



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“A Mellow Heart”

a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on November 9, 2014

We just sang, “There is more love somewhere.” More hope, more peace, more joy also. “I’m gonna keep on, ‘til I find it.” This hymn, from the African American tradition, came out of the time of slavery, when there wasn’t much hope or joy for those singing it. But still they asserted that there was a better way to live, a way we are meant to live, they sang, “I’m gonna keep on, ‘til I find it.”

Though our context is different, isn’t this our song too? Isn’t this our call--to find our way to that fullness of life we are meant to partake of, that we catch glimpses of from time to time? That is how we will help to heal and bless our world--by doing our own work, by trusting that we are worthy of love and joy, by keeping on, ‘til we find it. I think of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, and his “Walking Meditation”:

Take my hand.
We will walk.
We will only walk.
We will enjoy our walk
without thinking of arriving anywhere.
Walk peacefully.
Walk happily.
Our walk is a peace walk.
Our walk is a happiness walk.
Then we learn
that there is no peace walk;
that peace is the walk;
that there is no happiness walk;
that happiness is the walk.
We walk for ourselves.
We walk for everyone
always hand in hand.

Can you trust that what you do for yourself, you do for everyone? Whether you are bringing more joy into the world, or more bitterness, you can’t help but affect and influence those around you.

In the election that’s just behind us now, thankfully, there was plenty of angst and bitterness to go around. The most common reaction this week was, “Well, at least that’s over.” A sense of some

relief, that maybe we can calm down and be a little more human with one another. Is that too much to ask?

I used to occasionally tune in to a talk radio station, where people expressed views I almost always disagreed with. I set one of the buttons in my car to that station, and I'd tune in to hear what the rant was, that week. Inevitably this would make my blood boil, and I'd be in the car, talking back to the radio, yelling even, at people who were never going to hear me.

One day I was doing this and the thought came from somewhere, "Who are you to think you are so right and they are so wrong? Aren't they just as worthy, as human beings and in the sight of God?"

I haven't listened to that station in over a year. I don't need the aggravation. Most days, on my commute, I don't listen to the radio at all. I cherish the silence, in the car all alone. Between cable news and talk radio and the internet, there is so much ranting we can partake of! If we choose to. No wonder we have road rage, and fights between parents at youth hockey games; so much tension and anger that leads so quickly to violence.

When my children were younger, I helped coach their soccer teams. Our daughter Emma was on a travel team for a while, and in the winter they played at an indoor arena. On Saturday mornings I loved to make a big mug of coffee to take to the game, drinking it while coaching from the sidelines. One day, the referee had made some pretty bad calls, and I got frustrated, and yelled out something critical of him. This ref was maybe 14 years old, and one of the other coaches pointed out to me that he might be a kid with some kind of developmental disability. The not so subtle message to me was, "Calm down--he's doing the best he can. It's only a game."

I felt ashamed, to say the least. I wanted to be a good example for my daughter and the other girls on her team, and here I was, acting like a jerk. I vowed to be better, to keep things in perspective. Some words came to mind, a new mantra: "Switch to decaf."

We have enough challenges to deal with. We don't need to be taking on additional toxins that are floating out there. Nor do we need any more self-inflicted troubles. so I ask you: what do you need to switch off, or turn away from? What attitudes and behaviors would you be better off without? And what is it that you might turn toward?

This idea of turning runs deep in our religious and theological tradition. Numerous times in the Hebrew Bible, God and prophets say, to individuals or to the nation of Israel, "return," or "turn back," in order to be restored. The word for this turning and restoration occurs over a thousand times in the Hebrew Bible. Like in Jeremiah, when God says,

For I will restore health to you,
and your wounds I will heal...
And you shall be my people,
and I will be your God (Jer. 30: 17,22).

There's a song we sing about this:

Return again, return again
Return to the home of your Soul
Return to what you are, return to who you are
Return to where you are
Born and reborn again...¹

There's a prayer that's been in my heart lately. When I used it to close last month's Board of Trustees meeting, I told them you could call it an introvert's prayer. But I suspect it could be useful for anyone in these anxious and often bitter times we're living in:

O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we will be saved,
in quietness and confidence will be our strength:
By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray, to your presence,
where we may be still and know that you are God, Amen.

