



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Wonder, Love and Praise”

a sermon given by Barbara Gove and Rev. Frank Clarkson
on November 17, 2013

Frank: I have this habit of thinking that how things are now, that's how they'll continue. But this is simply not true. Things change. That's a truth about life. The seasons change, the days are always getting shorter or longer, children are growing up before our eyes. When I was a brand new parent, a nurse in the maternity unit shared this wisdom: “Whatever is happening with your children, whether it's good or bad, it won't last. Things change, whether we want them to, or not.”

It's obvious, isn't it, that religion is in a time of upheaval and change? This appears to be part of a pattern that's been going on for 2000 years--that about every 500 years, old forms fall away and new ones emerge, and the changes we're seeing are right on schedule.

What's clear to me is that we humans need good religion as much as people in any age. We need a church that meets us where we are, rather than trying to fit us into a 500 year-old box. I'm not suggesting we throw everything away, just that we acknowledge that things change, and learn to be flexible and adaptable.

Barbara and I were talking about this some weeks ago, and out of the blue I said, “Why don't you and I do a sermon together? It could be fun!” Barbara is one of our long time members. She's seen plenty of change in her 87 years. What can we learn from what she's seen and experienced?

Barbara: I grew up on a farm in Rockland, Mass. My father was a Baptist minister and had a church nearby. Over my life I've seen so many changes--people want immediate gratification now, and both parents work and children are in day care, and have playdates instead of roaming free outdoors. Life was a lot simpler when I was young, and we had none of the high-tech things that are everywhere today.

My dad was more liberal than a lot of Baptists, The most religion in our home was praying before dinner. My dad would sometimes read the sermon to us, but we were kids, we could care less about that. My mother was the token of goodness--at home she read the Bible, was superintendent of the Sunday School, made clothes for pageants, my mother was the most wonderful person in the world. She would do anything for anybody. She had 7 children and no time for herself. One of the most liberated women of the time, she taught grades one through eight in a one-room schoolhouse until she was married. From her we learned we learned much about how we would live our lives. She even stayed up at night with us as we did our homework

and helped us with our assignments. She was especially helpful with our Latin lessons as was a real student of Latin.

Everything was hard in those days--cooking on a wood stove, doing laundry, ironing with an iron you didn't plug in, but heated on the stove. We learned from our mom we could do just about anything. My sister Frannie and I were forever running to the kitchen to give her hugs as we loved her so much. I remember those days so clearly. Our parents never praised us much, as it was expected that you do the best that you could, but they encouraged us and supported us always.

But there was something about my parents' religion that never really worked for me. I didn't realize this until I was in my twenties. My sister Beverly had married a Unitarian minister, and was always after me about changing churches. Looking back, I was kind of a sad young person because I was worried about God and the fear of it. That's not necessarily what the Baptists were about, but that's how I interpreted it. Do you know the old prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep?" I didn't like worrying about dying at night. I didn't like the testimonies people gave in church, because they were about people being taken over by their Lord and Savior--it made me sad and I didn't like it. In college I didn't go to church much except when I came home, and went to where my dad was preaching. I tried joining the Baptist group at Boston University when I was a student there, but I did not continue in the the group because the theology just didn't fit, it just wasn't part of me, if you know what I mean.

My husband Hank and I were married in the First Baptist Church in Rockland. And we attended the First Baptist Church here in Haverhill, just down Main Street, when our children were little. But Hank grew up in this church, and never felt comfortable at First Baptist. When our oldest daughter Pamela was 13, there was pressure to have her baptized in the Baptist church. But we didn't want to do that. So I thought, "If it's going to make the family better, we'll go to the Universalist church." That was in 1960. It took a while for me to get into this church, but gradually I did. This church just met our needs more.

It was a gradual change for me as I listened and thought, was exposed to new ideas, with the freedom to think of the spiritual world in many different ways. Still, it took a while for me to feel really at home in this church. It was important to participate and gradually get to know this congregation. This church has been absolutely essential in helping me becoming the person I am now. I so love being a part of this church that I say it is my second home.

I have seen ministers come and go and I found some more to my liking than others, and there have been differences in the services over the years, but all remind me that this is the place for me. I'd say that over the years the church has become more community minded and more relaxed somehow that it was previously. So here I am and I feel so much more freedom in my thinking now, so that I think everyone should be a UU!

Frank: My question for Barbara, who's seen all kinds of change, in the church and in the world, who has been willing to make significant changes herself, is this: What lasts? What will never change? There's a famous old sermon about the "permanent and the transient." What's permanent, and what is changeable?

