



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Toward Healing and Happiness,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on June 16, 2013

A couple of months ago, I met a couple who were here for the first time. I told them I was glad, and grateful, they'd come. These days, it takes a certain amount of courage to come into a church for the first time. And then I said something else--that I figure people seeking a church must be looking for something. Maybe something is missing in your life, if you're coming here. I believe this, but I worried, afterwards, that I gave the wrong impression; implied that there was something wrong with you, if you were coming to church, of all places, on Sunday morning. Like, you don't you have something better you could be doing?

There's a book called *The Holy Longing*, which articulates what I was trying to say. Its author, Ronald Rolheiser, says desire and longing are part of the human condition: “we are forever restless, dissatisfied, frustrated, and aching,” he says. “There is within us a fundamental dis-ease, an unquenchable fire that renders us incapable, in this life, of ever coming to full peace... Sometimes desire hits us as pain--dissatisfaction, frustration and aching. At other times its grip is not felt as painful at all, but as a deep energy, as something beautiful... Spirituality is, ultimately, about what we do with that desire.”¹

That's what I was trying to say to those newcomers--that I assume you come here because you are wanting and needing a place to engage your spirituality, a community that helps you deal with the aches and pains, the joys and sorrows of life. And I trust this is a good place for that, for engaging with life, in all its wonder and mystery, grit and messiness.

I didn't mean to imply that the church is like a home for misfit toys, only for people who are broken. I think of the church as like a gym, where you go to exercise your heart and soul, where those muscles are strengthened.

I read an blog post this week, that got me thinking about these things, written by the Rev. Victoria Weinstein, a UU minister. She wrote about the church as a community that's here to encourage people, that is, to fill folks with courage.

She sees the church as a place for healing, but not just that: “There is a hospital wing here,” she says. “But no one takes up permanent residence in that wing. They get better and leave the bed

¹ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 3-5.

open for the next person... We are companions, fellow pilgrims. We are not saviors, social workers, or even nurses. Be clear about the difference.”²

In the gospels, Jesus is portrayed as an ally to those at the margins, one who challenges the powers that be. The stories of his ministry tell about him feeding the hungry and healing the sick, speaking truth to power and being a friend.

Do you ever think about Jesus as an example you might follow, as a kind of leader you might try to emulate? He never wrote a book or started a church. He didn't put himself at the center, though others tried to. He saw himself as a conduit for God's love and God's justice. He tried to show his followers that they could do it too. He told them, “you are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.”

There's a story in the gospel of John about an encounter between Jesus and a man who has been ill his whole life. Jesus meets this man is near a pool of water with healing properties, and there are lots of other invalids around there too. The gospel says, “When Jesus saw (the man) lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’”³

What a question. Can you imagine visiting a friend in the hospital and asking, “Do you want to be better?” It should be obvious, shouldn't it?

But the truth is, it's easy to get into a pattern in which you're so used to being sick or sad or broken or discouraged, that you forget this is not the way we are meant to live. Think about your life. Those places where you are hurt or broken. Do you want to be healed? Or have you gotten comfortable with your woundedness, accustomed to the way things are?

There is something in our human nature, isn't there, that urges us hold on to the pain and sorrow we know, rather than let it go? Sometimes despair can seem safer than hope. The poet W. H. Auden put it this way:

We would rather be ruined than changed
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And see our illusions die.⁴

When Jesus asks the man, “Do you want to be made well?” do you know how that man responds? He doesn't say “yes,” or “duh!,” or even “no,” or “what will it cost?” He replies with an excuse: “I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.”

² Victoria Weinstein's blog post, “Napping on the Floor of the Aerobics Studio,” available online at <http://www.peacebang.com/2013/06/10/napping-on-the-floor-of-the-aerobics-studio/>

³ This story is found in John 5:2-9.

⁴ W.H. Auden, from “The Age of Anxiety.”

You see, this water was understood to have healing powers only when it was stirred up. And someone else always got there first. So how does Jesus respond? Does he sit down and pat the man's hand and say, "Oh, it must be hard to be you"? Does he say, "Tell me about all your troubles"?

