



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“This Container Called Community,”
a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on September 7, 2014

When I was in divinity school, we had daily chapel services, and I went whenever I could. I needed the grounding that our community worship provided. Just being together in that chapel was a blessing. It was an Episcopal school and so they had some rituals that we don't have here. One, that might be familiar to those of you who grew up Catholic, was that there was this little bowl attached to the wall just inside the entrance. It held water, holy water, that had been consecrated or blessed by someone.

People would walk into the chapel, put their fingers in the water, and touch it to their foreheads, maybe making the sign of the cross. And I started doing this. This little ritual helped me to enter into that sacred space. One day, I walked into the chapel, touched the water, and then my forehead, and headed for a seat. Another student, whose name was Jim, was there preparing the chapel for worship, and when he saw me, his jaw dropped and his eye widened. “But you're a Unitarian!,” he said. “I didn't think you all went in for that kind of stuff.”

“I still need a blessing,” I said. I needed the blessing of that chapel time, and I needed the blessing of that water on the tips of my fingers and on my forehead, and I needed the blessing of that community.

Why do we ask you to bring water to church on the Sunday after Labor Day, at the start of a new church year? It's not really about where you may have gone, if you went anywhere, on summer vacation. No, it's because this ritual represents that cycle of going out and coming back; the fact that each of us bring gifts to this community. Water is, as much as anything, a symbol of the essence of life. Water is what makes life possible. We learned in science class that our bodies are about 60% water.

Bringing water today, and pouring it into our common bowl, is a way of saying, “Here I am, bringing my self--my gifts and my struggles--as an offering. In so many ways our culture tells us that we are isolated and disconnected individuals, each fending for ourselves and fighting over limited resources. Here we tell a different story--that we are connected, deeply and in ways we can't even understand. Pouring our water into a common container symbolizes these connections. That's why we also add water from previous years, because we are connected to those who have gone before us. The molecules of the water they brought, years ago now, are still here with us.

They will be in the water we use to bless babies. I keep this water, after it's been boiled and filtered, in a bottle in my office. This year I'm going to put a smaller bottle of it on my desk. If you need a blessing, you can come in, and take a bit, and put it on your fingers and on your forehead. You don't need me to be around for this--it's self service!--though I'm happy to be part of any blessing.

You know that this water needs to be contained in something. Just like the water in the chapel needed that bowl to hold it. Otherwise it's lost. Today we're collecting your water in this big bowl that was given to me by Rev. Mary Harrington. Some of you remember Mary--she was a UU minister who moved to Haverhill once she was diagnosed with ALS. She and her husband Marty were members here for a year or two, until they moved up to Maine where Mary lived the last year of her life. When they were packing up to move, they gave me this bowl. It's a special kind of bowl, a singing bowl; you could say it's a container for sound.

If you strike it, it makes this lovely sound. It vibrates, it resonates. For me this bowl is not only a reminder of Mary and the spirit she brought to this world; it's a symbol for what we are here. This church community is a container, that holds us, that reminds us we are connected to one another, even when we are apart.

Hopefully not too rigid a container: rather, one that is open to the wider world, and that people can find their way into. But one with shared aspirations, like our intent to be a welcoming, caring faith community, where we transform lives and the world. And with clear boundaries, like our covenant, which reminds us of how we promise to be in relationship together.

This container called community connects us, even when we are apart, and it holds those who are no longer with us, Rev. Janet Bowering and Irma Pasquale and Cindy Armstrong and Ruth Marr, all who have died in this past year. And it holds little Gwen Taylor, born just over a week ago, and little Vera Rand, six months old now, who we will bless next Sunday. It holds all of us, and there is room in it for those who aren't here yet.

When you bring your water up and add it to this bowl, I invite you to feel the power of being in community. Know what what you bring is good and valued and needed. And if you like, rather than saying where your water is from, simply strike the bowl as a way of saying, "Here I am. Part of this community."

"Somewhere," Starhawk says, "a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free."¹

I hope this is such a place for you. I am ever grateful for this church community, this container that holds us and encourages us, challenges us and blesses us, and is always here to welcome us home. Amen.

¹ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*.