



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“To Repair the World,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on November 20, 2011

Before I begin the sermon, I want to take a minute to say something about worship, and the changes we’ve made this fall. The worship committee has been functioning well for about a year now, attending district workshops, and reading about ways to make worship better. The changes we made came from what we heard from some of you, and from thoughtful deliberation.

Some of you like the changes, and some of you do not, and that will probably always be the case in a community. I know we could have done a better job communicating with you about these changes. We’re learning, and will do better. Thanks for your patience and your support.

What I want you to hear is that we value your perspective and carefully consider what you have to say. There’s nothing carved in stone around here! I hope we are a congregation that is willing to experiment, and try new things, and have fun and grow in the process.

Thanks to those of you who have already shared your thoughts about the changes. If you like them, let us know, And if you don’t, please, let us know—please speak directly to a member of the worship committee: Bob Johnson, Pam Pearson or Nancy Rusk, or to me. And if you feel passionate about worship, please consider joining the committee—we could always use more good people.

Almost three years ago, on the day you installed me as your settled minister, Aidan and Connor Wertz gave me a gift. It’s this green bracelet with three words on it: “Change the World,” it says. It doesn’t say, “Change the Worship.”

I’ve been wearing for the past three years, and I have to say that sometimes I find it daunting to look down at it and read its charge: “Change the world.” I think, “What am I supposed to do? What can I do?” I read it as a challenge to do something big; don’t just change your attitude or your relationships or your community--change the world!

A month or two ago I was at my doctor’s for a checkup. I love going to see him. He knows I’m a minister, and he likes to talk religion. He’s an observant Jew, and as he told me, “a card carrying atheist.” He’s bright and energetic and passionate guy, so we have these great conversations while he’s listening to my heart or warning me about my cholesterol.

Last time he noticed the bracelet Aidan and Connor gave me. “Change the world,” he said. And I responded, “Yeah, just a small project.” He said that in the Jewish tradition there’s an expression that’s like this, it’s “Repair the world.” That reminded me that I knew the Hebrew words for that: tikkun olam. There’s a progressive Jewish magazine called Tikkun, that’s about putting faith into action.

I like his translation, “Repair the world.” It sounds more like a group project; a reminder that it’s not all up to me. To repair the world is a long-term project too, it takes a lot of hands, and the work will never be done. There will always be more to do. Repair the world--I imagine us dressed in coveralls and carrying tool boxes, repair people going out in our vans to fix up this old world.

In the Jewish tradition, people understand this is part of what it means to practice the religion. I would like to think that it is part of what it means to be human--that we should know, inherently, that we are here not just for ourselves, but to look after one another, to leave this world better than we found it. Not everyone sees it this way. But how would our world be different if everyone did?

Marion Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund, says “Service is the rent we pay to be living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time.”

So I ask you, what are you doing to help repair the world? What are you doing to make the world more beautiful?<sup>1</sup>

It’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking you have to do something big and visible. I am so grateful for those of you who do things around here quietly, steadily, without fanfare--who show up with a rake or a snow shovel in hand, who write notes to those who are ill or grieving, who make food for coffee hour or community meals, who communicate directly and honestly, speaking your truth in love. Do you see that you are helping to repair the world? It was Mother Teresa who said, “We can do no great things, only small things with great love.”

Thanksgiving is just a few days away. It’s supposed to be a happy time when families gather around a table loaded with food, like that Norman Rockwell painting. That’s the image, anyway. But you know it’s more complicated than that. There are people who have no where to go for Thanksgiving. There are those who are estranged from their families, or who have decided that it is better to stay away from a one that doesn’t accept or support them. There are those who don’t have enough food or money to give thanks for.

Even among those of us who do, Thanksgiving can be complicated. We remember those who aren’t with us, and our hearts ache for that loss. On the other hand, there may be those with us whom we’d just as soon were somewhere else--family members who annoy us or make us uncomfortable.

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<sup>1</sup> This line comes from the children’s book, *Miss Rumphius*, by Barbara Cooney, which was the basis for the Time for All Ages today.

Even Thanksgiving can offer a chance to repair the world. Is there a relationship you might work to mend, or someone you need to forgive? Is there someone who needs your help?

