



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“The Invitation of Ordinary Time,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on June 28, 2015

What I want to offer you today is a prayer, more than a sermon. A prayer of thanks for this day, and this season, for our lives on this good earth: a prayer of celebration for the Supreme Court decision on Friday affirming equal marriage and the fact that in the end, love does win; and a prayer for those who are suffering: for those burying the dead in Charleston and for those who have little to celebrate. So will you pray with me? With these words by Mary Oliver:

“Another morning and I wake up 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. Who knows what will finally happen or where I will be sent, yet already I have given a great many things away, expecting to be told to pack nothing, except the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly learning.”<sup>1</sup>

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts find their place this day in the heart of God. Amen.

My heart has been full of memories this week, this first week of summer. I’ve been thinking about summer and about church, and I’ve been remembering the four summers of my childhood when I was lucky enough to spend a month at Camp Yonahnocka, in the mountains of North Carolina. In a brochure about that camp was this statement: “Life at Yonahnocka is primarily to be enjoyed.” Not about gaining skills or developing character or practicing good sportsmanship or learning to get along with others, though camp certainly provided those lessons. I wonder, how often are you invited to do some for the simple purpose of enjoying it? How often do you do something simply for joy? That is my prayer for you for today, and for this summer: more joy.

If you need a religious grounding for this charge to joy, then hear the words of the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which asks, “What is the chief end of humankind?” And then answers, “To glorify God and enjoy God forever.”

At Camp Yonahnocka, we played baseball and paddled canoes and had jobs like waiting tables or sweeping the tennis courts. We attended Vespers several nights a week, led by the counselors,

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Oliver, “Thirst,” the epilogue poem in her collection *Thirst*, published 2006.

and on Sunday, went to church in a chapel in the woods. Kind of like the one at Ferry Beach, if you're been there. For worship one Sunday I got asked to read the lovely gospel passage where Jesus says, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin, but I tell you Solomon is all his splendor was not attired like one of these" (Matthew 6:28-29). On Sunday nights we'd sit on the floor of a room called the Bark Room, and a counselor would play the piano, and we'd make requests from the dusty hymnals we held in our hands. Some of the boys complained about this, but I secretly loved those Sunday nights, gathered together singing those hymns.

Today I invite you to let your own summer memories rise to the surface; to remember the simple joys this season can bring, whether you remember something from a recent summer, or something from long ago. What does this season evoke for you?

Even though it has just begun, you know that summer is fleeting, don't you? You know that that life is passing by, that time is moving faster than we would like to think. There's a very short poem about this, by Roger Padgett, that I put at the top of today's order of service:

*That* was fast.  
I mean life.

You could memorize this poem. Like right now. "*That* was fast. I mean life."

Life life only seems to go faster, the older you get. And so the invitation is to be awake and alive in this moment, and this day, which is the only one we really have. So I encourage you, in this summer, to seize these moments of joy. To look for joy, and to let it find you.

In the church calendar we're at the start of what's called Ordinary Time, the long stretch between Pentecost and Advent. Though we like to celebrate the mountaintop moments, isn't it true that most of life, and most of life's joy, is found in the ordinary times? Days like Friday, when the Supreme Court make equal marriage the law of our land, are amazing and wonderful, and deserve to be celebrated. But so do the quieter moments. And this season offers them all the time, if only you will look for and be open to them.

Listen to these words by Frederick Buechner, reflecting on his own ordinary life:

"By examining as closely and candidly as I could the life that had come to seem to me in many ways a kind of trap or dead-end street, I discovered that it really wasn't that at all. I discovered that if you really keep your eye peeled to it and your ears open, if you really pay attention to it, even such a limited and limiting life as the one I was living opened up onto extraordinary vistas. Taking your children to school and kissing your wife good-bye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize or not...

"If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the

fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and the pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”<sup>2</sup>

To my mind, the greatest influence on our faith tradition came from the Transcendentalists, who, almost two hundred years ago, pushed Unitarianism away from its calm rationalism toward a more passionate, more intense spirituality. The Transcendentalists were seen as radical for advocating what we assume today—that it is through a person’s own experiences that they will be in touch with the Divine.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the most famous of the Transcendentalists, gave a talk at Harvard Divinity School advocating for this primacy of experience and asserting that the Divine is not found so much in books or in religious tradition, but rather, speaks through each of us. If we will listen for it.

Here are the opening lines from Emerson’s “Divinity School Address,” which I share with you as a kind of meditation that invites you to enter this summer with heart and mind and senses wide open to the possibilities it holds:

“In this refulgent summer (refulgent means “radiant” or “shining brightly”), it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy. The cool night bathes the world as with a river, and prepares his eyes again for the crimson dawn. The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily.”

What Emerson knew, what we need to be reminded of, is that revelation is ongoing, and available to each of us. You are invited to be the poet of your own life. We are called to be the poets and the prophets of our age. To see the beauty and the grace in the ordinary moments, the way Anne Sexton does in her prayer poem that welcomes morning. “All this is God,” she says, the kettle that heats the coffee, the spoon and the chair that cry out to her each morning, “and I mean, though often forget, to give thanks, to faint down by the kitchen table in a prayer of rejoicing.”<sup>3</sup>

Do any of us do this often enough? Faint down where we are in a prayer of rejoicing? That’s why you come to church, isn’t it? To be reminded of the holiness of the ordinary, that the chapel of sacred space is here and can be found anywhere. It’s why I love to be in church, and why I try to pay attention, why I sit and pray quietly every morning—to be reminded of the sacred quality of this moment and this life that I have been given. So I might offer up prayers of rejoicing.

And that is how we will help heal and bless our world, by being in touch with that divine spark, by being filled with the Spirit of life, of love, of justice, so filled with that amazing grace, that we are compelled to reach out in love and concern for others. To let our own light shine, and to be awake

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then*.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Sexton, “Welcome Morning.”

to that larger light of which we are a part, and let that light shine through us, so that we might spread its blessing and hasten the coming of love and justice on this earth.

In this season of ordinary time, in this refulgent summer, my prayer is that you will, every day, be struck by beauty; that you will, every day, be blessed by love, by receiving it and by giving it; that you will, every day, faint down in a prayer of rejoicing.

Amen.