



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Hour I First Believed,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on September 28, 2014

John Newton, who wrote the words to the beloved hymn¹ we just sang, was not a faithful person. At least not as a young man. He was not even a nice person. Conscripted into England's Royal Navy, he embraced the rough life that sailors are famous for. You know what they say, about swearing like a sailor? Early on, Newton became known as one of the most profane of his lot, and was disciplined for his creative and offensive oaths. Then one day at sea, something happened. A terrible storm came up, and washed overboard a sailor who was standing where Newton had been, moments before. The ship was taking on water, in danger of sinking. So Newton and another crewman tied themselves to the pump, so they wouldn't be washed overboard as they tried to save the ship. In that moment, Newton uttered a different oath: if they weren't successful, he said, “then Lord have mercy on us!”

Over the next two weeks, as the battered ship limped back toward Britain, Newton reflected on those words he had said. He wondered if he, who had scoffed at people of faith, was even worthy of God's mercy. He came to believe that God had sent him a message through that storm. And though he became the captain of a slave ship, eventually he renounced that work, was ordained a minister, became an abolitionist, and wrote the famous hymn that describes his change of heart.

Newton's conversion, that began in a storm on the high seas, has a “made for Hollywood” quality about it. Like the conversion of the apostle Paul, on the road to Damascus, it's the classic thunderbolt version.

My own coming to faith has been a longer, less dramatic process. More like water dripping on stone, gradually wearing it down, than any kind of thunderbolt. My formation as a person of faith includes the years I spent as a child in church, absorbing the stories and hymns that remain in my heart. Then came a time of questioning, and wandering away from faith, as has to happen if you are ever going to move from a child-like understanding to a more mature faith.

And then, a long coming back, a blessed journey which has included companions and guides like the mystics Teresa of Avila and Rainer Maria Rilke, contemporary writers like Marcus Borg and Kathleen Norris, poets like Mary Oliver and David Whyte. And mostly, ordinary people who inspired and strengthened my budding faith by the ways they lived their lives: classmates and teachers in seminary were key to my faith development, and the people in the congregations I

¹ *Amazing Grace!*, #205 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

have served, though their faith and their doubt, through their questioning and longing and searching, have led me to a deeper and more resonant faith than I could have ever found on my own. I'm talking about you here.

We didn't lead off this month on faith with talk about belief. Because that word too often stops conversations rather than starting them. Belief, Kathleen Norris says, is too often understood as what we think, what we can rationally and intellectually affirm. But the root of the word means, "what we give our heart to."

In this tradition, we don't all believe the same thing. Some of us believe there is a higher power, so of us don't. Some of us think that, when you die, that's it, some of us hope there's something more. We embrace our theological diversity; we think it makes us a yeasty and more interesting place. I think it situates us perfectly for the times we're living in, when our culture is becoming more welcoming of diversity, and families are becoming ever more blended and people more hyphenated. You never use to hear someone say, "I'm part Christian and part Buddhist." Now this kind of blending is common.

All our diversity can make leading worship a challenge. There's a joke about us, that we could begin our prayers by saying, "To whom it may concern." Some of my colleagues tend to keep their own theology to themselves, thinking that they are more accessible and acceptable to a wider range of people if they aren't too specific about what they actually believe.

But that has never worked for me. It sounds like trying to being a mile wide, which means you end up only an an inch deep. My hope is that, if I live my spirituality as deeply as I can, then I will have something to offer you, and that doing this will encourage and invite you to articulate the theology that resonates with you, to find the faith that is yours; that will companion you in joy and during the inevitable dark nights.

What is it that you give your heart to? Have you ever tried to articulate that? Have you spent enough time and effort trying to figure that out? I hope some of you will come and share your own experiences at the "Reflecting on Faith" gathering, in my office at 11:45 today.

You don't have to do this in an overtly religious way. You don't have to fit it into that churchy frame, unless you want to. Do you remember the movie "Bull Durham," about an aging minor league baseball player named Crash, played by Kevin Costner? There's a scene in the movie where Crash is talking with Annie, played by Susan Sarandon, and she asks him, "What do you believe in?"

