"An Adventurous Faith,"
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on November 13, 2011

Twenty years ago, I started attending the UU church in Portsmouth, NH. I'd grown up Episcopalian, so a new tradition took some getting used to. But I loved it there. South Church was a vibrant spiritual community where I felt free to wrestle with my questions. I thrived there, discovering a spiritual life and a voice I didn't know I had. In time I realized that I needed to live that life not only within the safety of my church community, but in the wider world. That's how I got started on the journey that led me here.

Around the time I joined that church, the Boston Sunday Globe ran a story about our denomination. It said, "Bucking the trend in declining church membership, the Unitarian Universalist Association's enrollments have risen dramatically, reflecting baby boomers' search for a comfortable canon."

A canon is a church law or principle. UUs sometimes say we're religion without dogma. Others say we're church without guilt. I say we're a place for those seeking a church that makes sense to them, a church that tries to be more connected to real life and the real world, a place where the values expressed here are ones you aspire to. Some of you have told me your stories of why you came here: because even though you are straight, you didn't want to be part of a tradition that discriminated against and excluded gay people; because you got tired of a church that seemed to care more about rules and hierarchy than about the people; because you wanted a faith community where you didn't have to leave your mind at the door or that expected you to believe or agree with everything the minister said!

That kind of comfort--a place where you feel invited and compelled to be more fully who you are--is a good thing. I cherish that we are a church that holds open a space for you to become yourself, without shame or fear. But the idea of "a comfortable canon" can make me cringe. Because it implies that what some of our critics say is true--that we're the church where anything goes, that we don't have beliefs or expectations or standards.

I saw a example of this on the Simpsons, the animated TV show that's a poignant and funny commentary on American life. Bart is playing video games with his neighbors Rod and Todd Flanders. The Flanders are a conservative Christian family, so the game they're playing has a religious theme, it's called "Billy Graham's Bible Blaster." It's a shooting game, and you score when you hit a heathen and convert him. So Bart is firing away and when he hits one he yells out, "Got him!" But Rod replies, "No, you just winged him and made him a Unitarian."

The joke is that what we do here doesn't really count; that we aren't a real religion. Jokes come from somewhere, and at times UUs have done things that help create that stereotype.

Our Unitarian and Universalists forebears would be dismayed to lean that their faith is seen by some as watered-down alternative to more orthodox religion. They would remind us that orthodox literally means "right speech," that we are people who have always put more emphasis on how you live than on what you say or believe. As the author of the book of James said, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:17). "Deeds, not creeds," is how our forebears put it.

Last week I said I hope you're comfortable here, but not too comfortable. I worry that if all we have is a comfortable canon, if that is our goal, then we don't have much to offer the world. A comfortable cannon sounds about right for our consumer culture, but it doesn't sound like what church is supposed to be. A church is where you come to be renewed, restored, inspired, equipped; it is not where you go to hide.

No, ours is actually a demanding faith. It requires that we do more that accept what we receive from the past; it requires that we engage our hearts and minds in a quest for what is good and true. I once heard a teenager eloquently describe our faith this way: "My church doesn't damn me to hell for believing what I can't help but believe."

Amen. What I can't help but believe. And what you can't help but believe. Our church is based on the premise that we are mature enough and responsible enough to undertake that search, that we can abide some differences and some dissonance between us, that we might actually grow to love the ways we are different and see that our diversity is a strength, not a liability.

My premise today is that ours is meant to be an adventurous faith. It is part of our religious DNA. If we seek only a comfortable canon, we betray our own heritage, and we do it at our peril. The growth that Globe article described flattened out not long after it began. I wonder if it's because we have yet to take the next step--to go beyond being welcoming and comfortable to being a place of transformation.

Let me tell you a story. It's about the man that our Murray Room is named for, John Murray. He grew up in England, where as a teenager he met John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church. Wesley took Murray under his wing and started him on the path to ministry. By age eighteen Murray was preaching to large audiences and people predicted he would become a "burning and shining light."[1]

One day John Murray went to hear the preacher James Relly, an early proponent of Universalism. Murray later wrote that "the veil was taken from my heart." He was convinced of the truth of Universalism, that in the end every one "must finally be saved." He said, "We now attended public worship, not only as duty... but it became our pleasure, our consolation, and our highest enjoyment... It might truly have been said, that we had a taste of heaven below."

