



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“And Home Rejoicing Brought Me,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on October 26, 2014

The hymn we just sang, it's been my favorite for a while now. I listen to it in the car and sing along. I hope it will be sung at my funeral. The third verse especially gets me:

Lost and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love she sought me
And on her shoulder gently laid
And home rejoicing brought me.¹

I find these lines so comforting and compelling, so Universalist to my ears. They evoke imagery that's kind of old-fashioned; most of us don't like to think of ourselves as sheep, to say nothing of needing a shepherd. “You're not the boss of me!”

Most of us don't think of God in personal terms. We have this more expansive view of the holy as Spirit or Source, as that Force which animates the universe. Like in Star Wars: “May the Force be with you.” And that's a good thing, this spacious understanding of the holy, because it makes room for us to enter into this mystery in ways that we're able to.

I don't tend to think of God in personal terms. I don't think of God as male, or female, or use the pronouns “he” or “she” for the divine. But sometimes all this talk of Spirit can seem so ethereal, so intangible. So a part of me does crave images that are more earthy: God as mother, or father, or shepherd. Even as we remember they are just images, our images, and not the thing itself.

Today, when we remember those who have died, it's a good time to contemplate these things. In the face of death, what do we affirm? What do we hold on to? There are words and images which have companioned people facing death for thousands of years. The 23rd psalm must get read at more funerals and gravesides than any other passage:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
You make me lie down in green pastures and lead me beside still waters...
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will not fear,
For you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me.

¹ *The King of Love My Shepherd Is*, words by Henry Williams Baker, adapted, #87 in *Hymns of the Spirit*.

In that back corner of the sanctuary there's a beautiful window that illustrates this psalm. It was installed after the windows up here, depicting Jesus, and before these other windows, which came later.

In the gospels of Matthew and Luke Jesus tells a parable that picks up on this imagery of shepherd and sheep. He said, "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep'" (Luke 15:3-6). Jesus said there would be more rejoicing in heaven over one lost who had been found, rather than over ninety-nine who never strayed.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu likes to unpack this story. He says, "If you look at most of the images in churches, they show the good shepherd carrying a fluffy little lamb. Now fluffy little lambs are not known for wandering away from their mummies. The sheep that is likely to do so is that obstreperous old ram. It's actually mind-blowing to think a good shepherd says, 'I'm leaving 99 well-behaved sheep to go and search for this rogue.'

"And when he finds it he doesn't pinch his nostrils. He gathers this thing up and says, 'There is greater joy in heaven over this one than over the 99 who did not need to be found.'" Tutu says, "That is an incredible statement about the divine!" Desmond Tutu says, "You and I would say what lousy stewardship. How can you want to invest in this thing when you've got these lovely well-behaved sheep? You'd need your head (examined)."²

Desmond Tutu says we misunderstand what God is like. We apply the standards of the world to the divine, and imagine God as angry parent or vengeful judge. We think we have to earn God's favor. But Tutu says we are wrong. That if we read the Bible, and pay attention to the stories, more often they tell of the God who wants us to come home. To come to our senses, to be who we were born to be, to trust that we already have everything we need.

There's a folk song that evokes this idea and image, it's titled, "Calling My Children Home." In it, a mother longs for her children to come back and she sings,

I'm lonesome for my precious children,
They live so far away,
O can't they hear my calling,
And come back home some day?³

What if we imagined God like this? Not as angry or vengeful or indifferent, but as one lonesome for us? As one longing for us to come home; even as one who wants us to come out and play, the way children do?

² Alec Russell, "Desmond Tutu," published September 13, 2013, in *The Financial Times Magazine*, available online at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/7b231140-1a89-11e3-93e8-00144feab7de.html#axzz3H4G5F3pB>

³ "Calling My Children Home," composed by Doyle Lawson, Charles Waller, Robert Yates. Here's a version recorded by Ralph Stanley: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHCCKsYgrvM>

Archbishop Tutu reminds us of an early bishop in the church, named Origen, who was cast out as a heretic because he said even the devil would eventually not be able to resist the attraction of God's love. Origen was one of the first universalists. He understood that the God whose other name is Love wants nothing more than to be in relationship with us, wants us to come home. To be at home, in our selves and on this earth.

This is our tradition and our theological foundation. It's no accident that the the stained glass windows over there illustrate the parable of the prodigal son; that one who wandered away and then, finally, came to his senses and came home. And that one in back, the 23rd psalm: "He leads me beside the still waters." The good people who built this church and who paid for these windows, they chose these images because they were central to their Universalist faith: God as Love and Jesus as the good shepherd.

They must have understood that it is in our human nature to wander and get lost, that we need to be reminded and encouraged to come on home. We need to be assured that the door is always open and we will be welcome. Too often the church has not done a good job of proclaiming this good news. Too many of us were made to feel unwelcome in the church because of one way or another we didn't fit in. But that is not who God is. That is not the God I know.

Lost and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love you sought me
And on your shoulder gently laid
And home rejoicing brought me.

Sometimes folks, when they hit a hard patch, they stay away from church. Maybe they don't want to fall apart here. But this is not a bad place to feel what you need to feel and cry those tears you need to cry. Maybe it's our New England stoicism, but it makes me sad to think that people might think they can't bring their brokenness to church. Of all places, this should be a safe and supportive and caring place where you can tell the truth of your life and healing can happen.

What happens when we die? On this side of the grave, none of us know for sure. The holy days that come at this time of year: All Souls, All Saints, the Mexican Day of the Dead, the Pagan celebration of Samhain; they reflect the ancient belief that this is a time when the veil between the material and spirit worlds is thin. That in these days we are better able to sense the presence of those who have died, that they are near.

Hundreds of years ago, the mystic Meister Eckhart said, "God is at home. We are in the far country." This is the mystery we are invited to inhabit: that when we die, we go back to where we came from; whether we imagine that as returning to the great silence, or to the good earth, or back home to God. Do you know that our friends at Calvary Baptist Church call their funerals "homecoming services?"

Death is all around us. Just yesterday Calvary held the homecoming service for fifteen year-old Joseph Green, Jr., who died of leukemia, the grandson of Kalister Green-Byrd, known and loved by many of us. In the past year we've lost four lovely members of our church: Ruth Marr, Irma Pasquale, Cindy Armstrong and Janet Bowering. Each of us remembers family members and

friends who have died. So how do we live in the face of death, the deaths of those we love, and our own certain mortality?

We live as fully as we can while we're here. We hug our children, we look our loved ones in the eye and we say, "I love you. Do you know that?" We deal with our unfinished business. Knowing we don't have all the time in the world, we cherish this moment and this day. We vow to live lives worth living, so that when our time comes, we are ready.

We can do our own theological work. We can ponder these mysteries and embrace the theology that is ours, that is life-giving. In the face of death, it helps me to trust that we are part of a great Love that will never let us go. That we are part of a great cloud of witness, a company of saints. It helps to remember ancient words and images that remind me I am not alone. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Or, as Christine Robinson interprets it:

I am a child of God

I have everything I need...

And though I will walk through dark places, and eventually to death,

I need never be afraid.

For You are with me always.⁴

And not only that: when the time comes, you will take me, gladly and rejoicing. The mistakes and missteps won't matter. Because our God is One who does not keep track of things like that, but is like the parent longing for her child to come home, like the good shepherd who rejoices over the one who was lost, but now is found.

Lost and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love you sought me
And on your shoulder gently laid
And home rejoicing brought me.

Amen.

⁴ Christine Robinson's improvisations on the psalms available online at <http://doubterpsalms.blogspot.com/>