Did you hear that word "return"? "In returning and rest we will be saved, in quietness and confidence will be our strength." That's my message today: that we each need ways to be grounded and centered, ways to return to who we are and whose we are, if we want to live good and joyful and useful lives. Especially in these times and in this culture, which can so easily pull us away from who we are and who we hope to be.

In this month when we are exploring the ways of forgiveness, we are called to look deeply into our own hearts. This takes time and attention. It doesn't happen if you are always rushing around, or are too well-defended, or too stuck in the ways you have been wronged.

One of my spiritual guides is the Roman Catholic priest and theologian Ron Rolheiser. In his book, *The Holy Longing*, he explores how to have a healthy and life-giving spirituality. Referring to the founder of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Rolheiser says we need to feed our souls in three ways: through prayer, both individual and communal, through working for justice, and finally, through cultivating those things in our lives that keep the soul mellow and grateful. Things like gathering with friends, enjoying food and maybe some wine together, having time for leisure and creativity. "Only one kind of person transforms the world spiritually," Rolheiser says, "someone with a grateful heart." He's written an essay called, "A Mellow Heart in a Bitter Time," that I've made copies of in case you want to take one today.²

He describes the problem we face today: "Both as liberals and conservatives we too easily write off this third prong of the spiritual life, rationalizing that our causes are so urgent, we are so wounded, and our world is so bad, that, in our situation, anger and bitterness are justified. But we are wrong, and as the American poet William Stafford warns, 'following the wrong God home we may miss our star.' The wrong God," Rolheiser says, "is the God of both the contemporary right and the contemporary left, that is, the God who is as wired, bitter, anxious, workaholic, neurotic

¹ "Return Again," words by Rabbi Shalom Carlebach, found in *Singing the Journey*.

² Available online at http://ronrolheiser.com/a-mellow-heart-in-a-bitter-time/#.VGANU_TF_-0

and unhappy as we are. But that is not the God who lies at the end of the spiritual quest, who, as Julian of Norwich assures us, sits in heaven, smiling, completely relaxed..."³

Think of those images of the Buddha, smiling and happy, laughing even. Our Buddhist meditation group here regularly practices metta, or lovingkindness meditation: "May I be happy, peaceful and at ease. May I be well. May you be happy, peaceful and at ease. May you be well. May all beings be happy, peaceful and at ease. May all be well."

Of course, this is not as easy as it sounds, I'm grateful to Diane Brokvist for offering her testimony this morning about the necessity and difficulty and blessing of this work of forgiveness. In many ways hers has been a hard life--she has been through so much, and she could have chosen to be trapped in bitterness and anger--toward those who hurt her, toward herself, toward the God of her understanding--but rather she has turned, again and again. She has done the good and hard work of redeeming what she has been given to bear. Under her sometimes tough exterior she has cultivated a mellow and tender heart. Diane and I have not always had an easy relationship. On the day you called me to be your minister, she sat in what would become my office and told me, "I'm don't necessarily trust ministers." But Diane has become one of my spiritual heroes, because of the good and hard soul work she has done. She is one of my teachers.

The invitation is to turn, again and again, the way a plant turns toward the sun. As our reading this morning described it, when things had gotten pretty bad,

(Someone) Turned to face the pain.
Turned to face the stranger.
Turned to look at the smouldering world and the hatred seething in too many eyes.
Turned to face himself, herself.

And then another turned.
And another. And another.
And as they wept, they took each other's hands.

Until whole groups of people were turning.
Young and old, gay and straight.
People of all colours, all nations, all religions.
Turning not only to the pain and hurt but to beauty, gratitude and love.
Turning to one another with forgiveness and a longing for peace in their hearts.⁴

This is how we change the world, by changing our selves, by turning. By cultivating a mellow heart and soul. By daring to be happy. And if necessary, switching to decaf. By being open to that amazing grace that is ever looking to enter our hearts and break into our lives, ever longing to set us free.

Amen.

³ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*.

⁴ "The Great Turning," by Christine Fry, available online at <http://www.joannamacy.net/poemsilove/workshop-poems/122-thegreatturning.html>