



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Precious to the Earth,”
a homily given by Rev. Frank Clarkson
on July 23, 2013

In a few minutes we'll take part in the tradition of flower communion, which was started 90 years ago this month by Norbert Capek, minister of the Unitarian Church in Krakow,. He developed this service because he wanted to offer people of diverse backgrounds and theologies a way to celebrate the blessings of the earth and our common humanity.

The symbolism of flower communion is that no two flowers are exactly alike, just as no two people are alike--each is beautiful and valuable in its own right. Together the flowers we have brought form beautiful bouquets. These bouquets we've created are composed of many individual flowers. And isn't it the same with our church community? It would not be the same without each and every one of you. The flower communion is a sacrament then, it stands not just for our love and appreciation of this beautiful world we are a part of, but these flowers are an outward and visible sign of the beauty and value of this community of diverse individuals.

There's a poem by Mary Oliver that's been on my mind this week. In it she's thinking about the fact her life will end one day, as will each of ours, of course. Knowing this, knowing she wants to be openhearted and full of wonder at the end, Mary Oliver gives us these words:

therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.¹

Now that's a confession of faith I can get my arms around, and give my heart to!

¹ Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes."

I hope being part of this congregation reminds you and assures you, the way this poem does, that you are precious to the earth. But I don't imagine most of us go around seeing ourselves that way. Maybe I'm wrong, but I sense that more often we see ourselves as disconnected from this good earth--either as consumers of its resources, or despoilers of its beauty, or observers of its wonder and majesty. But as separate from--how often do we see ourselves as part of this blue green earth, and even, precious to it?

Do you know the word Gaia? It's the word for the Greek Earth Goddess, and it's also a word that some planetary biologists adopted, to reflect their idea that our whole earth is a living system, a unified organism.² This word, and the idea of Gaia, offer an new way to imagine our earth--as a feminine being, a divinity that is immanent--here with us--not out there somewhere. A deity and a spirituality that would encourage a deeper relationship of humans with the earth would be a good thing. Rather than humans thinking of themselves as having dominion over the earth. We get this name "human" because we are made from humus, remember?

How might our relationship with the earth change if we understood ourselves not as troubled guests³ here, but as connected to, part of, this earth? What if we thought that our mother earth actually loved us, and cared for us, that we are precious to her?

"Consider the lilies," Jesus said, "how they grow. They neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these" (Matthew 6:28b-29).

"Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matthew 6:26). I don't know if we are of more value than them, but aren't we at least equally valuable, beloved and precious to the earth?

I invite you to imagine our planet earth now, as if you were seeing her for the first time. Maybe you're imagining a green meadow or dense stand of tall trees, or a blue lake or purple mountain range, or maybe you're picturing that photograph of the whole earth, looking like a blue and green marble in a universe dotted by tiny stars. It's powerful, and mystical, isn't it, to contemplate our earth, which we traverse every day, so often unaware of what a miracle it is, that the earth is here, and we are here! That our earth is just the right distance from our sun, and tilted at just the right angle, so we have seasons and cycles that nourish and sustain life, including our own. That we have this gift called summer, and this gift called morning, which will be followed by those gifts called afternoon and evening and night.

Will you now imagine with me a different kind of ecosystem--this congregation, which has been gathering here, in this place, for 119 years. Imagine our Universalist forebears, who started here in Haverhill 188 years ago, and our Unitarian ancestors who go back to the founding of Haverhill itself, in 1645. Imagine those who are part of our community, but not able to be here today--like Ruth Marr, who turned 96 on Friday, and who came over from the First Baptist church to join here

² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 4.

³ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in "The Holy Longing": "And so long as you haven't experienced this: /To die, and so to grow,/ You are only a troubled guest/ On the dark earth."

when she was a teenager, meaning she's been a member here for almost 80 years. Imagine those newest to our community--toddlers who crawl on our rose-colored carpet and babies snuggled against their parent's chests. Try to imagine those who are going to be part of this congregation, but who aren't here yet--those dear ones we have yet to meet, and those who will follow in our footsteps, when we are gone.

Isn't this community also a kind of miracle? This place only has substance and meaning and value because of the living, breathing, good-hearted, salt of the earth people who are here, and have been here and who will be here in the time to come. I am on-my-knees grateful for you, for this community of memory and hope. Where we affirm the worth of each and every soul. Where our affirmation of faith could be

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as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth, and to us all.

Amen.