



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Back to the Garden,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 10, 2015

About a month ago, I was out in the yard, cleaning up leaves and sticks from the winter, and it felt so good to do this; to touch the ground and see signs of spring coming. There were places still covered by snow and ice, but they were getting smaller. Out under the trees and sky, hearing the birds singing, these words started going in my head:

The kiss of the sun for pardon,
The song of the birds for mirth,--
One is nearer God's heart in a garden
Than anywhere else on earth.¹

You see these lines on plaques people put in their gardens, and they may be kind of schmaltzy, but they ring so true for me! A garden is a piece of heaven here on earth. A place where the cares of the world fall away, where things seem right and good and as they should be.

We each need places where we can find peace and experience transcendence. For some it's at the edge of the ocean, for others on a mountaintop or by a river, for some in the glorious diversity of the city; I hope that sometimes you even find it here, in church.

We just sang “Earth was given as a garden, cradle for humanity; tree of life and tree of knowledge, placed for our discovery.”² These lines refer to the creation story in Genesis, when Adam and Eve are living happily in the garden of Eden, until one day when they eat the fruit of the one tree God had said was forbidden, and they lose their innocence and get kicked out of the garden. As they go, God says,

Cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,

¹ From “God's Garden,” by Dorothy Frances Gurney.

² Words by Roberta Bard, hymn # 207 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 17b-19).

It’s clear, isn’t it, that this foundational story is one that developed in order to describe and give meaning to the hard life people were living, trying to survive in a harsh land. Some say the story of Adam and Eve being banished from the garden represents the rise of human consciousness, the transition from innocence to awareness. It’s certainly an example of humans seeing themselves as separate from the earth. It may also be an attempt by monotheism to separate itself from earlier earth-centered religions.

Do you remember that there are two creation stories in Genesis? The Garden of Eden, and the story of God creating everything in six days. Listen now to a few lines from that story, when God is almost done working:

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’” (Genesis 1:27-28). And a few lines later, the chapter ends this way: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day (Genesis 1:31).

We have been fruitful and have multiplied, to the point that there are now billions of people on the planet, and the energy we consume and waste we produce now threaten our quality of life and our existence. We have misinterpreted that line about subduing the earth and having dominion over it; it has been used to justify the slaughter of animals and indigenous peoples and centuries of trampling over what was supposed to be seen as a precious gift.

Did we undervalue our earth because there was always more of it, just over the horizon? If so, we no longer have that luxury. We need to see our planet as an island, or a lifeboat, not a fount of inexhaustible resources, but as the only home we’ve got.

Some years ago I spent a few days in the Great Smoky Mountains in North Carolina with my mom. We took walks on a trail along a ridge line, green fields on one side and old growth forest on the other. It was early spring, so you could see down the mountain into the forest, where the trunks of giant chestnut trees still lay, slowly decaying, a hundred years after they had been killed by blight.

Walking in that old forest in those ancient mountains, I sensed something I’d never known before. The woods and its creatures didn’t care if I was there or not! They would do just fine without the presence of humans at all. They’d been here before we arrived, and would be there after we’re gone. We aren’t in charge here, we’re only guests. The earth was not meant to be our battlefield or our dumping ground or our ashtray; no, we are meant to be responsible stewards, who till only the soil we need, and leave forests and rivers as they are, because they are holy and good.

Though we have made some progress over the last decades, establishing pollution controls and protecting endangered species, we've come to the point where increasing numbers of humans threaten our future here. As the world continues to develop, with more cars and farms and factories, and fewer rain forests, our impact will only grow. Concerning global climate change, some say we've already crossed the point of no return, while others think we can avoid catastrophe, if we act now. And some still deny there's a problem. But if you watched the moving "Chasing Ice," which our Green Sanctuary Committee screened a few months ago, about the melting of polar ice, than you know the problem is real and getting worse.

The bad news of global warming raises what is, for me, a persistent question: how do you enjoy and celebrate the good things in life when you are aware of all the trouble and pain and problems in this world?

Too often our human response to trouble is to draw back from it, if we're able. To pretend it's not there, or that it doesn't matter. But to separate oneself from the the pain and suffering is not without its own cost. Too often people who aren't suffering blame the victims, and say, "Let them fend for themselves." But is that any way to live, isolated and afraid?

One of the things I love about this congregation is where we are situated, and how we choose to engage with the world outside our doors. Haverhill is such an interesting community: a post-industrial inner city with working farms and a river that runs through it. Here on Ashland Street, five mornings a week the Drop-in Center welcomes people, often those living at the margins, into our basement, where they find food and hot coffee and community. Next Saturday afternoon our Social Justice Committee is hosting a forum called "Bridges Out of Poverty," in order to increase awareness of local organizations working on the persistent problems of homelessness and poverty. I hope you'll want to come and learn about ways we can make life better for people who are struggling.

Then a week later, we'll host our annual plant sale, when the Murray Room becomes a greenhouse. And this annual rite of spring will remind us of the blessings of this good earth, that spring does follow winter, that things which seem to have died do come back to life, and grow and bloom.

Isn't it good that we cover this wide range of here, from homeless to hostas? Because to live in this world you have to be able to find beauty and reason to hope. You need moments of transcendence and places that feed your soul. You need this as much as you need food to eat and water to drink. You need to be strong-souled (Mary Oliver) if you are going to to help heal our planet and its people, if you are going to be a force for good, for love and for justice.

Yes, there are troubles and there is injustice, and we are here to face that head on. But we also need to make room for joy. Considering the question of good and evil, the UU minister and theologian Galen Guengerich wrote, "I don't believe evil is a separate reality from good; it's not a power of equal force and standing. Rather, evil is the absence of what is good."³

³ Essay by Galen Guengerich available online at <https://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2015/05/07/despite-everything-we-must-risk-delight/36816>

So to have less of what is evil in the world, let's create and make more room for what is good. Guengerich quotes the poet Jack Gilbert, who says, "To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil. If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction, we lessen the importance of their deprivation. We must risk delight . . . We must admit that there will be music despite everything."

There are trees growing in the forest, without any help from us. Left alone, the earth does heal itself. Living things are made to grow and thrive. Though we live in a world that knows too much of death and destruction, we are invited to bear witness to the new life that is unfolding in our midst, to be bringers and bearers of that which is good.

Thousands of years ago, people started telling stories of the earth as a garden, where life was good and creatures dwelled together in peace. And it was good. It was very good. But then, the story says, we lost our way, and we lost the garden.

Might we finally be on the verge of a new era, when we see that our call is not to dominate the earth, but to cherish and enjoy it? When we understand that this fragile earth, our island home, is the only one we have, and that our fellow passengers are kindred souls? Isn't it time to walk more gently on this earth, and with one another? Time to get back to the garden, to love and cherish our mother earth, to see that where we are, right now, is paradise, if we will but open our eyes to the wonder of it all.

Amen.