



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

"Down to Earth,"
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on December 16, 2012

All of a sudden, this season of joy and peace is different, isn't it? In the wake of the tragic events Friday in Newtown, Connecticut, how do we speak or even think of joy or peace?

Perhaps the first step is to simply name our horror, our anger, our lament, our dismay at this horrific act, at the prevalence of violence in our country. There is something wrong, when troubled people, most often young men, take guns and turn them against innocent people.

I have nothing against guns for hunting and target shooting, but when will we come to our senses and admit there is something wrong when weapons that have no purpose but to kill people are easily available. The proliferation of guns in our country has not made us safer--it has just escalated the violence.

I know we need to grieve, but I have to say I'm getting tired of candlelight vigils after tragedies like this one. Because how do you grieve the loss of little children who were killed in their school, of all places? How do you say, "Peace," when there is no peace?

The truth is, to live on this earth has always been a risky enterprise. Human society has evolved, and we do resolve our problems more peacefully than we did in ages past. The trouble is, we now have at our disposal, as individuals and nations, the means with which to cause greater destruction than ever before. When he spoke out against the Vietnam war, Martin Luther King, Jr. said the greatest purveyor of violence in the world was his own country. And things have only gotten worse since then.

Here we are, in this lovely time of year, when we open our hearts to hope and to the possibility of joy. When we are invited to affirm our Universalist faith that we are all part of a great Love which will never let us go.

Is it necessary, on this day, in the wake of this tragedy, to say that it is bad theology and terrible pastoral care to ever say something like, "We can't understand the will of God," as if it is ever God's will for anyone to suffer? It is bad theology to say, "There must have been a reason that this happened." The truth is, bad things happen. There's a bumper sticker about that. And when you boil it down to its essence, that's my theology--bad things happen, and then we have a choice about how we will respond.

We just sang, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” and the plaintive tone of that Advent hymn seems right for this day:

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and with your captive children dwell.
Give comfort to all exiles here, and to the aching heart bid cheer.

Emmanuel is a Hebrew word that means “God with us,” and this word is first found in the writings of the prophet Isaiah. But this idea of God with us runs throughout the Bible. That most beloved psalm, psalm 23, says, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.”

That is what I need right now, the sense that I am not alone, that there is, sometimes in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, a force for good, a source of life and love, present in the world. Talking about this force, my friend and colleague, the Rev. Claire Feingold Thoryn, said, “I have this nickname that I like to use for the holy. It's just a little personal nickname. I call it, God. I don't mind if you use the same nickname. I actually didn't think it up.”

The name God is like shorthand, a nickname for that which is ultimately beyond our ability to name or describe. It would get tiresome, for me and for you, if every time I said the word God I tried to explain what that word meant, or that when I say it I'm not picturing a man at all, and certainly not an old man in the clouds. No, I've come to see that if we sense God anywhere, it is right here, in the midst and mess of our everyday lives.

Lately I've been especially aware that if I'm going to meet the holy anywhere, it is in the most down to earth places. You see, I've felt the longing lately to literally be in touch with the earth. To walk on the ground, to kick through leaves just beginning their process of return back to the earth. To lie on the ground and feel its embrace.

You may think me strange, but at a burial, I like the part where people pick up a handful of earth and drop it into the grave. I like getting that dirt on my hands. It feels right, after having said “we are mortal, formed from the earth, and to the earth we shall return.”

It is our nature, as humans, is to be connected to the earth. Human and humus, earth, share the same root word. We should tend our connections to the earth, for they will nurture and sustain us. Especially at times like this. Did anyone see that lovely sliver of a moon at dusk on Friday night? There is something reassuring, in the wake of tragedy, about getting outdoors, feeling the earth is still under our feet, seeing that the moon still waxes and wanes, remembering that the sun will still come up in the morning.

In this season that invites us to contemplate the stars and to lift up our hearts, to string up lights and sing songs of joy and peace--all of which I love to do--today I want to offer a counterpoint to this call to be merry and bright and always looking upward. Let's not forget to look down, to be in touch with the earth under our feet, and our own earthy nature. “Tis a gift to be simple,” the Shaker song says, “tis a gift to be free, tis a gift to come down where we ought to be.”

Sometimes we choose this, and other times we are forced down to earth, pushed to our knees, because we have no where else to go.

Our reading for today¹ invites us to see the Christmas story in its starkness. Who would choose to give birth in a cold, dark stable, surrounded by animals? We romanticize the humble shepherds, but in their day, those shepherds, who probably didn't smell so good from abiding in the fields with their sheep, had the social status that garbage collectors enjoy in our day. We sing "Away in a Manger," forgetting that a manger is what the animals eat out of, and slobber in.

If we told this story today in true detail, don't you think most children would respond, "Ewww-- gross!" The truth is, parenting can be gross at times. I remember one poignant moment of diaper changing, when all of a sudden I had poop all over my hands. And I was not happy. But then a voice came to me, and said, "Who are you, to not have poop on your hands?"

Who are we, to not get our hands dirty? To not be weighed down with sorrow and despair? We are human, formed of the earth. And to the earth we will return.

What I'm trying to say is that in this season of Advent, I invite you to come down to earth. Don't listen to those voices that try to tell you your aren't enough, or don't have enough, that you need to buy things in order to be whole. Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." Do you believe it?

The invitation in this season is not to pretend that you are something other than what you are. It is to trust in this ancient word, emmanuel, God with us. To trust that if we meet God anywhere, it is in the muck and mess of our daily lives, and often when we least expect it.

On Thursday morning I was getting to church a bit late. I had a cold, and wasn't feeling very good. On my way from the parking lot to the back door, Andre, who works downstairs in the Drop In Center, waved and said, "Hello Pastor Frank." A young woman standing next to him spoke up. "You're a pastor?" And she started heading my way. I thought about saying I was in a hurry, and had to get to work. You get all kinds of requests, especially at this time of year. But I kept quiet. And she started telling me about how she's been doing better lately, has been clean and sober. She said she was going to court on Friday to try and get her kids back, because she is actually now better able to care for them than her ex-husband is. And would I pray for her?

So we stood there, on the sidewalk, me holding a piece of cardboard and a used styrofoam cup I'd just picked up off the grass, she holding on to my arm. I gave thanks to God for these lives we have been given, and for the children she has been blessed with, for the chance to do right by them. I prayed that God and people would support and companion her, would bless and keep her, and her children.

¹ Garry Wills, "The Risk of Christmas," available online at http://www.uucgreenvale.org/Home_Page/December%2018,%202011.pdf

Maybe I was a sign of God's love, in that moment, for that young woman. I don't know. What I do know is that she was a sign of God for me. A reminder that God is here, with us, in the most common and ordinary places, if we will have eyes to see.

In this season, don't think there's anything wrong with having dirt on your hands, or sorrow in your heart. Don't think there's anything wrong with having disappointment and brokenness in your life. That's what it means to be human. And that's where God meets us. That's where we are most likely to touch and be touched by that source of life and love--in the earthy, messy, unplanned moments.

"Christmas is a dark and risky business," Garry Wills says. These days, as we head towards Christmas, I'm hanging on to words from songwriter Leonard Cohen:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

We live in the midst of brokenness. And the light of love does shine through the cracks. We say yes to life. We say peace. We say thank you. We say amen.

Amen.