Perhaps you are inspired to make a more public witness. I've been moved by the many ways the Occupy protesters are calling attention to the inequities and injustices in our system that privilege the very wealthy and corporations over common folk. I love the creative ways they have gotten their message out, like projecting words onto a building in New York City last Thursday while protesters marched across the Brooklyn Bridge.

But I've been troubled lately by the way authorities have responded to these protests lately, using way more force than necessary. There have been instances of Occupy protesters inciting violence, and I condemn that too. But mostly it's been the authorities misusing force. Yesterday Dawn alerted me to video taken Friday at the University of California-Davis. Protesters were sitting on a sidewalk, with their heads bowed. They had been ordered to move, but civil disobedience is a noble tradition in our country. If you are willing to be accept the consequences of your action, then civil disobedience can be a powerful act. Those protesters were sitting peacefully with police in riot gear all around them, when one officer began casually and methodically spraying the protesters in their faces with pepper spray. The video account of this is shocking. I don't know how anyone can justify this use of force on people who posed no threat.<sup>2</sup>

In the video, you can hear the horror of student onlookers as the police spray the protesters. People are shouting "No, no," and you hear coughing as the spray fills the air. The students begin chanting to the police, "Shame on you, shame on you," and the chant goes on and on. As minutes pass, something starts to shift. The police seem less confident, and the students bearing witness seem to grow in courage and righteousness.

After five or six minutes a new chant begins: "We are willing... to give you... a brief moment... of peace. Take your weapons and go." The chant rises up, "You can go, you can go." A minute later, the police back away. It's amazing to watch the power of those with no weapons, with only their witness and their conviction that this is not what America is supposed to be. Dawn told me that she was talking about this with another seminarian, who said, "Pepper spray is the new fire hose."

I chose our reading this morning because the poet calls us to look at what matters; she challenges us to be present to life, in its pain and its beauty:

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon...  
I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow  
if you have been opened by life's betrayals  
or have become shriveled and closed  
from fear of further pain.

I want to know if you can sit with pain  
mine or your own  
without moving to hide it

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<sup>2</sup> Video available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AbYHRg3qlw>

or fade it  
or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy  
mine or your own  
if you can dance with wildness  
and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your  
fingers and toes  
without cautioning us to  
be careful  
be realistic  
to remember the limitations of being human.

...  
It doesn't interest me  
to know where you live or how much money you have.  
I want to know if you can get up  
after a night of grief and despair  
weary and bruised to the bone  
and do what needs to be done  
to feed the children.<sup>3</sup>

To repair the world can not be something you do in your spare time, nor is it something for the faint of heart. It is a commitment, an orientation, in which you are always on the lookout for ways to be of use. Can I convince you that it is a better way to live? That as the apostle Paul says, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:25)? I could remind you of what Albert Schweitzer said, that "The only really happy people are those who have learned how to serve."

But I suspect words are not enough--you have to learn this for yourself. You could try doing something to repair the world, something little, as an experiment, and see what happens. You might find, as others have, that serving others, you come away feeling you received more than you gave.

Some days I have a sense of despair that I'm not doing much to change the world. I find myself wishing that I had gotten into this work when I was younger, wishing that I had more energy and more time. I wish that the way ahead was more clear. I wish that I had more assurance that I was making a difference, because some days, I wonder. Any of you ever feel this way?

When I find myself discouraged or in despair, I try to remember that is why they call it faith. That is what faith is--hope in things not seen. That you have to trust that you are planting seeds, and some of them might take root, whether you ever get to see them grow or not.

Do you have any idea what your presence means? It counts for more than you know. Your efforts and your good intentions restore my faith that we are here for something, that our lives do have

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<sup>3</sup> Lines from "The Invitation," by Oriah Mountain Dreamer.

purpose and meaning, that this great experiment we call church might actually make a difference in the world.

I want to do my part to repair the world, and I want to do it with you. The world needs us, our families and friends need us, this city and this church need us--to be strong and compassionate, caring and courageous, active and contemplative. To stand for what is right and just, and be willing to pay the cost, so that we do make the world more beautiful.

Happy Thanksgiving, and Amen.