



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Bread for a Thousand,”
a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on February 26, 2012

Two weeks ago, I told you about going up to the Congregational Church in Exeter to hear Bill McKibben speak about global warming. In addition to being a writer and environmental activist, he’s also a Sunday school teacher in his Methodist church in Vermont. Several years ago he wrote an essay about Biblical illiteracy our nation and the consequences of that, called “People of the (Unread) Book.” Here’s how it begins:

“Only 40 percent of Americans can name more than five of the Ten Commandments, and a scant half can cite any of the four authors of the gospels. Twelve percent believe Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife. This failure to recall the specifics of our Judeo-Christian heritage may be further evidence of our nation’s educational decline, but it probably doesn’t matter all that much in spiritual or political terms. Here is a statistic that does matter: Three-quarters of Americans believe that the Bible says “God helps those who help themselves.” That is, three out of four Americans believe that this uber-American idea, a notion at the core of our current individualist politics and culture, which was in fact uttered by Ben Franklin, actually appears in holy scripture. The thing is, not only is Franklin’s wisdom not biblical, it’s counter-biblical. Few ideas could be farther from the gospel message, with its radical summons to love of neighbor.”¹

In the rest of this piece, Bill McKibben describes how America, where most people identify as Christian, acts in such un-Christian ways--how we give less foreign aid per capita, and take worse care of our children and the poor, how we celebrate the ability of the rich to avoid paying taxes and blame people on welfare for our problems. He’s not particularly hopeful about the church either, noticing that the fastest growing churches are ones that preach a self-centered prosperity gospel, not “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

I hope you don’t need much convincing that in 2012 the Bible still matters. That it gets used, and misused, by preachers and politicians with their own agendas, if we let them. That there is so much misunderstanding of the Bible makes sense to me--it’s a big book, written from a variety of perspectives and contexts over thousands of years. It’s complicated. But there are parts of it, the gospels especially, where the message is simple. Love God and love your neighbor. Look out especially for what Jesus called “the least of these,” those who’ve been pushed to the margins. Love God and love your neighbor--that’s pretty much it--what both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures are about.

¹ Bill McKibben, “People of the (Unread) Book,” in *Getting on Message: Challenging the Christian Right from the Heart of the Gospel*, Peter Laarman, ed., (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p.13.

If progressive religion has failed in the 20th century, it's when it has forgotten to stick to this core message, love of God and love of neighbor. The message may be simple, but that doesn't mean that it's easy. Our human nature can pull us more toward fear than love, and we are inclined to look out for ourselves more than our neighbors. As we used to confess in the church I grew up in, "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things we ought not to have done..."

The story of the prodigal son² is one of a series of three parables Jesus told about the nature of God. People tend to believe that God is scary, angry, a judge always keeping score. That's what most religious leaders taught back when Jesus walked the earth, and it's what some churches still teach today. But Jesus said that's not what God is like at all. He said God is like the father of that son who ran away. Even though he must have been hurt and disappointed, even though his heart must have been broken, he welcomed his child back home with open arms. "He was dead, and now he's alive," the father says. "How could I not rejoice?"

Some of us are like the prodigal son, inclined toward running away, being irresponsible. Some of us are like the son who stayed home, doing what's expected, but quietly seething all the while. The invitation for each of us is to come to our senses, and to come home to the One who has loved us from the start. To see that, in the end, we are all supposed to be becoming more like that father, "caring and forgiving 'till we're reconciled," as the hymn says.

If you read the gospels, you'll see that after teaching or preaching or healing, Jesus always needs some alone time, and he goes out in boat, or up a mountain, or to a remote place, in order to restore his soul. There's a lesson here for us, who live in a 24/7, on-the-run culture. If you're going to do some good, you have to step back and rest too.

So Jesus was trying to do this one day, trying to get some space, but the people wouldn't let him go. And the story says he took pity on them, he saw they were like sheep without a shepherd, and so he began to teach them. And late in the day, when the people were hungry, and the disciples didn't know what to do, Jesus took what they had, five loaves and two fish, and gave thanks to God for them, and somehow there was more than enough food for everyone.

Though this story has numbers in it, 5 loaves, 2 fish, 5000 people, it is not a math problem. It's a story of what can happen when people are in the presence of great love. It's like the story of stone soup--when someone gives thanks for what they have, and starts to share, then surprising, even miraculous things, can happen.

You know that all those people wouldn't have come out into the country without some provisions. Well, maybe the men would have. But the women would have known to be prepared. Maybe they were all fed simply because they responded to Jesus' invitation to be open to love rather than fear, generosity rather than scarcity.

² The service today included the telling of two stories, the parable of the prodigal son (see Luke 15:11-32) and the miracle of the loaves and fishes (see Mark 6:30-44).

We grow up being taught to keep score, to count the cost of things, being taught that you only get what you deserve and earn. And there is some truth in this. Our world operates that way. It tells you, "Your worth is based on what you produce and what you own, what you do and what and who you know."

But Jesus imagined a different world, in which, no matter what you do, there is always room for you; no matter how bad you screw up, you will always be welcomed home. That's the heart of our Universalist faith, and it's the heart of the parable of the prodigal son--that there will be great rejoicing in heaven when we come to our senses and come home to who we are meant to be.

That's why we should read and be familiar with the Bible, because we need its counter-cultural message. We need its good news, and the world needs it too.

"This is not the age of information," the poet says. "This is the time of loaves and fishes. People are hungry, and one good word is bread for a thousand."³

People are hungry. If you doubt this, just look around. Even in our country, with all its resources, people are hungry, for food and for shelter. And not just that--people are hungry for love and for companionship. For truth and for justice. For connection and for what is real.

But it's not easy to find these things. There are plenty of people who will sell you something, will promise you that what they have is what you are hungry for, whether it's a new phone or car or fragrance or diet; a new method, or slogan. But you know, don't you, that is not what you really hunger for?

What is that good word that is bread for a thousand? It's simple, really, and it's in the stories we told today. It's what Jesus preached and what he lived out in his brief ministry. "God loves you," he said, "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world." So love God back, and love your neighbor. Be good to yourself, share what you have, love one another. And if you do this, if we would ever really do this, then we would have heaven on earth; we would have the kingdom of God right here, in our midst.

Amen.

³ David Whyte, "Loaves and Fishes."