



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Hope: Where We Find It,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on December 14, 2014

Our worship theme for December is “hope.” This is no accident. The holy days we celebrate this month each have hope as central to their message. Christmas celebrates the birth of the long-expected, long-hoped-for savior Jesus the Christ. Solstice and Yule celebrate the hope, in this darkest time of year, that the light will return. Hanukkah celebrates the hope that, against the odds, what is sacred will not be defiled; that in the end, the oppressors will not prevail.

But what exactly is hope? It’s one of those squishy words that sounds good, but do we know what it means? For me, hope is an attitude and a perspective, it’s a way of being, it’s a virtue, a commitment, a blessing. It’s not a thing you can bottle up and save. It’s something you practice; it’s a verb, not a noun. In a blog post one of you shared this week, Debra Dean Murphy says, “Hope is not wishful thinking; it is risk and action and the courage to undertake both.”¹

Hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism is the belief, usually based on experience, that things are going to work out well. If you’ve been lucky in the past, you’re likely to think your good fortune will continue in the future; you’re an optimist. But what happens when your luck changes? If all you have is optimism, your world can fall apart.

Some of us have not been so lucky; we have few reasons to for optimism. What happens when you’ve been disappointed, over and over; when people and institutions have failed you? It can be hard to hope. But that is what I commend to you today; not a sunny optimism but rather, a hard-won hope.

I have to confess that, when preparing this sermon, I felt inadequate, because some of you know more about this than I do; about keeping your heart open, when hope is hard to find. Some of you have had more than your share of suffering. But each of us here knows at least something about trouble, pain and loss. Though it doesn’t get distributed equally, suffering is one of the things we have in common, that connects us, one to another. That’s what compassion is-- suffering with another, feeling some part of their pain.

What I do know is this--that there is more than enough hardship and trouble these days, in the world and in our lives. We need hope. We need to be reminded and reassured that there is reason to hope, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

¹ Debra Dean Murphy, “Would That You Might Meet Us Doing Right,” available online at <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/would-that-you-might-meet-us-doing-right/7068>

Isn't that why we celebrate these stories of hope in times of fear, of light shining in the darkness? Isn't it why we will come to church next Sunday and act out, in a beautifully imperfect way, the nativity story? And why we will come here on Christmas Eve, to hear the old story, that says "fear not," and to light candles in the dark and sing together "Silent night, holy night, all is calm all is bright"?

Don't we want to be hopeful people? Don't we need to be hopeful people, if we want to live good and helpful lives?

Any vital faith community offers the opportunity to experience both ultimacy and intimacy. Ultimacy is the vertical dimension and intimacy is the horizontal one. Ultimacy is about connecting with the heights and depths, touching your deepest experience, being in touch with your own soul, and with that force or source some of us call God. Intimacy is about connecting with others in healthy, life-affirming ways, beholding one another and being seen in our fullness. Of course, these two intersect and overlap--it's often in other people that we can see the face of the divine, and our experiences of the holy want to be shared with others.

Last Sunday we heard words from the prophet Isaiah and I talked about the hope of Israel, that in hard times, Emmanuel, "God with us," would appear. My orientation was more toward the vertical, and you may have noticed that I kind of lean that way. This week, I invite you to seek hope with me in the horizontal--in the blessed human connections we share. I invite you to remember and reflect on the experiences you have of hope; the people who have given you hope, especially those who have appeared when hope was hard to find.

Back in the winter of 2003, as our country was preparing to go to war against Iraq and Saddam Hussein, I rode on a bus through the night down to Washington, DC, to be part of an antiwar rally over the Martin Luther King weekend. Standing out in front of the Capitol, in the cold with thousands of others, I was moved to tears by the power of all those people there together, hoping that we would not start another war. I think most of us there already knew that the war was inevitable, but somehow, showing up there gave me hope--as Vaclav Havel says, it made sense, regardless of how it turned out.²

In those days leading up to the war, I heard a story on the radio, told by Daniel Pinkwater. When he was in college, he had a studio across the quad from his dorm, where he would go at night and work on his art. He says some nights we would wonder, "What's the point?" and would almost not go. But something kept him going to that studio, unlocking the door, turning on the lights and spending the evening there, working away, though he often felt he was making no progress as an artist.

