



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Crossing Over, Coming Back”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on November 10, 2013

Sometimes I wonder, “Does it make a difference? Any difference at all, what we are trying to do here?” And then, you remind me that it does.

Under the leadership of our social justice committee, some of you have been collecting signatures to raise the minimum wage and give workers earned sick time. You’re doing this because you have the radical idea that working people should earn enough to live above the poverty line.

Bill Taylor, a relatively new member here, who just read the passage from Luke,<sup>1</sup> has been doing this, collecting signatures around town. He’s living the words he just read, about bringing good news to the poor; he’s taking a stand for love and justice. Bill’s been posting about this on Facebook. And he’s gotten some support, and some criticism too. One person in his extended family accused Bill of being a Communist. When Bill rejected this, she wrote back, drawing religion into her argument:

“I have an unconditional love for humanity,” she wrote, “but will never tolerate the false ‘looking like it’s good but evil’ mental play upon humanity... Children of God will survive; those who remain fooled and are following a Luciferien Agenda will burn, just that simple, all will be what will be in the end. Good luck with that Bill. Re-read your Holy Laws/Commands while you are at it too.”

There are so many things I disagree with here. The belief that there’s a cosmic battle going on between good and evil. And the implication if you follow the religious rules with blind obedience, everything will work out ok, at least for you, you don’t have to worry about anybody else. This concern for piety but not for people is so contrary to the life that Jesus lived.

I’m glad to tell you that Bill responded kindly and respectfully, and then unfriended this person. I’m talking today about reaching out and crossing over, but we all need to have boundaries!

Here’s what I wrote in response: “Bill, I have this great ‘Jesus was a liberal’ magnet that church folks gave me. If you ever want to borrow it... It’s so clear to me that Jesus would be out there working to raise the minimum wage. There’s that great quote, ‘When I give to the poor they call me a saint, but when I question the systems that make people poor they call me a communist.’”

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<sup>1</sup> The reading today was Luke 4:16-21, available online at <http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Luke+4>

Those words come from Helder Camara, a Roman Catholic archbishop in Brazil, a proponent of liberation theology, which says that the poor and marginalized have a clearer view of the truth, and we need to listen to them.

I love that Bill, and many of you, are out there standing up for what you believe, working to make ours a more just world. Last Sunday we started a new session of UU101, and I shared words from Anne Lamott about why she makes her son go to church. She wants to give him “a path and a little light to see by.” She says the people who have this are ones “with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith... people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful...”

Her words remind me of you, and this place--who we are and what we are trying to be. Listen: “Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and justice, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food. When I was at the end of my rope,” she writes, “the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of home – that it’s where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, ‘You come back now.’”<sup>2</sup>

I love that we have this beautiful image of Jesus here before us. This reminder of his life, his call to serve those in need, to be willing to take risks and stand up for what is right.

In the reading today, Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah, words about God bringing good news to the poor, release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind. Isaiah is saying that God wants us to be free, to see one another as sisters and brothers, to work for the common good. After he reads these words, Jesus says, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” In other words, “I’m here to help make this happen.”

Do you know what happens next? People in the temple acknowledge that Jesus has spoken powerfully and well. But then someone asks, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” The implication being, “Who does he think he is?”

And it doesn’t go well from there. Jesus tells them, “No prophet is accepted in his hometown,” and this makes the people mad, and they run him out of the temple and out of town.

It’s risky to take a stand, to stick your neck out. And that’s what we are called to do. As the hymn says, to be “a people so bold.”<sup>3</sup>

In the progressive church I grew up in, we had a full-length Jesus up front. This Jesus, a mosaic made of small tiles, is less earthy than ours--his robe is white and there’s an ethereal glow around his head. We didn’t talk much about Jesus in that church, and my hunch is that we were embarrassed by him, by what was done by Christians in the South in those days--often standing on the side of segregation, more concerned about the next world than this one.

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*.

