



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Give Your Hands to Struggle,”
a sermon given by Rev. Frank Clarkson
on March 15, 2015

“Blow, winds of love, awake and blow the mists of hate away;
Sing out, O Truth Divine, and tell how wide and far we stray.”¹

I don’t know about you, but I need a way to admit the mistakes I have made, to tell the truth about how wide and far I’ve strayed. I expect you need that too, and I hope that this is a place where you can do that. Where you are assured of your own worth, where you remember that you are are beloved on this earth, so that you can tell the truth of how wide and far you stray.

Our theme this month is brokenness. And don’t we need this invitation to pay attention to the brokenness in ourselves and in the world, if we’re going to move toward wholeness? This is not a time to celebrate being broken, or to be a victim, or say “poor poor me.” Not an invitation to stay stuck there. Nor is it to glorify suffering and sacrifice, which too often only causes more pain and suffering. I’ll say about that next week.

For now, let’s look at how we get from from brokenness to wholeness. A couple of weeks ago I talked about this on the personal and interpersonal levels, and shared some wisdom from *New York Times* columnist David Brooks about the power our presence has to help those who are suffering. Today let’s think about this on the institutional level: can we as a community hold brokenness, and in doing so promote healing and wholeness?

Do we have the capacity for this hard work? Are we up for the task of being present to the brokenness that’s in us and around us? Is this a place where people can bring their whole selves, including the parts that are bruised and broken? Are we a church where wounded people can find healing and reconciliation? Do we know how to do this, and are we willing?

What I know is that there has to be health in an institution if it’s going to be of any use to those in need. Leaders must be aware of their own power and their limitations. People must feel they are expected to participate in healthy and helpful ways. There must be systems of accountability that are understood and respected. That’s why we have a congregational covenant—because we are human, and we make mistakes, and when we cross boundaries we need people and practices that will help us to get back into right relationship. And there must be a willingness to do this—to engage discomfort and conflict directly, especially when the boundaries of community get tested.

¹ Words by John Greenleaf Whittier, from the hymn “Immortal Love,” #10 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

When a family or congregation can do this, it becomes a place where people can thrive and grow, can tell the truth about their brokenness and move toward healing and wholeness. When this happens, it sets loose all kinds of energy and creativity—it reminds us that we are made to be awake and alive, we are here to thrive, to be happy and whole, in spite of all the pain and trouble.

Too many churches seem to want people to leave their troubles at the door. I saw a comment on line this week; this person wrote, “I wish I could find a church to go where I didn't have to pretend to be someone better than I am.”

Something I love about you all is how unpretentious you are, how engaged you are in things that matter. I'd say we are maturing as a congregation; getting stronger, growing in spiritual depth and becoming more connected and more caring, more of a force for good in the world. Is there still plenty of work for us to do? Of course. And isn't that good?

I chose today's reading by Annie Dillard because I appreciate her reminder to let go of our fantasy of perfection and get to work with what we have, which is our selves and this moment. Hear her words again:

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place?

There is no one but us.

There is no one to send, nor a clean hand,
nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth,
but only us.

But there is no one but us. There never has been.²

We live in a culture that loves to lift up experts and gurus who have the proven method or product that will cure us, that will save us. Usually it's something you have to buy. Wouldn't it be nice if it was that simple?

The church is meant to be a place that offers a different way. Not a quick fix, but companions for the journey and strength for the struggle. Hopefully some encouragement and inspiration too.

Brené Brown is a researcher and storyteller whose work is focused on vulnerability, courage, worthiness and shame. She talks honestly about what she learned from her own experiences of

² Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*. The entire text of the reading:

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead--as if innocence had ever been--and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been. There have been generations which remembered and generations which forgot; there has never been a generation of whole men and women who lived well for even one day. Yet some have imagined well, with honesty and art, the detail of such a life, and have described it with such grace, that we mistake vision for history, dream for description, and fancy that life has devolved. So. You learn this studying any history at all, especially the lives of artists and visionaries; you learn it from Emerson, who noticed that the meanness of our days is itself worth our thought; and you learn it, fitful in your pew, in church.

trauma and how she passed courageously through them. Listen to what she says about finding her way back to church:

