



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Thin Places,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 27, 2012

Years ago, I attended a memorial service at the church where I was a member. The music that day was by a local Celtic band. The woman who had died had loved that band and their music, and, that day, so did I. It filled my heart and moved me, deep down in my bones. In part this was because it was a service for one who died too young. But it was also the music itself--traditional Celtic tunes played with heart and soul. This was the first time that I experienced what some call cellular memory--the idea that we have in our bodies, somehow, the memory of our forebears and where we come from. Hearing those tunes, I imagined my own ancestors making music like that, ages ago, sitting around peat fires in Scotland and Ireland.

A year and a half from now, I'll probably be going away for a few months. I'm eligible to take a sabbatical after five years of service here. So I've started thinking about this; what I might do, where I might go. A couple of months ago, one day I was procrastinating, and I went to the website for the Iona Community, an ancient abbey on an island off the coast of Scotland. Just looking at pictures of that place brought tears to my eyes. I feel a longing, for reasons I can't explain, to go there and soak in the spirit of that place.

Have you ever had a moment when you were suddenly aware of how precious and amazing it is to be here on this earth? When all of a sudden you saw with fresh eyes, and things seemed sparkling and new? Celtic spirituality, which came out of Scotland and Ireland, and combined Christianity with earlier earth-centered tradition, calls these times of spiritual wonder “thin places.” The Celts believed there were places and times where the physical world and the spirit world come particularly close, where the boundary between them is thin. Iona is one such place--it's been said that there, only a tissue paper separates the material from the spiritual.

But you don't have to go to the ends of the earth to have an experience of spiritual wonder. There are thin places in this world, but there are also thin places in our lives--moments when we are struck with a surprising and powerful experience of peace, well-being and oneness with all. These thin places can feed us and sustain us, can remind us that there is so much more to life than what first meets the eye. I remember moments when it was like something took hold of me, shook me gently to get my attention, and said, “Pay attention to this! See this place, this moment for the miracle that it is! Feel how you are connected to all of life, how you are whole, how you are companioned by so great a cloud of witnesses.”

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, the holiday when we remember those who have died serving in our armed forces. It's a time when people go to cemeteries and put flowers on the graves, a time for parades and more recently, cookouts. Today is Pentecost, the holy day in the Christian calendar that marks the end of the fifty days of Easter season. Pentecost began as a Jewish harvest festival, and the book of Acts describes the holy spirit coming down from heaven on Pentecost, and the disciples and others being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Memorial Day and Pentecost don't, at first glance, seem to have that much in common. But when you look beneath the surface, aren't they both about being attentive and attuned to what we might be inclined to push away? Memorial Day invites us to remember those who have died serving our country, and honor them. I know that tomorrow some of you will make a point of remembering those you have loved and lost, whether they served in the military or not. Perhaps you will go out to their grave and plant flowers or leave a bouquet.

Pentecost invites us to be open to the Holy Spirit, however you imagine that. For me, that spirit is a force, a presence, that I catch glimpses of from time to time. I've learned to trust in its presence even when I'm unable to sense it in my midst. The spirit doesn't stop existing just because I am unable to apprehend it! That's why they call it faith--trusting and hoping in things not seen. Of course, some days this is easier than others. But practicing your faith, this hope and trust, does help you be more open to those thin places, the same way that physical exercise helps your muscles to be stronger and more flexible.

A few minutes ago we sang "Come Down, O Love Divine." I love that hymn. But I'm not crazy about how the first line implies that heaven is up and earth is down. In our reading this morning, John O'Donohue says, "We have falsely spatialized the eternal world. We have driven the eternal out into some kind of distant galaxy." I think he would say the same thing about the Holy Spirit. Traditionally it was understood that heaven was up above. There was actually a hierarchy of layers of heaven. But Celtic spirituality understands (paraphrasing O'Donohue) that the spirit is close, is here with us, in the air we are moving through all the time. Where else could it be?