<sup>3</sup> “We’ll Build a Land,” words by Barbara Zanotti, #121 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

I wonder if we Unitarian Universalists are also embarrassed by Jesus--troubled by what gets done in his name, carrying a chip on our shoulder about the aspects of Christianity we find impossible to believe. If so, we are missing the chance to have an ally and a role model for the work of justice and reconciliation we say we are about. We ought to make common cause with progressive Protestants and Catholics, and nonreligious people too, who see in this Hebrew prophet a model for how to live a courageous and openhearted life. You don't have to think the nativity stories are literally true to sing "O Come, All Ye Faithful." You don't have to agree with all the faith claims made about Jesus in order to claim him as a companion and guide.

One of my teachers, Carter Heyward, wrote a book called *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right*. She says this was originally intended as a response to the religious right. Carter wanted to challenge the ways Christian fundamentalism has distorted Jesus' message. But she came to see "those who are right" as not only the Religious Right, but "all of us whenever we assume that we know it all or that our way is the only way to think or act. Those who are right," she says, "tend to be impatient with God, themselves, and others. They do not accept the incompleteness of God's creation."

Carter emphasizes "the significant theological and ethical, pastoral and political, difference" between trying to 'be right,' on the one hand, and the struggle... for right relation on the other." The difference between being right, and being in right relation. Think about Jesus. He hung around with those pushed to the margins—widows and orphans, lepers and tax collectors. His saved his harshest words for the Pharisees, those concerned with rules and regulations and doing religion right.

Today I want to lift up this essential aspect of Jesus' life and ministry--his willingness to cross the borders and expectations that try to define us, hem us in, confine us to a smaller life than we are meant to live.

We live in the most religious diverse country in the world. The U.S. is becoming less white and more black and brown, less Anglo and more Hispanic and Asian, less dominated by the heterosexual agenda.

The question is, will this diversity cause us to retreat into gated enclaves of like-minded people? Or will we become competent and confident border-crossers? For Unitarian Universalists, the choice is clear, isn't it? We are all about a big-tent theology and spirituality. We may not have completely figured out how to best do this, but we're trying.

Here's what I know. To reach out to others, you first have to know who you are and where you stand. True interfaith dialogue is not watering down your own commitments in order to be less offensive to another. No, it's having the confidence of your own convictions and the courage to share them, with openness and curiosity, and then to hold open a space for others to do the same.

You have to know who you are and where you stand. And then, be willing to leave home, to cross over to another country, and see what it's like to live there. Our middle schoolers are doing a version of this, when they visit neighboring congregations.

I'm not talking about being a voyeur or tourist. To cross over, to really engage with difference, means opening yourself to the other, taking the risk that you will be changed.

I have this fantasy that some day we might hang signs over our doors, that say, "Enter at Your Own Risk!" because we see this place as such a community of liberation and transformation that we know you can't come here without being changed. Isn't that what the church is supposed to be--not just a place that comforts those who are afflicted, but also, which challenges and changes those who are comfortable?

We have all kinds of opportunities, in daily life, for this border crossing. At work, you can tell folks about your church and our Universalist theology of nobody left behind. You can be like Bill, and go out in public and stand up for the working poor, trying to change our system that is so skewed toward the wealthy. You can prepare great platters of food and serve them to the hungry people who come here to be fed. You can be in conversation with those people and learn about what it's like to be in that kind of need.

Our participation this year in Leap of Faith, and our friendship with the good people of All Souls New London, is another way we are crossing borders and being changed. And I suspect they would tell you that, through this, they are being changed too. It has already been such a blessing, this journey we are on together. And we are just getting started!

So let's lift up this practice of crossing over, and coming back. Of sharing our border-crossing stories, and reflecting on what we learn and how we are being transformed. Won't that encourage and empower us to become more adept at reaching out and making connections across those lines that often divide us?

Jesus is one of my border-crossing heroes. But he's not the only one. The Muslim mystic, Rumi, is another. In a version by Coleman Barks, he says, "Out beyond the ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."

This is a house of meeting and blessing, of liberation and transformation. But not just here. This world we live in, it cries out to us to see and hear one another, to take the risk of standing up, and reaching out, to take the risk of being changed. Here's what I know: there is power and blessing in that sacred journey: crossing over and coming back.

Amen.