



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

---

"Praying All Along,"  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on June 19, 2011

I grew up in family that went to church pretty much every Sunday. It was what we did. Even when we went up to the mountains in North Carolina, where my grandparents had a summer place, on Sunday morning my grandfather would ask, "Who wants to go early to church?" We kids would help him unlock the doors, and turn on the lights, and when it was time, pull the rope that rang the church bell. We'd stand at the door with our Grandpa and hand out the orders of service as people arrived.

It's in my DNA to like being in church. It's where I want to be on Sunday morning. On the occasional Sunday when I'm not in church, even though it's nice to have break, it feels funny to stay away. I want and need what church offers--the weekly reminder to be still and pay attention, the invitation to connect with others and with the Holy, inspiration to go out and help heal our world.

This summer we've offering services at 9:30 am every Sunday except for 4th of July and Labor Day weekends. This is an incremental change for us, but it's a big change--because you won't have to wonder, on any given Sunday morning, "Is there church today?" Except for those two weekends, the answer will be yes. If you want to be here, there will be others gathering here too, and that makes me glad. Because church is the gathered community, and any Sunday there are those who need us and what we have to offer.

One of my favorite writers about church is Kathleen Norris. She grew up in the church but then left it for twenty years. She says, "I had a radiant faith as a child, mostly related to song and story. Like many people of my 'baby boomer' generation, I drifted away from religion when catechism came to the fore, and the well-meaning adults who taught Sunday school and confirmation class seemed intent on putting the vastness of 'God' into small boxes of their own devising." <sup>1</sup>

She came back to church only after she inherited her grandparent's farmhouse on the Dakota prairie, and moved there, with her husband, from New York City. She started attending the little Presbyterian church where her grandmother had been a member for sixty years. But she struggled, as a thinking person, to make sense of religion and faith. This is what she writes about--how she came to understand religion in a less literal, and more life-giving, way.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*.

In an essay called “Small Town Sunday Morning,”<sup>2</sup> she describes a part of their worship that will sound familiar to you:

“There’s a time, after the sermon and before the Lord’s prayer, in which people are asked to speak of any particular joys they wish to share with the congregation or concerns they want us to address in our communal prayer that Sunday, and also to pray over in the coming week. It’s an invaluable part of our worship, a chance to discover things you didn’t know: that the young woman sitting in the pew in front of you is desperately worried about her gravely ill brother in Oregon, that the widower in his eighties across the aisle is overjoyed at the birth of his first great-grandchild.”

“All this pleases the gossips,” she writes. “I’ve been told that on Sunday afternoon the phone lines in town are hot with news that’s been picked up in church. For the most part it’s a good kind of gossip, its main effect being to widen the prayer circle. It’s useful news as well; I’m one of many who make notes on my church bulletin; so-and-so’s in the hospital; send a card, plan a visit.”

Some of you do this too. I see you sometimes after church, going up to someone who’s shared how they’re grieving or struggling, and offering your support, and asking how you can help. Others of you write notes and offer rides and visit people.

Listen to how Kathleen Norris describes her church’s time for sharing joys and concerns. She writes, “Our worship sometimes goes into a kind of suspended animation, as people speak in great detail about the medical condition of their friends or relatives. We wince, we squirm, we sigh,” she writes, “and it’s good for us. Moments like this are when the congregation is reminded of something that all pastors know; that listening is often the major part of ministry, that people in a crisis need to tell their story, from beginning to end, and the best thing--often the only thing--that you can do is sit there and take it in.

“And we do that pretty well,” she says. “I sometimes think these moments are the heart of our worship.”

Sometimes I think that too. As one who believes worship is better with fewer words (and I’m aware of the irony of a preacher saying such a thing!), I particularly love the time when you come forward and light candles silently while Claudia plays on the piano. That often feels to me like the heart of our worship.