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[1] See the biography of John Murray at http://www.jsmsociety.com/John_Murray.html

But universal salvation was heresy to the Methodists, who kicked Murray out. Before long, Murray fell on hard times--his infant son died, and his Eliza wife became ill. Murray did all he could for her, but she died, leaving him heartbroken, in debt, and overwhelmed by a sense of personal failure. He decided to leave England and escape to America, where, he said, he would “close his life in solitude.”

The ship bearing John Murray to America was approaching New York when it ran around on a sandbar in New Jersey. Murray went ashore in search of provisions and happened to meet an elderly farmer named Thomas Potter, who had recently built a chapel on his property where he hoped itinerant preachers would come. Potter was waiting for someone who embraced universal salvation, as he himself did. So when he met John Murray he had no doubt that God had sent him there for that purpose. He begged John to preach, but Murray refused, wanting to leave his past behind and get on to New York.

But Potter was not so easily dismissed. He said to Murray, “The wind will never change, sir, until you have delivered to us, in that meeting-house, a message from God.” The wind remained calm, and that boat stayed stuck on the sandbar. John Murray was still enough of a believer in God’s intervening hand that, when Sunday came and the boat was still there, he preached in that chapel to Potter and those he had gathered there. The date was September 30, 1770. On that day John Murray felt his sense of calling and purpose return.

Soon Murray was preaching up and down the Atlantic seaboard, from Maryland to New England, his powerful message of God’s universal love. He was a compelling preacher, drawing large crowds and attracting opposition from more established clergy.

Preaching in Boston in 1774, one of his critics threw a stone through the window, barely missing his head. Murray picked it up and said, “This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither reasonable or convincing.” He set the rock aside, and said, “Not all the stones in Boston, except they stop my breath, shall shut my mouth.”

I could tell you other stories of our forebears. About Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister in Boston in the years before the Civil War. More than once he helped to harbor slaves who had escaped from the south, at a time when the Fugitive Slave Act encouraged northerners to hunt escaped slaves and return them to captivity. In those days Parker wrote his sermons with a loaded pistol within reach on his desk.

I could tell you about the Iowa sisterhood, 21 Unitarian women, ordained ministers, who served congregations on the Great Plains at the end of the 19th century, women who ministered with grit and heart and perseverance. I could tell you about Universalists and Unitarians, common people like you and me who had the courage to leave what was familiar and established, often at great personal cost, in order to seek a larger faith, because they could not do otherwise.

Almost 120 years ago the people of this congregation, The First Universalist Church of Haverhill, took a leap of faith and built these walls around us. They created a sanctuary, but not a hiding

place. They build study and beautiful house for hope and love, with room for all who would enter here.

At its best, UUism is a place that invites people to become themselves, without shame or fear, a place that encourages and promotes transformation and liberation. We are meant be a diverse, energetic, passionate, committed people doing our part to repair the world.

At its worst, UUism is a club for people who want community but who are afraid of commitment, who are seeking a safe haven where nothing will trouble them, who want to be with like-minded people who reinforce their own beliefs and practices, who seek a feel-good religion not worthy of the name, that means well but that doesn't have the backbone or the will to do much about it.

We live in a era in which our horizons seem to be shrinking. In which we seem to have forgotten how to dare great things. In which, as Edwin Friedman warns, safety has become more important than adventure, and peace is preferred over progress.[2]

But that is not who we are, as human beings, or as the inheritors of this liberal religious tradition. Ours is an adventurous faith. Let us claim it boldly. These hallowed walls, and those who came before us, demand to know: "What are you going to do? How are you going to live out this faith in this place and time?"

Let us answer them, not only with our lips, but with our lives. Let us take risks for love and for justice. Let us stand up and be counted, and let us be courageous in our faith, so that we live lives that matter, so that we leave this world at least a little better than we found it.

Amen.

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[2] See Edwin H, Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007).