Barbara and I had been talking about this, and today's reading came to mind, those words John Burroughs wrote a hundred years ago. "The forms and creeds of religion change, but the sentiment of religion--the wonder and reverence and love we feel in the presence of the inscrutable universe--persists." Barbara and I talked about what hasn't changed, what's stood the test of time. We thought of a line from a hymn that answers this question for us: "wonder, love and praise."

Barbara: I love the word wonder. I love to look out the window and wonder about this beautiful world. What a shame, we have this beautiful world we live in, and people are killing each other. Why do people want to do this? That worries me a lot--what's going to happen to our world? In my old church there's nothing to wonder about, because it's all in the Bible--telling us what to believe. A lot of those old songs made me sad. But here, I feel this openness to wonder and explore. There's nothing you can't learn more about! I feel a sense of wonder about all the people here and all they do, inside and outside the church.

Wonder brings to mind an array of beautiful thoughts: the sky at sunset, the stars at night, the sounds of birds, insects, children at play, music at it hits our ears, church bells. I wonder about our world in general: what will it look like tomorrow, next week, next year, and when our grandchildren and great-grandchildren are here to care for it?

When I was young and in bed at night, during the springtime I would hear the frogs in the pond behind our house and their chorus would put me to sleep. I wondered about a lot of things then, as I said my prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep." I wondered if I would wake up the next day. That kind of wonder made me fearful and so I changed the ending to "please bless the family." The kind of wonder I embrace now is my amazement at how people through the ages have done their part to beautify this world, with its lovely gardens, castles, churches and other buildings, where people can meet, as we are gathered here today, forming communities of love.

Frank: Rachel Carson, an early environmentalist wrote about how a sense of wonder comes naturally to children. There's something deeply religious about wonder. The famous rabbi Abraham Heschel, reflecting on his life, put it this way: "Never once in my life did I ask God for success or wisdom or power or fame. I asked for wonder, and (God) gave it to me."

Every Sunday we say aloud our unison affirmation, which begins, "Love is the doctrine of this church." We say that love is what we are about. In his famous words to the Corinthians, Paul said, "Faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love." Paul used the Greek word 'agape,' He wasn't talking about romantic love, or brotherly or sisterly love, but a selfless love, that's passionately committed to the well-being of the other.¹ Love is how we reach out to one another, and to the wider world.

Barbara: For me, I see love most clearly in the families and friends here and at home. We are so lucky here to look around and see babies, children, young people, adults and seniors who enjoy seeing and being with one another, feeling those moments of love that connect us to each other. Although my parents didn't talk about love the way many of us do now, my siblings and I felt it, by

¹ This definition comes from C. S. Lewis.

the many examples they set for us. We grew up feeling and knowing that we were loved unconditionally, for who we were. Is there any greater gift one person can give to another?

When my son Prent was about four years old and some of the family were going to visit my dad who was in a nursing home and not doing well. Prent asked if he could go with us. I'm not sure of my dad's state of mind at that time, but can you imagine that little boy running in to see his grandfather, whom he loved so much. It was an amazing moment for us all. Now that was love.

The third thing Frank and I identified as central and unchanging is praise. The word praise was used many times in the church of my childhood. It was always, "Praise the Lord!" I think today I would say I like to praise the people. I don't remember my folks praising us children though we should have been praised, now that I think of it!

Frank: Some of us resist words like praise and worship. Is it because we were taught to praise people or things that didn't seem worthy of our praise? Is it because we think praising is somehow diminishing to our own worth?

I don't see it that way. I say we are made for praise. The other day, I walked out of the church building and the sky in the west was an amazing array of colors--blue, rose, yellow. I wanted to turn to someone and say, "Hey, look at that! Isn't it beautiful?" That's what praise is: being moved, and sharing that feeling. Saying "Thanks!" and "Wow!" There's a hymn that says, "let every instrument be tuned for praise."

John Ciardi wrote a poem about this, called "White Heron."

What lifts the heron leaning on the air
I praise without a name. A crouch, a flare,
a long stroke through the cumulus of trees,
a shaped thought at the sky - then gone. O rare!
Saint Francis, being happiest on his knees,
would have cried Father! Cry anything you please

But praise. By any name or none. But praise
the white original burst that lights
the heron on his two soft kissing kites.
When saints praise heaven lit by doves and rays,
I sit by pond scums till the air recites
It's heron back. And doubt all else. But praise.

In this changeable world, what lasts? What endures?

Barbara: For us, on this day, it's these three things: wonder, love and praise. How would you answer the question, "What lasts?" What nourishes and sustains you, enough to last a lifetime? We each have a light, and we are here to let it shine.

Frank: And we are part of a great Love, which will not let us go. So let us be awake to wonder, and open to the power of love, and tuned for praise. And let us all say together: Amen.