I remember a moment this year, during “spoken candles,” when Barbara Gove’s daughter Holly was visiting from Idaho, and she came forward to light a candle, and she was so moved by something that had been shared just before, that she spoke to that person directly, in a heartfelt way that was lovely to witness. In that moment I felt the Spirit in our midst.

And there are moments when I wonder if we should do “spoken candles” at all: when they veer off into sounding more like announcements, or when they go on too long, or when they are shared in a way that doesn’t invite everyone in. This is a ritual that works best in a small

---

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk*.

congregation, and I wonder, as we grow, how we can have this depth of sharing in a way that will work; that will be good for the whole church.

We need a place to speak from the heart and to share our stories, and to listen as others do the same. A small group is often the best place for this to happen. If this sounds like something you want and need, I hope you'll be part of helping make more small groups possible here.

If nothing else happened at our services this summer than gathering to share joys and sorrows, and to lift them up in prayer, that would be enough. There's always someone who needs a place for this; a place to be reminded that they're not in this all alone, that Love does abide, that healing and wholeness are possible. I need a time and place for worship, and I expect you do too.

Here's the story I want you to hear about a worshipping community, a story Kathleen Norris tells about her small town church and their time for sharing joys and sorrows. She says "Our prayers also extend to those who seldom darken a church door. Not long ago, the congregation learned from one of his longtime friends that Bill O'Rourke had died. (Wild Bill to his friends, way back in his drinking days.) Most of us knew that he'd been failing in the Veteran's Hospital in Sturgis for some time. I knew him casually, but missed him. An old-time cowboy--he broke horses for the U.S. Calvary between the world wars--he was permanently bow-legged. In retirement he'd become a fixture at the cafe on Main Street; you could nearly always find him there, holding court... When his death was announced, a sigh ran through the congregation. All but the youngest members, and our pastor, had known him for years, and had their own Bill stories.

"It was an odd moment. Bill's death felt like a loss, to me, to many people, but we also knew that our young minister would know nothing of him. The pastor was about to begin the intercessory prayer that follows this part of worship, when one of Bill's oldest friends couldn't resist saying, 'You know, Bill paid me the first fifty cents I ever made, back in 1930.' The minister smiled, but looked a bit nonplussed. He took a breath, as if to start the prayer. From a pew in the back came a voice, 'And I'll be you still have (that fifty cents).'"

Kathleen Norris says, "Of course we laughed for a good long time before continuing with our worship; it was the kind of story Bill would have enjoyed. He didn't care much for church decorum, but he took some aspects of religion seriously enough... When the minister finally got to say his 'Let us pray,' we were ready. We had been praying, all along. We had been being ourselves before God."

Have you felt that here? That we were praying simply by being present, being attentive, being connected? Have you felt that power and that grace?

Mary Oliver writes, "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention." Isn't that why we're here--in this church and on this earth--to pay attention? To pay attention to these lives we have been given. So that we might be ourselves more fully and more completely. So we might be who we were born to be and do what what we are called to do.

I love to see you doing this--paying attention to your longings and what is stirring in you soul, paying attention to one another, paying attention to that force which some of us call God.

Sometimes I stand back and watch. I see you come forward to light candles silently and I wonder who and what you are praying for. I don't need to know; I'm just glad you have this place to do that. I see you at coffee hour, coming up to newcomers and welcoming them, I see you here during the week painting our new meditation space, or helping out in the office, or stopping by in hopes of making a connection, and you remind me why we're here.

Of course there's plenty here I don't see, none of us get to see everything, but the overall picture I have is of a community of openhearted people, of "longing, thirsty souls," who come to be in the presence of one another and to be in the presence of that which is always More. That's what the church is, and that's why I want and need to be in church on Sunday morning.

Can you see that you are like those lovely people in that little church on the prairie in South Dakota? Being yourselves with one another and before God, you are praying all along. And you are beautiful to behold.

We have this life, with its joys and with its sorrows. We have one another, and we are forever encompassed by that Spirit in which we live and move and have our being. How can we keep from singing?

Amen.