

“Back to the Garden,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on May9, 2010

I’ve got some good news and some bad news. First, the bad news. The world is going to hell all around us. Oil continues to pour into the Gulf of Mexico, as it has been for the past 18 days. Our country is fighting two wars, and though we’re on our way out of Iraq, in Afghanistan the end is nowhere in sight. Socially and politically, our nation is more polarized than ever. Around the world there’s one disaster after another, both natural and manmade. There’s warfare and human trafficking, overpopulation and global warming. The conflict in Israel/Palestine looks like it will never end. Closer to home, in our families there is dysfunction, estrangement and sometimes abuse.

And it’s always been this way. Every generation has its trials and problems. We certainly have our share, but other generations have faced equal, if not greater, challenges. The good news is that we are at a point in human history when there is the possibility of a new awakening, a shift in how we see ourselves on this planet, and how we act toward one another.

But we’re not there yet. What is it in our human nature, and in our institutions--religious, social and political--that makes us want to take sides? That causes us to be threatened by those who are different? That causes us to split things in two, and call one good and the other evil?

This tendency toward dualism is part of our nature, and human history. We separate the body from the spirit, the sacred from the secular. In the religious world, we divide Protestants from Catholics, Christians from Pagans, progressives from fundamentalists. In our own tradition, which claims to welcome and celebrate theological diversity, there has been mistrust and animosity between humanists and theists. We get divided men against women, young against old, white against black, immigrants against those who see themselves as “real Americans,” that is, those whose families were immigrants a few generations ago.

Are we destined to live lives fearing and fighting those who are different? Is our world always going to suffer from tribalism and mistrust of the other? And, you may ask, what does any of this have to do with gardens? And what kind of sermon is this for mother’s day, anyway? If you’re thinking that, bear with me, okay?

I want to tell you a story. It takes place in Liberia, the country on the west coast of Africa that was populated with American slaves who were sent back to Africa in the early 1820s. For the past few decades, Liberia has seen political upheaval and turmoil. Twenty year ago, a civil war started, and in 1997 a warlord named Charles Taylor was elected president after he led a bloody insurgency. Taylor’s regime used any means

necessary to maintain its power, and a second civil war started two years later when dissidents began fighting back. Over 200,000 people were killed, and one in three Liberians became homeless. Women were routinely raped, and children as young as ten years old were forced to be soldiers.

Living in the middle of this horror, a group of Liberian women were so desperate that they took the only thing they had--their bodies--and put them at risk to try and stop the fighting. They dressed in white, the color of peace, and took to the streets in protest, exposing themselves to possibility of beatings and death. These gatherings grew in size, and began to include both Christian and Muslim women. They got so big that eventually Charles Taylor agreed to meet with the women leaders. They eventually forced him to participate in peace negotiations, and even pushed him out of power and out of the country. Liberia elected a new president, the first woman to become head of state in Africa. This story is told in a powerful documentary film called *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*.

This story seems like a miracle because these women had no power. They didn't have guns or money or government behind them. They only had their own courage, their inner strength and faith. What they had was truth, and goodness, and hunger for peace and for justice.

Ten years ago, a group of Israeli and Palestinian parents came to New York to protest at the UN. Their group, the Parents' Circle, was made of mothers and fathers who had lost children to the violence. But these parents did not want revenge against the other side; they wanted an end to the fighting. To the Americans, one parent said, "You have no right to stand on the sidelines. You have no right to allow our children to keep on dying." These parents came to see that the enemy was not on the one on the other side of the border, but those leaders on all sides who keep the conflict going. One mother said: "All these voices that rule the world today should be smothered by the voice of parents. We as parents have to tell them, we are not giving away our children any more, otherwise death will have dominion, and we will be lost."

Do you know how Mother's Day got started in this country? Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the words to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," was a feminist who believed women had the responsibility to help change society for the better. Horrified by the carnage of the Civil War, in 1870 she wrote a "Mother's Day Proclamation," which said

"Arise, then, women of this day!
Arise, all women who have hearts,
Whether our baptism be of water or of tears!
Say firmly:
'We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies,
Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.'"

