



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Are You Ready?,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on March 25, 2012

I wonder how you liked the unusually warm weather we had this past week. Most years, for us the first day of spring just means the snow is starting to recede and winter is loosening its grip. So this week's weather made me think, “I'm not quite ready for this.” But that's kind of silly, because what can you do but adjust and enjoy it?

When autumn comes, you don't see people running around trying to stick the falling leaves back onto the trees.¹ In the spring, when flowers appear, no one tries to make them go back inside the stems and branches. We know, on some level, that change is happening that is beyond our power to control. We may complain about the weather, but mostly we adjust and adapt to the change of seasons. And it's good for us.

For a year or so, Sally and I have been talking about the changes happening here, in this church. We've been growing, and new people are bringing new energy and possibility. Have you noticed? There are new faces and voices in the choir, new children in our church school, new people at coffee hour. I'm excited about this new energy here, and I sense you are too.

In these conversations Sally and I have been having, it's clear to us that this is a moment of opportunity. We sense that now is the time for us to help you to go deeper and further on your faith journey--that that's why you're here. What's missing is a comprehensive offering of adult religious education and spirituality programs. That's why the Board has proposed a significant increase in the DRE position for next year, so that she could help us create these opportunities. We also need to pay more of the costs of our building maintenance, and pay our fair share to our district and our UUA. But that's all I'm going to say today about our church budget. What I want to talk about is you. I want to ask you, are you ready for this? Are you ready to go deeper, and ready for what it will require?

The church I want to be part of is one that knows its mission is transforming lives; helping people to see themselves as holy and whole, assured that we each do have a part to play. Last week Dawn talked about her teacher who said that ministry is like the Hokey Pokey, where you put your whole self in. This week I asked her, “You were talking about the ministry we all do, not just clergy, right?” She said yes, the ministry we all do. I hope this is a place where you want to put your whole self in. Where you feel encouraged to open your heart and receive what you need, and

¹ I saw this idea in a book some years ago, but can't remember whom to attribute it to.

where you want to roll up your sleeves and share your talents, and where you want to share your money--gladly and generously.

How you approach giving, especially when it comes to money, probably has something to do with the family you grew up in. If you grew up in a home where there was never enough, the call to give might make you nervous or afraid. If you grew up being taught that it's a hard world and you have to look out for yourself, then you might resist the idea that this church expects you to give us some what you earn.

My mom is someone who is generous to a fault. You have to be careful when you visit her; if you admire something, you might find yourself going home with it. What I learned from my mom is what a joy it is to give; to have places that you care about and believe in and want to support.

But what if you didn't grow up with that? What if the call to give makes you anxious or defensive or turns you off? I assume that almost everyone here wants to see themselves as generous. Does anyone really want to be stingy? No.

A colleague of mine says that it's a matter of deep spiritual maturity to decide to give away a percentage of your income. He says there are three groups of people in our congregations: those that are ready to make that commitment, giving a percentage of their income to the church; those who can't do that now, but are dedicated to getting there, and those who are not.²

For this church to thrive, to live up to our promise and our potential, we need you to be in those first two groups, who are saying, "Yes, we can," and "We're doing our best." But I don't think you should be in those groups of people who are learning how to give and make a commitment, just because it would be good for the church. No! The reason to do this necessary work, so you can be counted among those who are committed and generous, is for your own spiritual health and happiness. Isn't that why you're here? To know that life does have meaning and purpose, that you do have a part to play?

My question for you today is not, "How much can you give?" The truth is, often the most generous givers are those who give the smaller amounts. They are people who have to sacrifice something in order to make a contribution to the church they love. They are our heroes and exemplars.

No, my question for you is this: are you spiritually ready to make an ongoing commitment to this church that you belong to? Are you ready to commit to giving a percentage of your income? Two or three percent, is a good place to start. If "yes," then I am glad for you, and grateful. If "Not yet, but I'll work to get there," that's great too. I trust that being part of this church will help and support you. And if your answer is "No," then my only question for you is this: is that who you want to be? I care about you; I want you to feel that you are part of this community. And I don't know how you can do that if you are unwilling to make a commitment to it. Of course, if you are

² I'm grateful to the Rev. Tom Schade, minister of First Unitarian Church in Worcester, MA, for these thoughts and his wise understanding of the spirituality of stewardship.

new here, and are still figuring out if this is where you want to be, then take the time to discern that. You can make a pledge if and when you decide this is your church.

The other day I was talking to someone who said to me, "I feel guilty that I'm not able to give more, or do more for the church." I told this person that I never wanted her to feel guilty. I reminded her that there are people who need to be here for a while, to soak in the warmth and love of this community for a while, before they are able to give back. I said she is doing things and giving already. The fact that she wants to do more than she currently can proves that she is already one of those people trying to be generous and committed. The last thing I want is for any of you to feel guilty about what you can't do. But for your own sake, please don't let the fact that you can't do as much as you like keep you from doing what you can.

I trust that almost everyone can give something. Even if you're on a limited income, will you give up something so you can contribute a few dollars a week? Others of you can give substantially more. The truth is, we need everyone who belongs to this community to commit to regular giving. We need this if we are going to become the thriving church we say we want to be. We need this if we are going to be people working on our own spiritual growth, becoming who we aspire to be. Otherwise, why are we here?

I make a financial commitment to this church because I have to do my part; to help further our mission of being a community that encourages spiritual growth, where we put our words into action, so we leave the world better than we found it. I know that without this commitment, my life would be poorer.

Mary Oliver has a poem in which she reflects on her own mortality. She says,

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real...
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.³

Isn't that what you want too? To spend yourself, to make a commitment to something larger than yourself, to something beautiful and real?

When it's over, I want to know that I spent my life on what matters, that I let my little light shine. That's why we're here--to uncover our gifts, our potential--to uncover our light and let it shine. You have a choice, you always do. What are you going to do with this life of yours? Are you ready to let it shine? Let's join in singing "This Little Light of Mine." And in the days ahead, let's live out these words, let's make that commitment, let's uncover our light and let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Amen.

³ Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes."