



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Come to Your Senses,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on October 11, 2015

“I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.”¹

We just heard a story about one who was lost.² A young man, ready to make his way in the world, says to his father, “Give me my inheritance.” His father is still alive. It’s like saying, “You’re dead to me—your money is what matters.”

He leaves home and squanders the money, having a good time. And then hard times come. A famine hits the land, and the only work he can find is feeding the pigs. Remember this is a story told by Jesus, who was Jewish, whose audience was other Jews. To even be in the vicinity of pigs was bad, because they were unclean. You can imagine Jesus’ audience, hearing this, going, “Oooh, that’s really bad.”

But then, as they say, something happened. The parable says, “Finally, he came to his senses.” Though he doesn’t know what awaits him, or if he will be welcomed at all, he heads for home.

A long way off, he rehearses his speech: “Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and you. I don’t deserve to be called your son.” But when the father sees his boy, he runs to him, welcoming him back without reservation or recrimination. Jesus was saying, this is what God’s love is like, like a parent waiting for their beloved child to come home, just wanting to welcome them back with open arms.

There’s so much in this story we could explore. We could talk about images of God. We could talk the other brother, and the cost of being the dutiful one, who stays home and does what’s expected, and then gets mad about it. Today I want to focus on that one line on which the story turns: “Finally, he came to his senses.”

On this Sunday when we remember and honor those who have had the courage to come out to family and friends and coworkers and church members; to come out, sometimes at great personal cost, to affirm who they really are—isn’t this a good day for each of us to ponder our own lives and our own particular commitments, and ask, “Are there ways I need to come out? Are there ways that I am hiding, pretending, living in the shadows, being less than whole? Is there a way I need to come to my senses and come home?”

¹ John Newton, “Amazing Grace,” hymn #205 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

² The reading was Luke 15:11-32, the parable of the prodigal son.

Hearing Di's beautiful testimonial³ reminds me of the power and grace we invoke when we tell the truth about who we are. When you do that, in spite of the cost, you change not only your own life, you help to change the world.

We all get lost at times. We lose our way. Thank God for that voice within, that you sometimes only hear in the quietest moments or in the middle of the darkest nights, that nags at you, that tugs at you, calling you to be the unique person you were born to be.

Do you know that voice? Do you know how to listen for it? And to follow where it leads? Or have you lost track of it, because of all those louder voices you're listening to?

Thank God for those who tell us the truth, and call us to account; people and communities that remind us of our better selves and help us to find our way home.

In so many ways we are taught to live divided lives; to wear masks and pretend to be other than we are, to go along and get along. How many of you grew up hearing what I did: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all!"

Parker Palmer says, if we look "at the great liberation movements that have served humanity so well—in eastern Europe, Latin America, and South Africa, among women, African Americans, and our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters... (you see that) the movements that transform us, our relations, and our world emerge from the lives of people who care for their authentic selfhood."⁴

Palmer says there comes a time when these people decide to live "divided no more. They decide no longer to act on the outside in a way that contradicts some truth about themselves they hold deeply on the inside." This is what Rosa Parks did. That day she refused to give up her seat and move to the back of the bus, she was effectively saying "I am no longer going to conspire in my own oppression. I am not longer to go along with this system that says I am of less worth and dignity. I am not longer going to pretend to be other than who I am."

Isn't this precisely what those of you who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender have done, when you came out to your families and friends and coworkers and churches? You said, "I can no longer pretend to be other than who I am. I am willing to pay the price of telling this truth, because it can't be any greater than the cost I am paying now by hiding who I am." Those of you who have come out, I hope you see how your courage and your loving presence blesses all of us, helps us all to live fuller and more freely too.

This is what Marianne Williamson was talking about when she said, "We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

³ Testimonial by Di Kinsman available online at <http://www.uuhaverhill.org/worship/sermons>

⁴ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*.

This doesn't just happen on individual level. It can happen to families and churches and nations. We can lose our way, can forget who we are. We need help coming to our senses. We need people who tell us the truth and call us to heed, as President Lincoln said, "the better angels of our nature."

Do you need evidence that our country has lost its way? Consider the recurring acts of violence against people of color, the prevalence of mass shootings, our polarized political discourse, a growing distrust of Muslim Americans, the fact that we still have a race problem in this country; that life is just easier if your skin is white.

A week ago I led the memorial service for a man named Carl Byers who used to be a member of the UU Congregation in Andover. He'd been active in that town, and worked tirelessly for affordable housing. And he was black. Rev. Laura Hoke, minister of the Andover congregation, participated in the service and told a story about Carl. He was out cutting his grass one day, when a new neighbor drove by on that suburban street. The neighbor pulled over, and thinking that Carl was the yard man, he asked, "How much do you charge? I'm going to need someone to take care of my yard."

Carl had an important job with the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, was an unassuming mover and shaker in town, and must have been used to this, to people making assumptions about him because of the color of his skin. But he didn't get angry. When asked, "How much do you charge?," he responded, "Oh, I do it for free. But the lady of the house lets me sleep with her."

We as a nation have work to do. We need to come to our senses and let go of our belief that we are so special, so we can get back to doing the hard work of creating more liberty and more justice—for all.

In this church we say our mission is "to be a faith community transforming lives and the world." This is what we are about: holding open a space where you are invited and encouraged to become yourself, without shame or fear. Helping you do this work; walking with you through the shadow and celebrating with you when you come into the light. Trusting that this is how we will transform our world—one life at a time. Trusting that doing our own work of liberation means working to liberate others too.

We have this big and beautiful image of Jesus up front, that our forebears put there because his life and ministry, the good news that he proclaimed, his call to love God and love your neighbor; this was the foundation of their faith. We are more diverse in our theologies now. We say there are many ways toward the Holy. Like Rumi said, "There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."

I have to admit that there were times in my life when I was embarrassed about Jesus, because of some of the things people do in his name. But I'm so glad we have Jesus in front of us every Sunday. This Jesus who is fair-skinned by day and dark-skinned by night. Because he was all about liberation, about helping people to be free. Especially people the society said were of less worth, those pushed to the margins, the ones Jesus called "the least of these."

He told stories like the parable of the prodigal son, because he wanted us to realize that none of us are beyond God's love. That no matter how far we stray, no matter what mistakes and missteps we have made, there is God, like a loving parent, always waiting for us to come to our senses and come back home.

That's the great invitation—to come home to ourselves, to come into the presence of that source of life and love, that only calls us to be who we are. To have the courage to say “I am what I am,” and the willingness to follow where that leads. To let go of what is holding you back, keeping you imprisoned, and get on with this work of liberation and transformation.

Are you with me? Are you ready to be on your way to where you ought to be? Then let's affirm our faith by singing, “I'm on my way, to the freedom land.”

Amen.