



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on June 5, 2011

There's a group of teenagers that stop by here some afternoons. They bring their skateboards and use our ramp, and they sit around outside our back door and talk. Every now and then I hear some choice words coming from our there, and I stick my head outside and say, “Hey guys, watch you're language please--remember we're a church here!”

Sometimes I worry that church folks coming here will be intimidated by them. But they're pretty respectful and seem to be good kids. And I'm loathe to run them off. The church is supposed to be a place of welcome. Sometimes I wish we were more accommodating. What if we offered a place where teenagers could come in and hang out after school? We generally keep our doors locked around here during the week, and sometimes I'm sorry for that. I know there are some good reasons, that security is important, but I don't like the image of a church all locked up. Because there may be someone who needs a clean, well-lighted place.

That's the title of a Hemingway short story: “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” It's about two waiters at a cafe, one old, the other young. The young one is anxious to close up so he can get home to his wife, and he's exasperated that there's this one customer, an old man, who stays late every night. But the old waiter is more sanguine. He says, “Each night I am reluctant to close up because there may be some one who needs the cafe.”

That's the attitude I hope we have here, as individuals and as a community--always looking outward, asking how we might be of use, because there may be someone who needs us; there may be someone who needs a clean, well-lighted place. There's really no maybe about it--I think you know already there are plenty of people out there who could use what we have to offer.

But it's easy to forget this. It's easy to focus too much on the inside stuff, and on the small stuff, and forget that the church exists to be looking outside its walls and throwing its doors open wide. The only reason to have a clean, well-lighted place is to invite people in. That's why we're here, what we're supposed to do.

Years ago, when Rev. Janet Bowering was the minister here, you invited homeless men to sleep in the basement when no one else would take them in. You installed a shower down there for them in what was the first Mitch's Place, what is now part of Emmaus House. Later, you spent some of your endowment funds to create a space downstairs for the Community Action Drop-in

Center. If you have any doubt about whether people need a clean, well-lighted place, come by here any weekday morning.

You'll see folks at the drop-in center and, on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, lining up for the food pantry. Come by on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday nights and you'll see folks gathering for AA. This afternoon at 4 we're opening our sanctuary for a benefit concert for Merrimack Valley Hospice.

On Sunday morning, there's often someone who's here for the first time. Sometimes it a person who hasn't crossed the threshold of a church for a long time, and they come wondering, "Is there a place for me here?" I appreciate the intention and effort it takes to visit a church for the first time, and the courage it takes to stay for coffee hour. When new folks tell me their stories, you tell about your longing for community and connection, your search for depth and meaning, your hope for a religion that you can believe in, that will help you to lead a good life.

We live in a time when it's countercultural to belong to a church--it's something most people don't do. But I worry about them and what they are missing. Because we live in a culture that encourages us, in so many ways, to be self-centered. That tells us, "look out for yourself. Meet your own needs." There's the temptation to create a safe haven for yourself and your friends, and then pull up the drawbridge behind you, before it gets too crowded, or the wrong sort of people start coming in. You know what I'm talking about? It's part of our human nature to be this way. But that's not what the church is supposed to be.

This week David Brooks wrote a column in the New York Times called "It's Not About You." He's noticed that in most college commencement speeches, "graduates are told to: Follow your passion, chart your own course, march to the beat of your own drummer, follow your dreams and find yourself. This is the litany of expressive individualism, which is still the dominant note in American culture. But, of course, this mantra misleads on nearly every front."<sup>1</sup>

He continues, "College grads are often sent out into the world amid rapturous talk of limitless possibilities. But this talk is of no help to the central business of adulthood, finding serious things to tie yourself down to. The successful young adult is beginning to make sacred commitments — to a spouse, a community and calling — yet mostly hears about freedom and autonomy."

He concludes his column, which I recommend to you, by saying "The purpose in life is not to find yourself. It's to lose yourself."

The purpose in life is to give yourself over to something larger than yourself. That's what I love about religion--at its best it reminds us of our place in the larger context of things. It encourages us to live a right-sized life. Not self-centered, but neither living smaller than we are meant to. Good religion makes us mindful of the gift that is this life, this moment; mindful of who we are and whose we are.

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<sup>1</sup> David Brooks, "It's Not About You," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2001, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/opinion/31brooks.html?\\_r=1&scp=1&sq=not%20about%20you&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/opinion/31brooks.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=not%20about%20you&st=cse)

On this day when we welcome new members, when we hear the words of our proposed covenant for the first time, when we gather for our annual meeting, it's a good time to be reminded of why we go to all the trouble of church. Why we spend precious money on the roof and the boiler and on salaries and copy paper, why you spend your time in committee meetings, and making food for coffee hour and coming to choir rehearsal and setting up chairs and tables and putting them away, again and again.

It's not because it's what we've always done. That may have been true a generation ago, but we live in a culture where that kind of allegiance to institutions has fallen away. It's not because the church is a feel-good collection of like-minded people, though I hope you do like most of the people here, and I hope that coming here does make you feel good at least some of the time. But that's not enough, to justify the effort, or to be called a church.

No, we are a church because we are here to build up the beloved community, the kingdom of heaven here on earth. Right here, in this place. To extend hospitality to strangers, to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.<sup>2</sup> To stand on the side of love and of justice. To build the beloved community right here, and to always be making room for one more, because we know there are those who need a place like this.

That's what those words we sang at the beginning of our service are about--imagining the kingdom of heaven as a glorious golden city, "pictured by the seers of old," where wrong is banished and justice reigns. "We are builders of that city," we sang, "all our joys and all our groans help to rear its shining ramparts, all our lives are building stones."<sup>3</sup>

The final verse always gets me, because it expresses my faith that our lives are for something:

And the work that we have builded, oft with bleeding hands and tears,  
Oft in error, oft in anguish, will not perish with our years:  
It will live and shine transfigured in the final reign of right:  
It will pass into the splendors of the city of the light.

I take heart in and am sustained by this theology, that our efforts will outlive us; that even our mistakes, our missteps, our failings will be transformed into something beautiful and lasting; that we are not called to be perfect or right, but only to be faithful. To trust that we are builders of that city. That even though it won't be completed in our lifetimes, our work is a step along the way.

That's why we're here. Not to find ourselves, but to lose ourselves; to give ourselves away in service of something larger and more lasting, to help build the common good. As we sang in Janet Bowering's lovely hymn, to find assurance in what is beautiful and true.

When my wife and I were married, among the prayers the minister prayed that day was this one: "give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:13a, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Felix Adler, *Hail the Glorious Golden City*, #140 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

for others.” In other words, let them know they are loved enough, make them whole enough, so they can reach out and help others. That is my prayer for each of you, and for our community: that this is a place where you are loved enough, where you are assured of that love, so you are compelled to reach out in love and concern for others. It’s the heart of our Universalist faith and my one sermon: God loves you, so please, start acting like it.

Because you know, they are those who need a clean, well-lighted place. I trust you know that when I imagine that clean, well-lighted place, I’m not thinking about our building, as much as I love and appreciate this beautiful place. No, what I’m talking about, and what people are seeking, is not a building. What they are seeking is a community. What they want and need is you: your presence, your compassion, your commitment.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.<sup>4</sup> My prayer is that you will be aware of your light, and you will let it shine. The you will be assured that you are loved, and so will reach out in love and concern for others. That, you, my “sisters and brothers, anointed by God, may then create peace,” and we will help build that land “where justice shall roll down like waters, and peace like an ever flowing stream.”<sup>5</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:13a, 14a.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Zanotti (adapted from Isaiah & Amos), *We’ll Build a Land*, #121 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.