Well, one day at the end of the semester, Pinkwater met a student who seemed to recognize him. This student said, "Aren't you the guy who has the studio on the third floor of Smith Hall?"

And Pinkwater said, "Yes, that's me."

² Vaclav Havel: "Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

The other student said, “I need to thank you. This has been a really hard semester for me. I’ve been depressed and discouraged, and at times I thought about taking my life. But at night I’d look out my window, and see the light on in your studio, and see you working there. Seeing you there, knowing that someone could have a reason and purpose for living, that gave me hope. Hope to go on, hope to get help. And I’m better now.”

You never know, you seldom get to know, how the simple acts of your daily life might be sending out ripples of hope, making a difference, even saving other people.

Where do we look, when hope is hard to find? My hunch is that too often we think we need something dramatic, too often we go searching far and wide when we’d be better off paying closer attention to what is near. When Jesus said, “Seek and you will find,” he didn’t say you have to travel a thousand miles. Seeking can be about opening your eyes, your heart, your mind to what is right here, right now.

The other day, a friend told me about how she found restoration at home. She was exhausted from some good work she had done, and was scheduled to have a weekend with her adult daughter coming home to visit. But when she realized how depleted she felt, she cancelled that time with her daughter, and she stayed home and had a silent retreat all by herself, reading and writing, and making some soup she gave to friends. She says it was heavenly, and restorative.

For some of you, a weekend in silence would be bliss. For others, not so much. My point is, that when you are tired and depleted, when you find yourself hopeless, you need to put yourself in the presence of that which will restore you. If you search your heart, you will know what this is. Your heart and your soul will tell you. And then you need to allow yourself this experience which will feed your soul.

Where do we find hope? For some, it is in being with people and taking action, making ours a more just world. For others, it is in quiet and contemplation. For some it is in study and learning, for others, it is in ritual or beauty or acts of compassion and caring.

I find hope in the Christmas story of God becoming incarnate, like one of us. But not just there. I find hope in the ways I see you living lives of courage and resilience; in seeing you making connections with one another, like at the meal after Vespers on Wednesday night. Music brings me hope. So did the recent photograph of a young Black man hugging a White police officer at a protest, tears running down the young man’s face.³ I find hope in the visions of prophets:

The wolf and the lamb will live together;
the leopard will lie down with the baby goat.
The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion,
and a little child will lead them all (Isaiah 11:6, NIV).

And in the words of poets that remind us who we are meant to be:

³ Photography by Johnny Nguyen, available online at http://www.oregonlive.com/today/index.ssf/2014/11/photo_of_hug_between_portland.html

Come down and settle.
Unlearn the years of hiding.
Light fires that can be seen for miles,
that dance and spark and warm
the frozen marrow. Set lamps
in the window. Declare your presence,
your loyalties, the truths
for which you do not expect to have to die.
It would take a miracle, you say,
to carve such a solid life
out of the shell of fear.
I say you are the stuff
from which such miracles are made.⁴

This season of Advent is about being open to the ways love and light and hope might come into the world. Into the midst of the pain and the mess and all the trouble. Into our hearts and into our homes and into this world, this broken and beautiful world.

If it is a miracle, this thing called hope, then it is a miracle that is accessible to us. A miracle for which we are made. In these days, let us be, as May Sarton wrote, “the always hopeful gardeners of the Spirit, who know that without darkness, nothing comes to birth, as without light, nothing flowers.”

Let us be bringers and bearers of hope, now and forever,

Amen.

⁴ “Chanukkah,” by Lynn Ungar.