

“What Lasts,”
a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on September 13, 2009

I find myself having mixed feelings this time of year. On the one hand, I get a sense of renewed energy as the weather cools and the fall approaches. I’m excited and glad to be back together here in church, and I even like getting back into a more regular routine.

But on the other hand, I feel a sense of sadness that summer is over. The promise of those long, warm days was that there was time--time to do all kinds of things that are just not possible when we’re back at school, and back to work, and the days are growing shorter. That’s why I chose the poem “The Summer Place,” for our reading today--it describes what early September feels like for me, and I suspect, for some of you too:

You know what happens. The days shorten,
the nights grow colder, the summer ends.
Just when we imagine the puzzle ready
for finishing, two pieces come up lost
and we never make the heaven we look for.

You know what happens. A child grows up and moves away. An employer you thought you could count on tells you the company is downsizing. A relationship ends. Things change, you run out of time, you don’t get what you wish or hope for.

When I was young, the summer always seemed like it was going to last forever. Our family used to go to the beach down in South Carolina in August, and I remember, like it was yesterday, one day at the beach, when my mom said to another grownup, “The children go back to school in just a few days.” “What?” I shrieked. I was startled that somehow, when I wasn’t looking, the summer had come to an end.

For those of you in school, starting a new year is exciting, but it’s hard too, isn’t it? You probably wondered “Will I like my teacher?” “Will there be anyone I know in my class?” And if you were starting at a new school, “Will I get lost?”

So if you are feeling sad, or on edge, or unsettled these days, take a deep breath. Change does that to people. Things will settle down. And it helps to acknowledge

that you're in a time of transition, and even to wonder if there are things to learn from it, hidden gifts in this time of change. It's not a time to be hard on yourself.

The fact is, life is full of change. We are changing all the time, and the world is changing around us. And to the extent we can accept this, and be open to it, the better off we'll be. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "There is no sleep, no pause, no preservation, but all things renew, germinate and spring. People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them." We would like for things to be settled, but change, challenging as it can be, is actually good for us. It helps us to grow and learn and adapt.

Knowing all this still doesn't keep me from feeling kind of melancholy at this time of year. I say to myself. "You shouldn't feel this way. You had a great summer!" And that other voice in my head says, "Yes, I did. Still, the fishing wasn't as awesome as I had thought it would be. I let our little vegetable garden go wild with weeds. I didn't read nearly as many books as I planned to. And the summer's over."

That's the way life is. Things come to an end, and often there's something missing. Things big and small, are left undone, unsaid, sometimes unfixable.

But is that the end of the story? Is there a unity in all the change and upheaval around us? Is there rightness and righteousness to be found in the midst of our lives, in the here and now?¹ What lasts? I encourage you to ask yourself that question--what lasts? What can you count on, what gives your life meaning and purpose?

Some would say that nothing lasts, that everything is temporal and passing away. But if I believed that, if I thought life was random and meaningless, then I don't know how I could be a minister or a preacher. Because I see my job as trying to lift up, from the ordinary places of our lives, what lasts, what is sacred and beautiful and good and real.

What lasts? For me, the answer is love. Not romantic love, which like a flower will eventually fade. But the affection of family members for one another, or friendship that grows deep with time, this kind of love can last even longer than our individual lives. I know many of you can still feel the presence of those you have

¹ The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth asked, "Is it true, this sense of a unity in diversity, of a stationery pole amid changing appearances, of a righteousness not somewhere beyond the stars but in the events which are our present life?"

loved and lost. Their spirit is not gone from you; there is something of them that lasts.

The kind of love that last is what the Greeks called agape. It is a charitable and unconditional love. It's the kind of love that St. Paul said, "bears all things, hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:7).

We can experience this unconditional love. It flows in two dimensions, horizontal and vertical. The horizontal dimension is love of neighbor. When we care for one another, when we show kindness to another, when we speak out against injustice or stand with someone in need, when we share what we have, we are loving our neighbor.

The vertical dimension is love of God; that spirit or source, whatever you call it, that spirit in which we live and move and have our being. And that vertical dimension includes being open to God's love, asking for it, putting ourselves in its presence, opening our hearts to receive its grace.

This is what Jesus was talking about when he said there were two great commandments, to love God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength," and, to "love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 28:30-31).

The horizontal dimension is about intimacy--reaching out to those around us, and letting others reach out to us. The vertical dimension is about ultimacy--touching and being touched by what is deep and profound and sacred. And the church exists to help you go in both directions.

In a minute we will participate in a simple ritual that emphasizes the horizontal dimension. Our water communion symbolizes that we are individuals, that we come from particular places and experiences, but we have a common life here together. We bring particular gifts and share them with one another for a purpose--to heal and bless each other and the world. Just as we will use this water, once it is purified, to bless those who come to be christened or dedicated here.

At the end of our service today, we'll sing a hymn that speaks to the vertical dimension. The words of the final verse say

"The letter fails, the systems fall, and every symbol wanes,
the Spirit overseeing all, Eternal Love, remains" (*Immortal Love*, SLT #10).

That's what lasts. The love we receive, the love we share, the love that surrounds us on every side, the love we give away. That's why we're here--to touch that source of life and love and be touched by it, to be renewed and restored, to share that love with others.

May that love be in us and among us, now and forever,

Amen.