

“The Hallowed Walls Demand,”
a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on September 12, 2010

My text this morning is the first two lines of our opening hymn: “Rank by rank again we stand, from the four winds gathered hither. Loud the hallowed walls demand whence we come and how, and whither.”¹

Many of us have gone our own ways over the past couple of months, scattered to the four winds, and now, look, here we are, back together again. *Rank by Rank* is a favorite hymn of mine. It’s always sung at the start of the Service of the Living Tradition, the big worship service at UU General Assembly when new ministers are welcomed into the ministry and retiring ministers are honored and recently deceased ministers are remembered. There’s something powerful about singing this with thousands of others, particularly when you are a new minister and part of the procession. But it’s a good hymn for us today as well, as we gather to begin a new church year.

It reminds us that we are part of a long tradition, that there are those who have gone before us, what the book of Hebrews calls “so great a cloud of witnesses,” and that they surround us and companion us still. I wonder, are you aware of that, do you ever feel the presence of our forebears? Or maybe you feel the absence of those who were here once, but who are now gone.

I remember the first time I came into this building, back when I was in divinity school, in the winter of 2003. It made an impression on me; I remember where I sat and what the church felt like; it had a particular feeling to it. Sally and I were talking about it this week, and we agreed that this church has a vibe, an energy to it. Do you feel it?

Desmond Tutu, former archbishop of South Africa and one of the most energetic and vital religious leaders I’ve ever met, says that you can tell when you go into a church if it’s one that has been prayed in for a long time. It changes the place; it’s as if there’s something hanging in the air, or stuck to the walls that you can sense.

I experience this church as having a sturdy beauty--the old wood, the stained glass, the brick and stone. But I don’t believe the energy I feel here has much to do with the architecture. It has more to do with the fact that for over a hundred years people have been gathering here to share their times of joy and sorrow, to lift their voices in song and in prayer, to open their hearts to one another, to seek the presence of God. There is such a thing as the spirit of a place, and this place, in my experience, has its own spirit.

“Loud the hallowed walls demand, whence we come, and how and whither.”

¹ *Rank by Rank Again We Stand*, #358 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

The hymn says these are hallowed, or holy, walls. And they are, hallowed by the purpose for which they were built, and by what they have witnessed over the generations. The hymn says these walls demand of us, loudly, whence we come, and how, and whither. These are old fashioned words, but not complicated ones. Whence means “from what place,” so asking “whence we come” is simply asking, “Where are you coming from?” Growing up in the south, I learned that one way to address someone I’d just met was to ask, “Where y’all from?” It’s another way of asking, “Who are you?”

And the walls ask how we come--do we arrive bearing a heavy load, or with a spring in our step? Hopeful or anxious? And whither--that’s another old word that asks a question--”whither” means “to what place.” “Whither are you bound?” means “Where are you going?”

So if these old walls could talk, they would ask, they would demand of us, “Who are you, and whose are you? What brings you here, and what have you brought in with you? What are you looking for? And what are you going to do about it? Where are you going?”

This week, knowing I was going to talk with you about these demanding hallowed walls we have here, it occurred to me that maybe I should spend some time listening to them, and hearing what they have to say. When I told my two teenagers that I came into the sanctuary on Thursday afternoon, when nobody else was here, so I could listen to the walls, they thought that was kind of weird. But they are kind of used to it, since their Dad became a minister; used to him occasionally doing and saying some weird things.

Thursday afternoon I walked in here, and bowed to these four walls. I sat down in a pew and asked them what they wanted to say. I waited in the dark. The first thing I heard was this: “Remember, you won’t be here forever.”

“Hmm. You’re right,” I thought. “I need to make the most of this day. None of us know how much time we have.”

A minute later, I heard this: “We like it when you folks are here. Bring your friends! Throw the church doors open wide!”

One of the other walls chimed in, “You could have services in here on more than just on Sunday morning! We miss you when you’re not here. We like sheltering you, and blessing you, and then sending you out and welcoming you back again. We know that the church is not the building, that you folks are the church, but still, we’re glad to be church walls, and not prison walls or walls designed to keep people out.”

The last thing I heard was a blessing and a challenge. These walls want me to tell you something important. They said, "Know that you folks are destined for greatness. Dream big! Your forebears here were people like you--hard working, big hearted people, who loved this church. Look around you at what they built. What are you going to do in your time?"

These walls remind us that the church is not the building; that we are the church. That we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, people who in their day did their part to make the world more beautiful, more loving, and more just. We are sheltered by these walls that have seen so much over the years. They stand around us as witnesses and reminders that our lives are for something. And they challenge us, they call us to account; they demand to know, "How are you going to carry on the good work that others began here? What will be your legacy? What do you intend to do with this one life you have been given?"

Listen! Can you hear them? These hallowed walls, calling you to be who you were born to be, challenging you to do the work you have been given to do. Can you hear the voices of those who have gone before us, calling us to be grateful and to be glad that we are here, urging us to lift up our hearts and live out our lives with joy and with purpose? Can you sense the spirit, that one in which we live and move and have our being, stirring among us, calling us to wake up to the wonder of this life, calling us to serve something larger than ourselves?

Here we are! Let us seize this moment, and this day. Alleluia and Amen!