“My return to faith was around having a breakdown. I went back to church because it was hard and it hurt. And in all the midlife unraveling books they say, ‘Go back to church.’ So I went back to church, thinking it would be like an epidural; it would take the pain away. I would just replace research with church, and church would make the pain go away. But faith and church was not like an epidural for me at all; it was like a midwife, who just stood next to me saying. ‘Push, it’s supposed to hurt a little bit.’³

Back in the days of the Civil Rights Movement, one of the things that keep the movement going was communal singing. Bernice Johnson Reagon, the founder of the group “Sweet Honey in the Rock,” was a young woman then, and she wrote this song:

If you see me stumble, don’t stand back and look on
Reach out now, baby, give your hands to struggle.
If you feel my heartbreak, don’t just count the sound waves
Hold me close now baby, give your arms to struggle.
If you see me crying, tears running down my face
Don’t just pat my shoulder, help me go on right on
Give your strength to struggle.
If you hear me singing this love song, don’t just stand back and listen
Help me sing it right now, give your voice to struggle.
Then we’ll be moving, we’ll really be moving
Building up our union
If you give your all to the struggle.⁴

Life is not meant to be a spectator sport. The invitation is to lift your voice, to be part of the song. It’s better, it’s always better, when more people join in, and sing with all they’ve got.

This is the time when we are planning for the coming year, and we ask you to make your pledge of financial support to the church. There are some good things we want to do in the coming months. We hope to hire a new music director, and we’d like to have some paid teachers in our Sunday School classes, so the volunteers, most of them parents, can come to church. We want to offer a modest cost of living increase to our staff, and support the many good things that are happening here.

It’s not easy to care for an old building, and pay fair salaries, and keep a church going on the gifts of goodhearted people. But that’s how it works here. There is no one else—no mother church that sends us money—we actually send money to support our district and Association, as we should, for how they help us and because of the connections we share. We are fortunate that, thanks to the generosity of previous generations, we have some investments that provide about \$65,000 of income per year. We have some rental income, we do fundraisers, but most of the

³ These words from a video with Brené Brown, “Jesus Wept,” on the website “The Work of the People,” <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/jesus-wept>

⁴ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Give Your Hands to Struggle.”

money it takes to keep this church going, every year it comes from you. It comes from us. We are the ones who will decide if this congregation will thrive, or hang on, or God forbid, waste away.

Though we are growing here, we are still a relatively small congregation. We have this big and beautiful building; we have a small and dedicated staff. We do a lot here with a relatively small budget, and we need you to give as you are able. And so I ask you to join me, and make your pledge to our church. I hope you know it matters what you give, because our gifts are what makes it possible for this church to be here, to keep our doors open, to thrive.

At coffee hour today members of our stewardship team and finance committee can answer your questions. If you would like to have a conversation about this, speak with them, or speak with me. We hope you're prepared to turn in your pledge card today. And if you didn't bring one, don't worry, we have plenty.

Some of you don't like to hear talk about money in church. You've told me so. It makes you uncomfortable, this talk of money. You'd rather move on from this subject as quickly as possible, and hear about more uplifting, more spiritual things. One way to accomplish that is to make a generous pledge today! You won't find us talking about money every Sunday here. But what we spend our money on, the choices we make, certainly reflect our values and our spirituality, and this is a subject worthy of our attention.

If talk of money makes you uncomfortable, I encourage you to sit with that. For some, the subject brings a certain amount of dread or shame; but it doesn't have to be that way. I hope this is a place where you can engage with these issues, because that's the way to healing and wholeness.

We've done a lot of good work here over the past few years. We are a stronger, more vibrant, more welcoming and caring faith community. I sense that we are ready to take the next steps. And one is becoming a church that is spiritually deep and mature, where we can hold what is difficult and painful, where we see ourselves as companions in the struggle, where we know there is joy and liberation in passing courageously through the trials of this life.

When she came back to church, Brené Brown said "I thought faith would say, 'I'll take away the pain and discomfort.' But what it ended up saying was, 'I'll sit with you in it.'"

This is who we are called to be: people of faith and hope and courage, open to the blessings of this moment and this day. Giving our hands to struggle, grateful and glad for the opportunity, and for the amazing grace we find, right here in our midst.

Amen.