



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Holy Now,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 6, 2012

As some of you know, I just came back from Montana, where I was on a fishing trip with my friend Dave. His two boys are both students at Montana State, and he'd planned to visit them, and twisted my arm, just a bit, so I'd join him.

Four and a half years ago when I put together a packet for the search committee here, I included a few photos. One was a picture of a me wearing a pack and holding a fly rod. The caption read, “In my other church--fly-fishing and hiking with my buddy Dave in Montana.” Before I left on this trip, knowing I was going to be out in that big and beautiful country, with rivers running through it, I decided this was a good week to preach on mysticism in everyday life, finding the holy in the here and now. That time out West would surely help prepare me.

Last Sunday, while you were gathered here for what I understand was an awesome service, led by Jessica Woodard and her mom and Suzanne Spaight-Mohns, I was on the way to Craig, Montana. Craig is tiny town on the Missouri River. There are a few houses, a restaurant and across the street a bar, and three fly shops. That's about it--a perfect trout town!

On the drive up to Craig, we stopped at a place called Wheat Montana, where they have all kinds of lovely baked goods. In my mind it's a kind of shrine. Sitting there over breakfast, I noticed it was about 9 am, mountain time, which meant you all were in the middle of the service here. I thought about you, and pictured you here. I send a text to my wife: “Worshipping this am at Wheat Montana.” And it felt like that--being with my friend and his boys, a day of fishing under that big sky ahead of us--for me, that is a state of grace.

But it didn't turn out how I expected, or hoped. When we finally stopped fishing, after the sun had gone down behind the hills, I was in a bad mood. It had been a long day of casting to big, beautiful fish in clear, fast water, a beautiful day in country that I love, my idea of heaven. But around mid-afternoon I started to get in a funk because the fish weren't cooperating. In all those hours I'd hooked just two fish and landed one. There's a big difference between one and none. But I felt cheated because my friend and his two college boys were hooking and catching way more fish than I was. A day that I expected to be holy turned sour. And the fact that I was being such a baby about it, taking a day that should have been great and making a mess of it, all because of the fact that a beautiful rainbow-colored creature, with a brain the size of a peanut, wouldn't accept my invitation to come out and play, well that made me feel even worse.

On the drive back to Bozeman, I thought about this and I thought about you. I'm supposed to be something of a spiritual guide here, but there wasn't anything enlightened about how I was feeling. How was I going to say anything to you today about finding the holy in our midst, when I felt so far from the holy that day? How, when I went to the church of the river, and failed to worship there, because I chased after the wrong thing?

I told my companions that I was frustrated and discouraged by all not-catching. I apologized to them for my bad mood, and said I hoped it didn't put a damper on their day. The next morning, about to start fishing again, I remembered some words by the farmer and poet Wendell Berry. Standing at the edge of the river, I spoke his words as prayer:

To the sky, to the wind, then,
and to the faithful trees, I confess
my sins: that I have not been happy
enough, considering my good luck,
have listened to too much noise,
have been inattentive to wonders,
have lusted after praise.¹

This confession helped me to put myself in the right posture before fishing, and before the sacred gift of another day. It reminded me what I am chagrined to say I forgot, that fishing is not about catching. It is about being present to the moment, and whatever mysteries may present themselves. It is about being grateful for the simple gift of being able to stand in moving water at all, being alive on this earth for one more day.

I wish I was more spiritually evolved. I think of these words by the poet Mary Oliver:

Another morning and I wake with thirst
for the goodness I do not have. I walk
out to the pond and all the way God has
given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord,
I was never a quick scholar but sulked
and hunched over my books past the hour
and the bell; grant me, in your mercy,
a little more time. Love for the earth
and love for you are having such a long
conversation in my heart.²

Standing in a river should help me have that conversation, and it usually does. What I know is that if we experience the holy anywhere, it is in this present moment. It is in the particular, earthy, gritty, sometimes lovely experiences of our lives. It might be in a moment of calm in midst of fear and

¹ Wendell Berry, "A Purification."

² Mary Oliver, "Thirst."

anxiety, it might be in the face or the touch of another. It might be in the song of a bird or the opening of a flower.

When Peter Mayer sings “Everything is holy now,”³ he expresses the mystic’s view that the holy can be anywhere, and everything has the potential to make manifest the presence of the divine. He’s standing in a long line of mystics, people who have had this experience, who have seen with new eyes, who have been awakened to the wonder that is all around us. You and I can be mystics too, and the world and our lives give us that chance, which we often miss, because we aren’t looking for or expecting it, because we are inattentive, listening to too much noise, chasing after the wrong things.

Eight hundred years ago, Mechtid of Magdeburg said the words at the top of the order of service today: “The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw--and knew I saw--all things in God and God in all things.”

Today I want to invite you to see yourself as a mystic, as someone who is able to apprehend the holy in the midst, and even in the mess, of your life. It begins with looking for it. With slowing down so that you can see, and feel, and taste and touch this moment. This week, I hope you will give yourself the gift of some time to do something that feeds your own soul. I encourage you to make the time for something that opens you up, that calls you to pay attention. It could be painting or drawing, it might be praying or meditating, or cooking, for someone you love or for community meals. It might be fasting, like our youth did last weekend. It might be having a conversation with a friend.

I trust that, deep inside you, your soul knows what it wants and what it longs for. This week, will you ask you soul, “What shall we do together?” and then listen for the response, and then follow your soul’s lead?

Organized religion loses its way when it acts like the holy can only be found within its walls. As someone who is a functionary of organized religion, sometimes I wonder about the whole enterprise. Should I be telling you, “Go out and walk through the woods and stand in running water. That’s where you’ll find the holy!”?

But I sense the holy here too. In your faces, and in the spaces between us. In the silence while Claudia plays and you light candles. In moments of unexpected and unplanned grace. Last week, while I was away, I thought about church, and what, if anything we have to offer to contemporary mystics. A church is doomed when it loses the connection to wonder, awe and mystery. Are we helping you to apprehend the holy in your midst? I hope so. But I certainly don’t think the church has cornered the market on mystical experiences.

No, if anything, we are a place where you can come and reflect on and share your experiences of what is sacred. Where you can connect with others over these holy mysteries. Where you can find a frame within which to ponder and explore and deepen your experiences of the divine.

³ This song preceded the sermon. You can hear it at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfL1tL_Pda4, and read the lyrics at http://www.lyricsmania.com/holy_now_lyrics_peter_mayer.html

In her novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker says, "Tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for God to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God."

You come to church, I hope, to be reminded of what is good and true, reminded that the holy is all around. You come to church, I hope, to be encouraged and empowered to be a mystic yourself, to see and understand that you have that ability, to touch what is sacred, here and now. This week, I hope you will carry Peter Mayer's words with you, and be open and awake to the moments you have been given, and find what is holy now.

Jacob, sleeping in the wilderness with a stone for a pillow, wakes up and says, "Surely God is in this place--and I did not know it!" (Genesis 28:16).

My prayer for you, and for myself, is that we be like Jacob--that we will wake up to the wonder of this hour and this day. That we will see it as holy, even when the fish aren't biting. Come what may, that we will feel the earth under our feet, and breathe in the breath of life, and know that it is good. That it is very good.

Amen.