There's a common theme here, a thread that runs from those women in Liberia to Julia Ward Howe and back ancient Greece. It's described in the play *Lysistrata*. In that story, women, tired of war and violence, refuse to have sex with their husbands until they stop fighting. Talk about real power!

Are any of you familiar with the Myers Briggs Type Indicator? It's a test used to identify personality type--how people see the world and make decisions. It's a useful tool, and it reminds us that we don't all see things the same way. It works by sorting people into categories--whether you are primarily an introvert or extrovert, a thinking or feeling person, whether you prefer precision or ambiguity, whether are more rational or more intuitive.

People who have used and studied the Myers Briggs system say that we spend the first half of our lives developing competence in what they call our dominant functions. If you're a thinker, you like using your intellect, resolving issues mostly with logic and reason. But Myers Briggs folks say that around middle age, people start working on what's called their inferior functions. If you're that thinking person, you start to realize that using logic doesn't help to console your spouse when he or she is grieving or upset. You begin to learn how to touch the feeling side, that part of yourself that you've neglected until now, that has been in the shadows. You start to see that those shadowy parts of yourself can be useful too.

The point is, to be happy and whole, as an individual, a family, a church or a nation, requires some balance. It's not either/or, it's both/and. In western civilization, in the church, and through most of human history, men have been the ones with the power, the ones mostly in charge. And too often we have made a mess of things. Not because masculine is bad; no. It just needs to be balanced and corrected by the feminine. We need both. A leader in the Baha'i faith said "The world of humanity has two wings; one is woman and the other man. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly."¹ My first year in seminary, my wife and I got to spend a bit of time with Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Tracey mentioned to him that she sings in a women's chorus that has sung freedom songs from South Africa. Archbishop Tutu lit up, and started talking about the strength and power of women in his country. "We men have had our chance," he said. "We should try letting women be in charge for a change." Last September, Desmond Tutu's buddy, the Dalai Lama, said he was a feminist. He says that he learned compassion, not from Buddhism, but from his mother.

The reading this morning, Wendell Berry's poem "Anglo-Saxon Protestant Heterosexual Men," may have seemed like an odd choice for today. I hope you heard it in the spirit in which he wrote it, as a call for men to recognize the privilege we have been living with for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, to stop this nonsense of claiming victimhood and take responsibility for our actions, to start cleaning up our

¹ This quote from Abdu'l-Baha.

own messes. As he says, to “settle down for a change/to picking up after ourselves/and a few centuries of honest work.”

I began by saying the world is in a mess, and yet, we are at a time of potential and promise. The problems of the world today are calling us to do things in a different way. As Paul Tsongas used to say, to realize that we are all in the same boat, and we need to stop hitting each other over the head with the oars and instead start rowing.

In the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden when they eat of the tree of knowledge. That story has informed human life for thousands of years--it's been men against women, and humans against that poor snake, and the other creatures of this earth that we have mistreated and abused. It's been God above and people below. This dualistic way of seeing things hasn't worked very well.

We didn't get kicked out of the garden--we walked out. We turned our backs on it. We feared the dark woods so we cut down all the trees. We learned to see things as either good or bad, we pushed away what was different; we feared what we didn't understand.

We are invited back to the garden. We are invited, in this age, to see the world as not either/or but as both/and. Both light and shadow, both masculine and feminine, both liberal and conservative. We need one another. It's time to see that the garden of Eden is all around us, that paradise is right under our feet. That we are here to tend the garden, to help it bloom and flourish.

Hear again those words we sang right before the sermon; hear them as a charge to you this day, and as a blessing for the days to come:

Bless the earth and all your children, one creation: make us whole,
Interwoven, all connected, planet wide and inmost soul.
Holy mother, life bestowing, bid our waste and warfare cease.
Fill us all with grace o'erflowing. Teach us how to live in peace.²

Amen.

² Verse 3 of “Earth Was Given as a Garden,” words by Roberta Bard Ruby; #207 in Singing the Living Tradition.