person of color; for that I need to listen to those who have that experience. If I've learned anything from doing anti-racism/anti-oppression work, it's that some of the best work you can do is to pay attention to those who make you uncomfortable, even those who annoy you, and rather than attack or reject them, to ask yourself, "What does it say about me that I am bothered by this person whose experience is so different from my own?"

The amazing thing is, coming in contact with those who are different, listening to their stories, starting to understand what it's like to walk in their shoes, can break down the barriers that divide us. It can be liberating, for both the privileged and the marginalized.

In the mid-80's, I was living in Washington, DC, working as a freelance photographer. I volunteered in a program in which photographers helped children who were living in homeless shelters to take pictures and document their lives. Once a week I met with a ten year-old boy named Dion. I taught him use my cameras to photograph his life, his family and friends, and the streets of DC. This took me to parts of the city I usually avoided. Driving there, I locked my car doors.

After some weeks at the shelter, Dion and his family moved into Section 8 housing, and we saw each other weekly for about a year. One day I realized that I no longer locked the doors when I drove through those neighborhoods. The streets hadn't changed. The city hadn't gotten any safer. Something had changed in me. By walking those sidewalks with Dion, by spending time with the people who lived there, I was no longer a stranger in what had seemed like a foreign land. I was still an outsider, but I also felt at home.

If you feel afraid and insecure, one response is to build a wall around yourself. That's what we're often told to do--distrust those who are different, protect yourself at any cost. But when you let down your guard, when you risk being changed, when you actually move toward the margins--it is there you will find a different kind of security; a happiness even, because you are living more fully into your own humanity. And there is where you'll find your sisters and brothers.

The image of the center that keeps coming to my mind is a guarded fortress or a gated community. Who can enjoy living inside that, protecting what you have while hiding from the life going on outside? That prince only became the Buddha after he left his protected and privileged place. Our religious tradition invites us, compels us, not toward the center, but toward the margins. That is where the energy is and where the action is. That is where we are most likely to be in touch with each other and with that Spirit which courses through everything.

Sandy and Pat take their band name from the quote attributed to Emma Goldman: "If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution." Working to change the world can lead any of us to be way too somber and serious. In our work for justice, it's important to not forget to dance! Let's not forget to dance.

It's in our nature to seek the center. But we are called to life at the margins. It is there that we will make connections with one another and with the holy. And wherever you find yourself located, whatever the facts of your life, our Universalist faith is that we are all in this together; as Pat and Sandy sing, "we're all swimming to the other side."

"O persistent God, let how much it all matters pry me off dead center
so if I am moved inside to tears or sighs or screams or smiles or dreams
they will be real
and I will be in touch with who I am
and who you are
and who my sisters and brothers are." ⁴

Amen.

⁴ Ted Loder, "Pry Me Off Dead Center," from *Guerrillas of Grace*.