



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“A Real Church,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on September 26, 2010

When I arrived here a couple of years ago, it wasn't long before I noticed that we didn't have any babies in the church. It occurred to me: I could approach people who had the potential to address this problem: “You know, there's something we could use your help with.” Of course, I didn't do this. Nevertheless, we have a number of little children and babies here now, and it's great. So thank those of you who have done your part to make us a more youthful and lively church!

It's such a joy and a privilege to welcome and bless new babies, to hold them and put my hand on their forehead, to call their name and say, “Know that you are beloved upon this earth.” A few years ago I was blessing a child at the family's home. These were people who weren't connected to any church, so we gathered in their back yard for the ceremony, and afterwards for lunch. Some of the family asked me about the church in Haverhill I'd been called to serve, the usual questions--where it's located, how many members, those kind of things. Then one of the uncles asked, “Is it a real church?”

Sometimes I wish that I was quicker on my feet, or a little less polite. I could have said, “No, it's a fake one. And I'm not really a minister. I just play one on TV.” But I simply said, “Yes,” and thought to myself, “Of course it's real. Would I have gone through all I have to serve one that is not?”

But his question stayed with me. I wish I'd asked him, “What do you mean, a real church? Are you asking about the building, or what folks believe, or how they act? What do you think makes a church real?” As the velveteen rabbit asks, “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?” Does it mean having stained glass windows, or bishops, or your Sunday service on TV?

I suspect that for some folks, especially in this transitory world we live in, a real church is one that does things the way they have always been done, that emphasizes tradition and promises stability. For others, a real church is one that has a certain kind of architecture or ornamentation, or clergy that dress or act in a certain way. But can we agree that these are not essential things, and not what make a church real?

Now let me tell you about a conversation I had this past summer, when I spent a few days at a dude ranch in Wyoming owned by my wife's cousin. At meals I sat at the table where the family and the ranch hands ate. One night, one of the wranglers asked me what I did for work, and

when I told him, another one of the cowboys perked up. He wanted to hear about my church. I tried to give him the short version, but he had lots of questions. “How do you understand the Bible?” I said we tend to take the Bible seriously but not literally. That it is a compilation of books written by different people and different times from their own perspectives. “What about Jesus?” I said we have diverse understandings here, but UUs tend to see Jesus as a man, a prophet, but not God. I found myself explaining my problems with atonement theology. All this time other folks, but not me, were getting seconds on the ribs and cornbread!

Though I tried to avoid it, the conversation kept sounding like an argument. This young man, in his early 20’s, had grown up in a Bible church, and was agitated by my heretical beliefs. I wished I had just said, “Look, I’m on vacation. Can we talk about something else?”

The next day I found myself still thinking about that conversation. It was like we were speaking different languages. He wanted to know what I believed but I wish I had changed the conversation to how our faith calls us to live.¹ That would have been better. Too often religion, particularly in the Protestant tradition, which we are part of, is about what you think, rather than how you live, and seems walled off from the real world. No wonder so many people have given up on the church.

I want my religion to be different. I want my to be part of a faith that is at home around the dinner table, or on a city street, or out under that big Wyoming sky. This isn’t a new idea. But do any of you doubt that an expansive faith, rather than a narrow one, is what is needed today? At least as much in the 21st century, as it was back in the 19th, when Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister spoke these words I put at the top of our order of service:

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;
its temple, all space;
its shrine, the good heart;
its creed, all truth;
its ritual, works of love;
its profession of faith, divine living.

Parker understood the need to get to what is transcendent in religion. This perspective is sorely needed today, when politicians and religious leaders and the media inflame religious differences and exploit people’s fears and pick on our Islamic sisters and brothers. The true test of religion is not what we say, or even what we think, but how we act.

I love ministering here. If you asked my why, I’d say because you’re an openhearted congregation looking to go deeper and grow our ministry. You’re a real church--what else could I want? This church is not real because we’ve been worshipping here in this place for over a hundred years, or because we have these beautiful stained glass windows. You know the church is not the building. It’s the people, you who come together, who cast your lot with one another. A real church is one that does three basic things--welcomes people in, helps them to go deeper, and then sends them

¹ For more on the need to move beyond belief, see Rev. Peter Morales’ sermon “Religion Beyond Belief,” available at <http://clf.uua.org/quest/2010/10/morales.html>

out to help build a better world. Welcoming, spiritual depth, and justice seeking--that's what a church needs to be real. Today I'll say a few things about welcoming diversity, and next week, in part two, I'll talk about going deeper, and in a few weeks, we'll turn to seeking justice.

Some of you are visiting us today from other faith traditions, and it makes my heart glad to have you are here with us. Some of you are new here and wondering, "Is this the right church for me?" Some of you, even if you've been here a while, are still learning about this denomination with its long name. You might be wondering "What kind of church is this?"

We are a different kind of church, mainly because we don't have a creed to define what we believe. This makes us a big-tent religion, or at least we try to be. We are intentional about our theological diversity. We don't all imagine God in the same way, and some of us are atheists and agnostics. We are part of the Protestant tradition, though our diversity has moved us to the edge of that tradition, if not into a different category altogether. I do believe that our UU faith would be stronger and if we renewed and strengthened out ties to our Jewish and Christian roots, because there are spiritual depths to be plumbed there.

My point is, where does it say that being a real church means everyone sees things the same way? What if we saw the diversity of creation as a gift and a blessing, and not something to be feared? Of course, there is a balance to be struck here, between individuals and the community, between diversity and commonality, but a church that is real is one that throws its doors open wide, that appreciates difference and celebrates diversity.

This is what the writer Anne Lamott found at a little Presbyterian church where she lives in northern California. She says, "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," she writes. "They even said, 'You come back now.'"²

The United Church of Christ has a TV ad that shows a church with a velvet rope line out front and a bouncer letting some folks in, and keeping others out. At the end of the ad a voice over says, "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we." They have another ad that begins with a little white girl doing the old hand thing, "Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and see all the people." The next shot shows a little black girl, opening her hands, saying, "all the people," Then a same sex couple, then an older person, then a disabled one, all of them looking into the camera and saying, "all the people." I love this ad campaign, and wish that our denomination was the one running it, because it beautifully illustrates the kind of welcome and hospitality we try to offer here.³

"By the time you are real," the Skin Horse says, "most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in your joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." A

² Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Random House, 1999) p. 100.

³ To view these ads, visit <http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/ads/television-ads.html>

church that is real is one where people understand, where you can't be ugly, where they will always let you in.

Next Sunday everyone who is interested in this church community is invited to be part of our Appreciative Inquiry process. I'm not going to take time to explain to you what Appreciate Inquiry is right now--you'll understand better when you participate--but if you want your story and your experience and your hopes to help shape the future of this congregation, then you better stay after church next Sunday! We need your voice and your ideas and your participation. In exchange, we'll feed you lunch and promise to make it an engaging and rewarding experience.

For now, I want you leave you with the words that were said to Tristan and Liam this morning by their Godmothers. My prayer is that we will be a church where you know these words to be true.

You and I, we meet as strangers,
Each carrying a mystery within us.
I may never know who you are,
I may never know you completely.
But I trust that you are a person in your own right
possessed of a beauty and a value that are the earth's richest treasures.
So, I make this promise to you.
I will impose no identities upon you but will invite you
to become yourself without shame or fear.
I will hold open a space for you in the world
and defend your right to fill it with an authentic vocation
For as long as your search takes,
You have my loyalty.⁴

Together we will do our part to help build that land where all of us, all God's people, shall be free.

Amen.

⁴ Theodore Roszak, *Person/Planet*.