



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Take the Long View,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on January 25, 2015

This month, when we’ve been focused on justice, asking ourselves “how might I help make this a better world?,” I’ve become increasingly aware of how important is it to be grounded, if you are going to do this work, grounded in what nourishes and sustains you.

For me, there’s nothing like getting out in the fresh air, under the wide sky, to renew my spirit. But it also helps to be grounded in a community, where you remember you’re not alone. To be grounded in a tradition, so you know whose shoulders you’re standing on. To be grounded in a spirituality that’s live-giving, that will sustain you for the long haul.

Sometime in my first year in divinity school, I had a conversation with my father in law. A lifelong Catholic who rarely went to church, he was curious about what I was learning in seminary. I could tell from his questions that he thought it was about being indoctrinated, into the beliefs and practices of the institutional church. Now, I loved my father in law, who died a few years ago, and we were politically pretty far apart. We had some lively arguments over the years, and I learned that there were times to bite my tongue. So I don’t remember exactly how I answered his questions, but I do remember what I wanted to say, and didn’t: “My experience of seminary isn’t anything like what your imagine. If we’re being indoctrinated into anything, it’s how to overthrow the government.”

You see, in seminary I came to a whole new understanding of religion—not as a defender of orthodoxy but as a force for liberation. I came to value faith that calls us to critique and challenge the status quo, to make no peace with oppression.

Like the Hebrew prophets who preceded him, Jesus led a renewal movement within Judaism, challenging the authorities that took advantage of the poor and vulnerable. Two of the gospels tell the story of Jesus, at the start of his public ministry, coming back to Nazareth and standing up in the temple to read these words from the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

This orientation toward the margins, rooted in the Hebrew prophets, continued in the early Christian communities that sprung up after Jesus' death. Under oppressive Roman rule, they created communities based on hospitality and fellowship and care for one another. They observed the same open fellowship that Jesus practiced, where even outcasts like tax collectors and prostitutes, the wrong kind of people, were welcome.

But this started to change in the fourth century, when the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. A religion at the margins came to the center, and was joined to imperial power. Since then, the Church has too often been an instrument of oppression. It has privileged men over women; it has lent its authority to warfare and torture, to colonialism and slavery. In our country, religious leaders have cozied up to political power, often for their own gain; rather than to make ours a more just world.

All this is enough to make a person of conscience walk away from the church. And many good people have. But as one of my teachers said, "Christianity was never meant to be a mainstream religion."

When I said that about overthrowing the government, I hope you didn't hear that in a partisan kind of way. I simply mean that the place for religion is not at the center, where the power is. No, we are supposed to be at the margins. The Christianity I came back to calls those in power to account. How will their policies and actions affect the least among us: the poor, the alien, the disenfranchised?

I'm sometimes dismayed by the political discourse in our country. It's too often more about individual freedom than justice, too often it's posturing about who is tough; that is, who is willing to use force to achieve our ends. How often do we hear our leaders propose beating swords into plowshares, or saying, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them," or that we all are parts of God's creation?

I believe that our job as people of faith, as Christians for those of us who claim that name, is standing outside the gates of power, calling for a different way. And if we are standing inside, as many of us are, we need to acknowledge the ways we are privileged, and ask, "How can I use my privilege to make this a better world?"

I'm inspired by the idea of the kingdom, or realm of God—the time that prophets speak of, when justice shall roll down like waters, when the lion will lay down with the lamb. This hoped-for time is more promise than reality. We will not see this in our lifetime. And yet, there are moments we see it breaking into human history. The fact that a brutal regime in South Africa was overcome without massive bloodshed, the fact that the Berlin Wall came down, that marriage equality is spreading across our country: these are signs that what Theodore Parker, the 19th century Unitarian minister, said was true: though the arc of the moral universe is a long one, "from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

There is a longing in the human heart for freedom and justice that will not be denied forever. Even with all that remains to be done, don't the accomplishments of the American civil rights movement prove this to be true, that in the end, justice will prevail? This was Desmond Tutu's faith in the darkest days of apartheid. He had the audacity to say to his adversaries in the South African government, "We live in a moral universe. You have already lost. Come over and join us on the winning side."¹

And so, I wonder if we have this faith. It's harder for those of us who haven't known such oppression, who lead relatively comfortable lives, to trust so radically in God or in that arc that bends toward justice.

Those of us who are used to winning, to getting our way much of the time, we may have some work to do here. Because the faith I am talking about does not promise that we will win. It's more likely that we won't, at least not in the short term. Principalities do not give up their power easily. The arc of the moral universe is long.

Those of you who were Red Sox fans before 2004, you know something about this; about having what's called revolutionary patience; knowing that the kingdom is not here yet, and trusting that one day, one day, it will come.

So if you get tired or overwhelmed when you consider the problems of this world, the pain and injustice, then take heart--you're in good company. These feelings are a sign that you care, that you take these problems seriously. And also a sign that you need to take care of yourself, and feed your own soul. I'm convinced that time spent in contemplation is essential for those doing this work--to save us from burning out, to remind us that we are not in charge, and that we are not alone.

Our reading this morning is a tribute to Oscar Romero, once the Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador. Born into privilege, Romero was initially a bishop who didn't rock the boat. But when a fellow priest and friend was killed by the Salvadoran army for standing with the peasant revolt, Romero's eyes were opened, and his life was changed. He became an outspoken advocate for the poor in his country. Because of the threat his witness posed to the military regime, in 1980 he was assassinated. Listen again to the prayer written for him:

"It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. . . We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."²

¹ Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 2.

² Bishop Ken Untener, "The Romero Prayer," available online at http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/archbishop_romero_prayer.cfm

So many of you are tireless workers for the causes you believe in. I believe we are all called to put our faith into action. But there's a danger in this—of being overwhelmed by the enormity of the task, becoming too sure that we are right, getting burned out.

To sustain ourselves for the long haul, we need places where we can be challenged, rejuvenated, restored; places where we can join our voices with others in praise and protest, song and prayer, places where we can laugh and cry together, places where we can be exposed to alternative points of view. That's my idea of church. I love the church for its potential to change individual lives and, in the fullness of time, to transform the world. I long for the church to be considered dangerous by those who wield oppressive power, for the church to take its place as not only a sanctuary for the suffering, but as a powerful witness for justice. As a place where we remember, "who we are and who God is and who our sisters and brothers are."³

So if you're feeling burned out or helpless, anxious or self-righteous, it's time to step back and take the long view. Take a walk or get out under the stars; roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty, spend some time on your knees. Do what makes your heart glad; what feeds your soul. If you do this, if you keep doing this, you will find the strength and the courage to do this work you are called to do.

If we do this, I'm convinced we will find a faith big enough to hold both our longing for justice and the knowledge that our work will never be done. We will be able to reach out to our friends and to our enemies. We will be able to imagine a new creation, and know we are doing our own small part to make it real.

Amen.

³ These words are from the final line of Ted Loder's prayer "Pry Me Off Dead Center" in his book *Guerrillas of Grace*.