



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Return Again,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on September 15, 2013

I promise I won't keep telling stories from my trip out West this summer, but here's one--My wife Tracey and I were in Yellowstone Park, and she signed on to my plan to hike an hour or more to where a river runs through a beautiful meadow--it's prettiest place to fish I've ever been. It's bear country out there, which Tracey wasn't thrilled about, but I assured her I'd never seen bears, or any large wildlife, in that backcountry. And I had pepper spray, just in case, and we'd be careful, and make plenty of noise on the trail, so as to not surprise any bears by accident..

Well, when we got to that meadow, there was a herd of bison grazing there, that we'd have to walk carefully around, to get to the river. “I thought you never saw wildlife here,” Tracey said. All I could do was shrug. Bison are pretty much harmless unless you aggravate them. We ran into another couple fishing there, who told us that downstream they'd seen an animal carcass, surrounded by wolf tracks. Tracey wasn't amused. But the kicker was when we saw a grizzly bear. It was far enough away that we weren't in any danger, but still, it was a grizzly!

By early afternoon, I could tell that Tracey wasn't interested in making a long day of it. I said, “You know, on these days I spend out here, my favorite part of the day is the early morning, when I'm packing up and heading out. The whole day is ahead, and you don't know what it's going to bring.”

To that she said: “You know what's my favorite part of the day? When we start heading back!” And not too long afterwards, that's what we did.

I kind of knew this already, that my wife and I are different. I get excited about heading out; she is happier heading home. I could preach all year about the these two aspects of the spiritual life; about journey and home, and how they belong together. About going out, and coming back, and how we need both. Journey and home.

Yesterday was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish year. It's a day when Jews fast and pray; repent their sins and are reconciled, made at-one, with God. The song we sang, “Return Again,” was written by a rabbi, and the Hebrew word for repentance literally means “return.” “Return to the home of your soul,” we sang. “Return to who you are, return to what you are.” Don't we each need ways and places to do this, regularly and often?

I don't know about you, but I can't do this all on my own. To return, to be at one, I need to be in touch with that mysterious and elusive presence I call God. I need human companions and

guides. I need a community, to support me and hold me accountable. For most of my life, the church has been that community.

We created a brochure last year, to introduce this church to newcomers. On the cover, it says, among other things, “A warm and caring community/Diverse backgrounds & beliefs/ A different kind of church.”

Do you know what makes us different? It’s not that we are more open, and less rigid, than some churches. It’s not that we welcome diversity, that we say right up front that we don’t expect we’ll all share the same theology. Those are the results of that which makes us different. To learn what that difference is, listen to this conversation the UU minister Thom Belote had with a couple of religion reporters. They’d come up to him at a public rally, because they wanted to talk to this minister holding a sign. When asked, he told them he was a Unitarian Universalist, and he says,

“They asked me how to spell that, and then they asked me to explain what UU’s believe. I explained that we are a covenantal faith, not a creedal faith. We share a covenant of how we try to be together, not a creed of what we all must believe together.”

Then, he says, the questions got going: “Well, does your church believe in the Bible?” they asked.

Thom’s response: “That is a creedal question. We are a covenantal congregation. We share a covenant of how we try to be together, not what we are expected to believe together.”

“Does your church believe in God?” they asked. “That is a creedal question. We are a covenantal faith. We share a covenant of how we try to be together, not what we are expected to believe together.”

This went on for a while. It took them some time to get what he was saying.

Reflecting on this, Thom says, “I think that sometimes we stress the fact that we are not a creedal faith a lot more than we stress that we are a covenantal faith. We emphasize the creeds we are not asked to recite more than the covenants we are asked to share. We over-emphasize the fact that we are not necessarily required to believe in God or believe a certain doctrine about the Bible or the afterlife. And we under-emphasize the covenantal dimensions of our shared faith, preferring not to articulate the covenants of behavior we do share.”¹

All groups, whether they are families or churches or nations, have norms and expectations about how people should act if the group is going to be healthy and vital. Sometimes these norms are explicit--like traffic laws and the Ten Commandments. And often they are implicit--not spoken aloud, but still, expectations of how to behave. Families have these implicit expectations. Like, we don’t talk about Dad’s anger, or his drinking. You know the old adage, “If you can’t say anything nice...”

