



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Our Funky Little Church,”

a reflection given by Sally Liebermann Rev. Frank Clarkson
on June 14, 2015

Note: This reflection for Religious Education Sunday was preceded by this passage from Anne Lamott, “Why I Make Sam Go to Church,” from her Book Traveling Mercies:

Sam is the only kid he knows who goes to church — who is made to go to church two or three times a month. He rarely wants to...it does not help to remind him that once he's there he enjoys himself.... It does not help that I always pack some snacks, some Legos, his art supplies, and bring along any friend of his whom we can lure into our churchy web. It does not help that he genuinely cares for the people there. All that matters to him is that he alone among his colleagues is forced to spend Sunday morning in church.

You might think, noting the bitterness, the resignation, that he was being made to sit through a six-hour Latin mass. Or you might wonder why I make this strapping, exuberant boy come with me most weeks, and if you were to ask, this is what I would say.

I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy-five pounds.

But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I have found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know that have what I want — which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy — are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith: they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians—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. I saw something once from the Jewish Theological Seminary that said, “A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be part of a great meaning.” Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, 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, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me to 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.”

Frank: When I hear those words Kate and Noah just read about why Anne Lamott makes her son Sam go to church, I picture you all, and this place.”Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, 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.” And they are teaching our children, and setting up tables and chairs, are taking care of this old building and planting and watering flowers.

Sally: Frank, do you think we’re a funky little church? I looked up that word FUNKY and one of its meanings is “cool and admirable”?

Frank: Even though our building is not so little, I definitely think we are cool and admirable. When people ask me, “What’s the Haverhill church like?” I say, “It’s full of good-hearted, salt of the earth people. It’s more diverse than other churches I’ve known. It’s a wonderful place to do ministry, and I love it.” I could say that this church is more funky than fancy; it’s real, not pretentious. It’s a place where, if you are at the end of your rope, we will help you tie a knot in it and hold on. Where we will say, “You come back now.” I’m talking about the people here. And we have this awesome building—these windows, the beautiful wood, the organ up there—but the church isn’t the building, it’s the people.

Sally: Yeah, you know, here’s the church, here’s the steeple, open the doors, there are the people? (does hand movements and leads congregation) It’s good for us to remember that the church is the people. So do you think we’re funky people?

Frank: I think what makes us funky is that we are different and unique, and this is a place where we are invited to be ourselves, not fit into a mold. You were talking earlier about how we use our open minds, our loving hearts and our helping hands..... I can’t think of anything more cool or admirable than that. If there is a spirit of welcome and grace in this place, it is because of the people here. It’s you all—who show up and who bring your children, you who bring your friends. It is because of you young people, who bring your energy and sense of fun, and the babies who remind us how precious and beautiful life is.

Sally: It’s who we are, and it’s what we do, isn’t it? When we’re collecting stuffing for Thanksgiving baskets and making Community Meals and serving soup and making hats, I’m starting to think that is cool! I’ve always thought it was nice, but I guess I never really thought of it as cool.

Frank: Yeah, sometimes we think it’s cool to have the newest piece of clothing or video game. But wanting and having things is nothing compared how we treat other people. When you do something to help someone else, when you use your open mind, and loving heart, and helping hands, I think that is really cool.

Sally: Sharing your food, your time, your ideas, your muscles, your kindness, that’s the REAL COOL, isn’t it? And it’s why we’re here—to reach out and be good friends to one another, to help other people, to make a difference in our part of the world.

Frank: What I love about what you do here, is how our RE program is helping our young people connect with each other in healthy and helpful ways, about reminding them they have worth and

dignity, that we are here to love our neighbors and that it's a privilege to serve those in need. What we are doing here is helping to shape and form or young people into caring and faithful people—and our world certainly needs more people like that.

Sally: Today we celebrate and give thanks for those who make this possible. For the thirty adult volunteers who were part of our program this year. For the children and youth, and their families who bring them, and encourage them. For this congregation, which understands how important it is to reach across the generations and be attentive to the youngest in our midst. What we just sang says it so well:

Both: For all that is our life, we give our thanks and praise
For all life is a gift that we are called to use
To build the common good, and make our own days glad.

Amen.