



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Wait Right Here,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on December 12, 2010

When I was a kid, I really didn't like that Advent hymn we just sang, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” I thought it was kind of dreary. I love it now, but back then, I was ready for Christmas and wanted to sing those happy carols! I didn't want to wait, and didn't like to wait. To tell the truth, I still don't. I can get antsy when I'm forced to wait. I know what I want and I want it now!

But you know life doesn't work that way. And I've learned that what I think I want is not always what I really want, or what I need, or what's good for me. The Rolling Stones had a song about this. You can't always get what you want--and thank God for that.

“I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.”¹

Over time I've come to see that waiting can be a blessing in itself. My favorite season of the church year is this season of Advent, which is set up as a time for waiting, for watching, for pondering. I'm so happy that we are having those midweek Vespers services right now, and am loving the quiet, dark space this sanctuary provides us.

The first sermon I ever preached, long before I had any idea of going off to seminary, was at the invitation of my minister, who had heard me talk about my passion for fly fishing. She said, “It sounds like there's a sermon in there.” Thinking she was going to preach it, I gave her a copy of the book *A River Runs Through It*, by Norman Maclean. But she wanted me to preach, and it was a good experience. I believe that each of us has at least one sermon inside us, at least one story to share that would be powerful and inspiring for others, and I want help you to uncover and lift up those stories and experiences. This winter I'm going to offer a class called “The Sermon That's in You.” It will provide a way to get in touch with the story that is yours, and develop it into a sermon, and then prepare to preach it--so you can give that sermon here some Sunday morning.

In that first sermon I ever preached, I described my love for the act of fishing, which is not the same as catching. I described the holy moment when a fish has taken the fly, and I've hooked it, when after long hours of casting I'm connected to something alive, and I want to slow it all down,

¹ T.S. Eliot, “East Coker,” No. 2 of “Four Quartets.”

because it never lasts. If I land the fish I must handle it quickly, I must get the hook out cleanly and then admire the fish only briefly, and try to remember its pink belly and multicolored glistening back. I cradle it in the water, rock it back and forth so the water flows through its gills, until its fins begin to wave, its strength returns, and I watch it swim away. In that sermon I said, "You would think that these are the moments that keep me fishing. They are precious. But for me, the expectation can even be better than the fact. Hours of not-catching can be beautiful. In fishing, I live in Advent."

There are moments when waiting can be blissful. But that's not what most waiting is like. Waiting can be hard. Waiting to hear the results of a medical test, or if you got that job you really need, or if your kid is getting into that college, and if so, how much financial aid they are going to offer. Think about the places people wait--in hospitals, airports, train and bus stations, car dealers. Have you noticed how common televisions are in those places? They're there to offer a distraction, any distraction, from the emptiness of waiting. But I wonder how much more peaceful folks would be if they didn't have that cable news or talk show blaring in the background.

Henri Nouwen, the great contemporary mystic, once observed that waiting, especially in this country, is not a popular pastime. He said that most people think of it as a waste of time, an "awful desert between where they are and where they want to be." But this, he says, is a misunderstanding of waiting, or at least of the kind of waiting that is part of the spiritual life. Waiting, Nouwen says, is not "a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more."

He says, "waiting is active. Most of us think of waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands." That is one way to look at it. But the kind of waiting that can be transformative, the kind of waiting that Advent calls us to, is active waiting. Nouwen says this kind of waiting is "like a seed that has started to grow...Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it."²

Frederich Buechner once wrote that if he had to put into a few words everything he was trying to say "both as a novelist and preacher, it would be something like this: 'Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness of it; touch, taste, smell your way the the holy and hidden part of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.'"³

Waiting forces us to be right here, right where we are. Of course you can distract yourself from the waiting--you can watch TV, or sleep, or catch up on e-mail. Or you can sit by that bedside in the hospital, and look into that person's eyes, or hold their hand. You can sit in that airport or at the DMV or in a traffic jam and be present to that moment, rather than wishing it away.

² Henri Nouwen, "Waiting for God," available at <http://stbrendansdc.blogspot.com/2007/12/waiting-for-god-by-henri-nouwen.html>

³ Frederich Buechner, *Now and Then*.

When I was preparing for ministry, I had to take one of those psychological tests to make sure I was emotionally sound enough to do this work. There were some questions on it that you know you don't want to answer yes to, like "I hear voices." But I do hear voices. Not literally, but there are a bunch of voices inside my head, some of which have been there since childhood. Those of you who have participated in The Artist's Way program here know something about this. One of those dominant voices in many of us is the critic, who says, "Who are you to think of yourself as creative? You call that art?" The voices I hear say things like, "Move faster--you're not getting enough done," implying that my value is only in what I do. When I sit or kneel in my prayer place, I often hear, "Don't you have something more important to do?" But if I hang in there, and listen to those voices for a moment, then they start to fall away, and make room for quieter, shyer voices, that were there all along, waiting patiently behind the louder ones.

These voices say, "Be still now. Wait with us here for a while. Know that you are enough, you don't need to do anything. Pay attention to this moment. Be present to what is going on right here. Don't rush off, don't run away. Wait right here. Because this moment is the key moment, and life itself is grace."

One of the best parts of The Artist's Way is a practice called Morning Pages. The idea is that you get up every morning and first thing you write out three pages in a journal or notebook, without thinking. You just let it flow. Even if you write, over and over, "I have nothing to write." I've written these pages, some times, for months on end. And when I did it became a spiritual practice for me. It helped me to lead a happier and more grounded life. It was a simple way to get those anxious voices out of my head, where they can cause all kinds of trouble, and onto a page, where they lost their power. Many mornings I found I would write myself toward health and happiness, to the point that by the time I stopped writing, my usual response was gratitude, and I'd end my writing with a prayer.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a philosopher and a religious man, a paleontologist and geologist and a mystic. Perhaps it was his study of those things in which time is measured not in years, but in eons, that informed his prayer, one of our readings this morning:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way
to something unknown,
something new.
Yet it is the law of all progress that is made
by passing through some stages of instability
and that may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you.
Your ideas mature gradually. Let them grow.
Let them shape themselves without undue haste.

Do not try to force them on
as though you could be today what time
-- that is to say, grace --
and circumstances
acting on your own good will
will make you tomorrow.
Only God could say what this new Spirit
gradually forming in you will be.

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.⁴

That's the invitation of these days, when our side of the earth is still tilting away from the sun, when the days are short and the nights are long, when there ought to be time to slow down. In these days, when so many voices call to us, saying "Hurry up and do something!" When those inner voices are saying, "You aren't good enough," or "You don't have enough." There is another voice that calls to us, a quieter voice, that simply says, "Be here now. Wait and watch. Be present to your life, to its joy and its sadness. Wait right here. Do not worry, and do not be afraid. I am with you. I am with you."

Amen.

⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Trust in the Slow Work of God."