¹ I found this story in a sermon preached by Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, minister of the UU Congregation of Phoenix. She found it in the piece “Covenant – Not Creedal” by Thom Belote, published in Quest Vol. LXIX, No. 8 September 2009.

Churches have implicit expectations too. About how people act, even what they wear. If you doubt this, just hang out on Ashland Street some Sunday morning. I promise you, you'll be able to easily tell who's coming here, and who's going to Calvary Baptist Church, just by how they're dressed.

Those implicit expectations become invisible, once you're been in a place for a while. But there are always people, in churches and in families, who are happy to let you know when you've violated a norm or expectation. They give you a look; they say, "We don't do that around here." This can be necessary sometimes, but it can also feel unwelcoming and uncomfortable.

And of course, there's a better way. It's what Thom Belote challenges us to do--to be more explicit, to articulate the covenantal dimensions of our shared faith. For a long time now, every Sunday we have said the words of our unison affirmation, variations of which are used by a number of UU congregations. Those words were written by James Vila Blake, who was the Unitarian minister in Haverhill just after the Civil War. You know these words, that begin

Love is the doctrine of this church
The quest for truth is its sacrament
and service is its prayer.

In the middle of those words we say every Sunday is the word "covenant." "This is our great covenant," we say. A covenant is a sacred promise. And these are beautiful and inspiring words, aren't they? But they aren't particularly explicit.

Coming into New Hampshire from Massachusetts, you see a sign that says "Drive with courtesy--that's the New Hampshire way." I think the subtext is, "Don't drive the way folks in Mass do." But that's a pretty soft message. "Speed limit 65"--now that's more explicit, isn't it?

Three years ago, we began working on a more explicit statement of how we want to be together as people in this community. We developed a covenant, which was adapted over time, as people in the church responded to it and suggested changes. At our annual meeting this past June, the congregation voted to adopt this new covenant as our own. It says pretty clearly how we intend to be with one another.

I vow to speak my truth and encourage others to voice their own truths.
I pledge to use love and forgiveness as a guide.
I promise to deal directly with others, mindful of the good intentions of others
I will accept responsibility for what I say and do.

We have a beautiful and growing diversity here: different ages and sexual orientations, different political perspectives and racial and ethnic backgrounds, different social classes and differing abilities. For some of us, church is about seeking oneness with God or Spirit; for others, it is about the communion of human connection. Some of us are lovers of leaving and some of us are longing for home. For many, it's both/and: Spirit and community, journey and home.

People tend to think that religion is about what you believe, about what you think. We are a different kind of church. For us, to be religious is not about signing on to the right belief system; it's what we give our hearts to, and how that compels us to act, with one another, and out in the world.

Of course we will not do this perfectly; we'll make mistakes, and even hurt and disappoint one another. We're human. When we break our promises, when we fall out of covenant, then what will we do? Will we run away, and cut ourselves off from the community? That's what people do so often these days--get mad, move away, try to start over somewhere else.

But you can't run away from trouble, there's no place that far.² The beauty of a covenant, whether it's a marriage or a church covenant, is that these promises help us to stick together and work things out, when it would be easier to leave.

I'm someone who loves packing up and heading out. But just as much, I want a place to come home to. A place where I belong, where I can be myself, without shame or fear.

And don't you too? Don't you need people to return to, who will support you and tell you what you need to hear? Don't you want and need to return, again and again? To return to the home of your soul; to who you are, and what you are?

Joining in covenant with others is a sacred act. It's what we are made for. There is blessing in belonging.

I'm not saying this is easy, to live and get along with people who are so... different. But that's what the church is; this mosaic of all kind of people, of the sacred and the mundane, with its promise and potential to be empowering, life-giving, transformative even. I am ever grateful for you, who are the church, and ask you to join me in an old prayer for the church universal:

God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour out your power;
crown you ancient church's story, bring its bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour.
Look, the clouds of evil 'round us, hide your brightness from our gaze;
from the fears that long have bound us, free our hearts to faith and praise.
Grant us wisdom, we pray, grant us courage, for the living of these days,
for the living of these days.³

Amen.

² These words are spoken by the character Uncle Remus in the Disney movie, "The Song of the South."

³ From the hymn "God of Grace and God of Glory," written by Harry Emerson Fosdick, #115 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.