So we are as likely to sense the spirit under our feet, in earthy things, or in those at our side, as we are from above. I love the ending of "Come Down, O Love Divine": "for none can guess its grace, till we become the place, wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling." Wherever the Spirit comes from, it is meant to reside in us, because we are the ones who can embody it. We are its hands and feet, one mystic said.¹

I read somewhere that on Memorial Day people used to visit cemeteries and decorate the graves, and then spread out blankets and have picnics on the ground. I love that image, of people enjoying themselves on a spring day, surrounded by the graves of family and friends. It seems to belong to an earlier age. I wonder about those picnics--did they tell the youngsters stories of those they never got to meet? Did they sense the presence of the dead there, in their midst? Did the distance between the living and the dead seem closer?

¹ Teresa of Avila: "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks compassion on this world."

Does it sound strange to you that people would have a picnic in a graveyard? It does to me. I would think it odd if I saw people eating and relaxing, and children playing there. That's what beaches and playgrounds are for! But we are less comfortable with death than our great-grandparents were. We act as if, by denying death, we can avoid it. We have pushed death away.

Rainer Maria Rilke, in words I've share with you before, said that our pushing away of what is strange, unfamiliar, scary, has done harm to life and made us less able to apprehend these holy mysteries. "The experiences that are called 'visions,' the whole so-called 'spirit-world,' death, all those things that are so closely akin to us, have by daily parrying been so crowded out of life that the senses with which we could have grasped them are atrophied. To say nothing of God."

Nowadays, I don't think many of us would think to have a picnic in a cemetery, would we? But why not? Why not put ourselves in places, both physical places and in states of mind and heart, where we are open to what is mysterious, awesome, unexplainable, powerful, moving?

Isn't that why you come to church? To be in a place where you might sense the presence of the spirit? Church architecture is designed to create a thin place, and to remind people of other thin places they have known. Stained glass windows create a feeling of perpetual twilight, of liminal space. Have you even been on a city street on a hot sunny day, and then stepped into a church? You sense immediately that you have crossed into a different land. The soaring heights, the dim lighting, the flickering candles, they quietly proclaim, "This is a thin place--where you can let down your guard and be open to mystery and wonder."

Too often we go through our lives as if we're sleepwalking. I trust that invitations to spiritual wonder are all around us, just outside our everyday vision, just waiting for us to slow down and look around. We need thin places and thin experiences, to remind us to be awake to this moment, this day, this life. We need thin places because they feed us and restore us and remind us to keep in touch with what makes us whole.

But you can't conjure up a thin place just because you want it. Rather, they seem to sneak up on you. In a NY Times travel article,² Eric Weiner wrote, "You don't plan a trip to a thin place; you stumble upon one." But he says, "there are steps you can take to increase the odds of an encounter with thinness. For starters, have no expectations. Nothing gets in the way of a genuine experience more than expectations, which explains why so many 'spiritual journeys' disappoint." This is a lesson that fishing keeps trying to teach me: expect nothing. Just be open to what comes.

If in our lives we find ourselves lost or dismayed, anxious or distracted, maybe it's because we have lost the connection to the holy that we once had, before we were so self-conscious, so rational, so skeptical. If you are longing for that connection, if you are thirsty for some of that living water, take heart. There are thin places, in the world and in our lives. You can find them. Remember this old wisdom: "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door shall be opened" (Matthew 7:7).

² Available online at <http://travel.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html?pagewanted=all>

Black Elk, the famous Lakota holy man, said peace will come when people realize their oneness with the universe and all its powers. He said this will happen when we realize that “at the center of the universe dwells the Great Spirit, and that its center is really everywhere, it is within each of us.”

You don’t have to go anywhere to be in touch with the Great Spirit, it is here already. You just have to be open to it; willing to seek, and to wait. “Be still and know” (Psalm 46:10), the psalmist wrote.

“Be still, and know that I am near,” the Spirit says. “And with you, always.”

Amen.