Isn't that what we'd expect any caring person to do--to listen and be empathetic? But how helpful, really, is this kind of caring? Talk is good, if it leads to new understandings and changed behaviors. But if empathy is just a painkiller, a temporary respite, does it do any good?

There's a book called *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy-- and the World's Getting Worse*.⁵ I'm not against therapy--I have benefitted from it, and I believe in it--but you have to do the work, and be willing to change, if you want to get better.

There's a comedy skit Bob Newhart once did for a TV show. He plays a therapist, who explains to his patient he can cure her in five minutes. "So tell me why you're here," he says, and she describes her problem. He listens until she's done, and then he says, "I'm going to say two words to you now. I want you to listen to them very carefully, to take them out of the office with you and incorporate them into your life."

"Shall I write them down?" the patient asks. "If it makes you comfortable, you can," he says. "Most people can remember them. Are you ready? Here they are. 'Stop it!'"

The patient says, "So, what are you saying?" And Bob says, "It's not complicated--just stop it!" "But this problem has been with me since childhood--" And Bob says, "No, we don't go there--just stop it!"⁶

This is a comedy routine, but it makes a point, that we have a choice--to be victims of the circumstances of our lives, or to something that moves us toward health and healing. Sometimes we need to stop listening to the old tapes that run in our heads, and stop doing things that aren't good for us. To seek out people who encourage us to do the hard work of getting better, and stay away from those who want us to remain in our woundedness.

When Jesus asks that lifelong invalid, "Do you want to be made well?" and the man responds with an excuse, do you what Jesus does next? He doesn't empathize, he doesn't say, "I'm sorry your life has been so hard." No, Jesus says, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

If you want to be well, you can't just wait around for someone else to make that happen. You need to take responsibility for your own healing. And after hearing this, the story says, "At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk."

There's a TV preacher I see sometimes, when I'm at the gym. He heals people, they say, and even cures financial woes. If you send money, he will send you a vial of his special holy healing water. When I talk about healing, I am not talking about this kind of charlatan. I'm not denying the real and painful physical and emotional struggles you face.

⁵ James Hillman and Michael Ventura, *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy--And the World's Getting Worse*.

⁶ Available online at <http://vimeo.com/10880189>

What I am saying is that, no matter our circumstances, we do have choices. Will you keep engaging in behaviors that are unhealthy and unhelpful, or will you stop it, and start doing what is needed to be made well? Jesus said, "Pick up that mat you've been lying on all these years, and walk."

Walking is both a great practice and a good metaphor for the journey toward healing and wholeness. Soren Kierkegaard gave this advice: "Above all, do not lose your desire to walk. Every day, I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts."

Do not lose your desire to change and grow, your desire to move on from what ails you, your desire to be made well. Make time to listen to that desire, and follow where it leads. And if you can't walk, if you are physically unable, then find another practice that's good for you, that promotes healing and wholeness. The important thing is to be in touch with that desire for what nourishes and sustains you.

I've known enough sadness this year. And some joy too. In these sweet June days, I plan to walk toward hope and happiness. What about you?

And what about this community? We are not social workers here, or messiahs or even nurses--we are a church--people walking together; walking, I hope, toward healing and happiness. Doing our own work, and encouraging others to do theirs. Helping one another to get up and walk.

Thich Naht Hanh wrote a meditation about this. It begins, "Take my hand, We will walk. We will only walk. We will enjoy our walk without thinking of arriving anywhere." Further on, it continues, "Then we learn that there is no peace walk; that peace is the walk; that there is no happiness walk; that happiness is the walk." And it ends, "Earth will be safe when we feel in us enough safety."⁷

Our gifts, and our lives, can be used to bless or to curse.⁸ My companions, let us be ones who choose to bless the world.

Amen.

⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, "Walking Meditation," from *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1999), p. 194.

⁸ These last lines refer to the poem by Rebecca Parker, "Choose to Bless the World," which was used as a responsive reading.