Here's his response, edited a bit for church: "Well, I believe in the soul.... The hanging curveball. High fiber. Good scotch. That the novels of Susan Sontag are self-indulgent, overrated crap. I believe Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. I believe there ought to be a Constitution Amendment outlawing Astroturf and the designated hitter. I believe in... opening your presents Christmas morning rather than Christmas eve."

Would this kind of credo get more people to church, if they knew they didn't have to say words that never made sense to them? Here's another one, part of our reading this morning from Mary Oliver:

"The wild waste spaces of the sea, and the pale dunes with one hawk hanging in the wind, they are for me the formal spaces that, in a liturgy, are taken up by prayer, song, sermon, silence, homily, scripture, the architecture of the church itself."²

What I love about this tradition is how it offers us this space, this freedom, to go where the Spirit leads us. As a new Unitarian Universalist in the African country of Burundi put it, "This is the faith where I can be free in my mind, so I can be free in my heart."

With this freedom, how do you articulate what moves you, what inspires you, what saves you? What do you believe in; that is, what is it you give your heart to, without reservation? Are you able to articulate that yet? Are you ready to share that? In a gathering like the one we're having today, or as a testimonial in church? If not, don't worry--this is a good place to figure it out. Let me know if I can help.

Something that's central to our tradition is this openness to multiple truths and diverse sources. In this sanctuary we have this beautiful image of Jesus, that reminds us of our Christian roots, and encourages us to hold on to the best of that tradition: the call love our neighbors, and especially look out for those who are different, and those in need; to trust, as our Universalist faith proclaims, in the God whose love is so vast that, in the end, no one will be beyond it, we say nobody gets left behind; to have courage that allows us to stand up to the powers in this world that would destroy and demean that which is holy and good; to live our lives as Jesus did, with more faith and less fear.

Some of you are regulars at our Buddhist meditation on Monday nights, or part of the MoonPool coven, the Pagan group that meets on Sunday nights. And many of you would simply say, "I'm a Unitarian Universalist," or, perhaps, "I'm a person of faith." However you might name your path, I'm glad you're on it, and glad it's brought you here.

I think I've told you that I never really wanted to be a minister. I wasn't looking for that call when it came, out of the blue, in midlife. At first I resisted it: why would I want to do that, spend my life in a church, of all places? But an authentic call is nothing if not persistent. It kept nagging at me, until one night, when I heard it so clearly that my doubts and fears were swept away, and all I could say was, "Yes."

I didn't know where that road was leading, but I started walking it. Well, actually, driving it, down I-95 to Cambridge and divinity school. One day, I was heading home after class. I remember it was in Medford, at the on-ramp to I-93 North, when something happened. I felt this surge of--what was it?--joy, relief, connectedness, faith, all mixed up into one.

² From the essay "Winter Hours," by Mary Oliver.

In that moment, something shifted--my worry about where I was going, my apprehension about organized religion and all its scary words, the fact that I was at an Episcopal seminary, of all places, these all faded in importance, and in their place was this awareness that I--that we--are part of so much more than we can see or behold. That there is this other world, which is right here, all around us! As Mary Oliver says, "the perceived, tactile world is, upon the instant, only half the world!"

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.³

Did that moment resolve everything once and for all? No. Do I still have times of doubt and fear? Of course. But I also know how, as Mary Oliver's friend the monk says, to put myself "in a state of grace." And I hope you do too. I've learned how to drop down into God. To be open to that grace that does appear, sometimes as surprise, always as blessing.

I believe in things seen and unseen; that there is more going on than we can observe or describe. I believe that love and commitment can last a lifetime. I believe in the healing power of this good earth, and of rivers; that there are trout there, under the surface, and sometimes, one will rise. Even with all its faults, I believe in the church. I believe in the human spirit, and trust that its resilience is what will save our world. I believe we are all part of a great Love, that will never let us go. That God loves us and so we ought to act like it.

Here's my prayer: that we will be filled with the power of the Spirit, both human and holy, so that we will boldly and beautifully live these lives we have been given.

Amen.

³ *Amazing Grace*, words by John Newton.