



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Dirty Hands and Living Monuments,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 25, 2014

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, our national day to remember and give thanks for those who have died serving in our armed forces. It's also a day, for many of us, to remember those dear to us who have died, whether they served in the military or not. Some of us go out to a cemetery and visit a grave, maybe bring flowers to plant.

I'm fond of cemeteries. They're sacred, and usually beautiful, places. Walking through them, I imagine the gatherings around each grave; the families and friends there to remember and say goodbye. I hold in my heart and memory the different places I've stood with some of you as we laid your loved ones to rest.

On this Memorial Day I'm also mindful of those who did return from war, but who came home injured in body or spirit. How do we honor those who are still living, who need support, love and care? It is possible, isn't it, to both love and support our veterans and at the same time, to pray for peace?

President Lincoln said it best, what this work is about, in his second inaugural address:

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

We need memorials--physical places that remind us who we are, what we hold sacred; places we can return to, to remember and connect with those we have loved and lost. A week ago, just before the memorial service for Cindy Armstrong began, one of the family members said how it felt good to be here in church. I told her what Desmond Tutu says about this, that you can tell a church that people have prayed in for years and years: like it's in the walls and the space, that Spirit, you can sense it.

I'm happy to think and talk about the spiritual life, but it can seem so ephemeral, can't it? So airy, elusive, hard to pin down. We need ways to be grounded in what is earthy and real. Last Sunday we heard these words from Mary Oliver:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,¹

Isn't one of the best things about gardening how it gets you down on your knees in the grass and in the dirt? How it gets your hands down into the earth, which is so good for the soul? Today I'm thinking about physicality and earthiness; about how we need tangible ways to touch what is sacred.

St. Paul's Cathedral in London stands as a testament to the faith and resilience of the English people. During World War II, the German air force bombed London for 57 straight nights. Surrounded by devastation all around, St. Paul's was damaged but not destroyed. Situated on the highest point in the city, its dome stands as a reminder of how Londoners persevered, "kept calm and carried on." though those dark days.

Inside St. Paul's is a marble plaque, marking the life of Sir Christopher Wren, the cathedral's architect, who is buried below. It includes these Latin words: "Lector si momentum requiris circumpice." "Reader, if you seek his monument, look around you."

Don't we all wonder, at times, what will remain after we're gone? Will there be a gravestone somewhere? Will our name appear anywhere more permanent than the internet or a newspaper? When we're gone, will people remember us? How will they remember us? Don't you wonder about that?

As I said, I love and appreciate physical monuments and memorials. But today I commend to you a different kind: a living memorial, built from the stuff of our lives.

Some years ago I attended a celebration of the tenth year of ministry for Rev. Roger Paine, my internship supervisor. A number of his former students came back for this. When it was my turn to speak, I shared those words from Christopher Wren's plaque, "If you seek a memorial, look around you," and said, "Roger, look around you. We--your students, all of us here, are a monument to your ten years of ministry in this place."

Can't this be true for each of us? Can't we live lives so fully and well so that we leave the world better than we found it? Isn't that the best kind of monument: a legacy of commitment and caring, of lives healed and redeemed?

You know how to do this, don't you? How to put your words into action, how to pray with your feet? It's what you do, twice a month, when you feed hungry people at Community Meals. In a different way, it's what you do when you sit in meditation upstairs on Monday nights, when you practice metta, or loving-kindness meditation.

Isn't it why you're here? To find ways to help heal and bless our world. To make a difference, to make your faith, hope and love tangible and real. Isn't that why you're here? Sometimes I worry that we don't offer you enough opportunities to do this.

¹ Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day."

Today I can tell you about two new ways you can put your faith into action; two tangible ways: building homes and growing food. Two ways to help others. Two ways to do good and feel good.

One is Habitat for Humanity, which organizes volunteers to help build affordable housing for people in need. We're putting together a team of folks to work on Habitat projects in the Merrimack Valley. The main project right now is in Lawrence, an old convent that's being converted into ten condominiums. If you're handy with tools, that's great. But there are also jobs for people who've never held a hammer or a saw. What I know from volunteering for Habitat is how fun it is to be part of a team working together, how moving it is to meet the family that will live in the home you're building, how rewarding it is to see tangible progress and know that you are helping someone have a home of their own, often for the first time.

Bill Taylor is coordinating this effort, and you can find him at coffee hour today, and learn more about how to get involved. He wants you to know that he really wants to have conversation with you about this: to hear your questions, your ideas, how you want to be involved--so seek Bill out today, ok?

The second project comes out of the Open Hand Food Pantry, which we host here in our building. You may remember that the pantry used to be run by Catholic Charities, but a year ago they decided to get out of the pantry business. Father Bob Murray and the people of St. James Church were unwilling to let the pantry die. They put together a plan and funding and the Pantry is better than ever. Among the Haverhill clergy we've been talking about the interrelated issues of hunger and healthy eating, and had the idea to start growing fresh food to distribute through pantries in town. This is what our church did for years with our Cornucopia Project, when we grew and distributed thousands of ears of corn.

There are fresh new plots of earth just two miles from here, on the grounds of St. John the Baptist church, near the hospital. Different groups and individuals in town have taken plots, and there's one with our name on it! This summer we'll be down there, planting vegetables, pulling weeds, and harvesting food that will go to people who don't get a lot of fresh, healthy food to eat. Anyone who helps is welcome to take some produce home too.

And if you're looking for a one-time commitment, another way to get your hands dirty is by helping at the a church cleanup day in two weeks, on Saturday, June 7 at 9 am. Bill Taylor can tell you more about at coffee hour too.

This kind of physical, tangible work is good for the soul: building a house, growing a garden, working with others to make things better. It's holy work,

be(ing) with people who submerge
in the task, (as Marge Piercy says) who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm

when the food must come in or the fire be put out.²

Thirty years ago, I lived in Washington, DC, with my best friend from college. One day I was doing a carpentry project, and this made me so happy, working with my hands, that I said to my friend, who was a devout Presbyterian, “You know, I love carpentry so much, I think sometimes think I was been Jesus in a previous life.” He was scandalized, of course. And I was just kidding. But there is something blessed in working with your hands, isn’t there?

That's how we will make living monuments. Using our gifts and talents; applying them where they are needed. Getting our hands dirty doing good; making a difference through our actions. And in the process, being made different: learning, growing, strengthening our hearts and souls.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.³

We have these opportunities to do some work that is real. To grow food for people who are hungry, to build homes for people who need them. To make our church more beautiful and more welcoming. To do this, shoulder to shoulder with folks from our faith community. Is there anything better?

Here we are, with these lives we have been given. With these hearts, ready to give and receive love. With these hands ready to serve. Let’s roll up our sleeves and get those hands dirty. Let’s set about building that land we dream of, where sisters and brothers, anointed by God will then create peace, where justice shall roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.⁴

Amen.

² Marge Piercy, “To Be of Use.”

³ Ibid.

⁴ These words echo the refrain of Barbara Zanotti’s hymn “We’ll Build a Land,” #121 in *Singing the Living Tradition*. They are based on texts from the prophets Isaiah and Amos.