



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Don’t Just Do Something”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on October 20, 2013

Last week I talked about having the courage to be who you were born to be; how each of us is invited, and compelled, to find the path this is our own, and travel it; how there is joy and blessing in that.

I hope you heard that as about about being who you are; about being, and not just doing. Because we live in a culture that is so focused on doing, on what people do, as if that is the key to who we are. You meet someone at a party and ask, “What do you do?” Meaning, “What is your occupation?” You know how to answer this question. But you could respond in all kinds of ways: “I do a little pottery,” “I like reading novels,” “I watch the Red Sox on TV.” One of my fantasy answers to the question “What do you do?” is this: “As little as possible.”

But that is my shadow side coming out. You see, I am a doer. I like to think of myself as a contemplative, but I have a hard time sitting still. So today I’m preaching a sermon that I need to hear. Maybe some of you need to hear it too.

Did any of you grow up being told, “Don’t just sit there, do something!”? Well, my message today is just the opposite: don’t just do something, try sitting there, for a change. Thousands of years ago, the psalmist wrote these words, “Be still and know that I am God.”<sup>1</sup> Let’s reflect for a moment on this ancient wisdom. Will you meditate on these words with me?

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be. Just be.

You don’t have to do anything to be open to the wonder and mystery of this life. Just be. But that’s easier said than done. When I sit down for my morning prayer, one of the nagging voices that pops up asks, “Isn’t there something more productive you could be doing?”

One of the great things about worship is that you don’t have to do anything, other than show up. You may feel moved to greet someone, or light a candle silently, or voice a joy or sorrow, and I hope you want to lift your voice in song, but you don’t have to! It’s good, isn’t it, to have this hour

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 46:10.

when you don't have to do anything? Is one hour a week enough? Are there other times in your week when you are free to just be, when you don't have to do anything? When you can be still and open to the wonder and mystery that surrounds us?

This Sunday, some of our people are up at Ferry Beach, a Universalist retreat center on the ocean in Scarborough, Maine. I imagine them worshipping this morning in the simple chapel in the woods there, and taking walks on that beach which curves around Saco Bay. It's good to have times and places to go on retreat. And we need practices, everyday practices, to keep us grounded and whole in a world that seems to want to spin out of control. For me, one hour on Sunday is not enough.

I've been leading a class called "The Life of Prayer." We're gathering three times to pray together, and to talk about prayer. The first week, I told the participants I had two hopes for the class--that each person would lead us in prayer, and that during this two week span, they would commit to daily prayer or meditation, thirty minutes a day. There was an audible gasp when I said that!

I have a daily prayer practice, but I'm easily distracted, and can have a hard time sitting still. Knowing others are praying too, that helps.

The truth is, I love getting things done, feeling productive, checking things off my "to do" list. There's nothing inherently wrong with that. But turn it up a notch or two, and I start to think, "I'm running things past people," I start to think I am in control and in charge. This busyness is like a drug, and I'm learning it is the road to ruin.

In our culture, many of us take pride in how busy our lives are. "My calendar is totally booked," we tell our friends. "I am crazy busy!" It's a socially acceptable way of saying, "I am so important!"

Isn't it true that we fill our lives with activity because the emptiness frightens us? That we run ourselves ragged doing things because we are afraid that we don't have much worth as human beings?

You know, there are happy and productive cultures on this earth where everyone goes home in the afternoon and takes a nap! There are societies that spend more time playing than we do, that understand that time wasted is not wasted time. The other day, someone on the radio was wondering if baseball is too slow and too time-consuming a game, too old-fashioned, for our fast-paced society.

I have a new word I'm going to live by. It's unbusy. I didn't make it up. I got it from Eugene Peterson, who pastored the same Presbyterian church in Maryland for over 30 years. He started that church from scratch, and in the early years, he did everything. He wanted it to be successful, of course, so he was very busy.<sup>2</sup>

But one day he realized that by trying to pay attention to everything, by trying to do everything, he was missing some of the most important things. Convinced he needed to change, Peterson

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011) p.277-82.

vowed to become an unbusy pastor. And he says this change freed him up to be the kind of pastor he longed to be--to really be present to the lives of his people, and to the ways God was moving among them.

To be unbusy is to live at a sustainable pace, making time for work and for play, time to rest, time to just be. I'm not against work--I love to work--but I want to give up busy work.

Though I hate to admit it when I'm in the middle of frenzied overfunctioning, isn't being busy a choice? Isn't busy mostly a state of mind? A frenzied, reactionary, self-important state that makes no room for reflection, connection or grace.

This is what Thomas Merton is talking about in our reading today. He says our contemporary tendency toward hyperactivity is a form of violence.

"The idealist... easily succumbs (to) activism and overwork...To allow oneself to be carried away by the multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence... "<sup>3</sup>

I recognize myself in what Merton says. How about you? Are you with me? Is busyness one of our contemporary deadly sins? Are you too busy for your own good?

The farmer and poet Wendell Berry has an annual ritual in which he cleans out old papers and buries them in the ground. Standing outdoors, he makes this confession:

To the sky, to the wind, then,  
and to the faithful trees, I confess  
my sins: that I have not been happy  
enough, considering my good luck,  
have listened to too much noise,  
have been inattentive to wonders,  
have lusted after praise.<sup>4</sup>

The invitation is to slow down and be mindful of the blessings of this life, to turn down the noise so you can be attentive to wonder, to stop trying to please others so you can be true to who you were born to be. The invitation is to be still, and to know, who you are, and whose you are.

It is from that grounded, centered, joyful place that our our good work will come. We tend to have it backwards--to think that we need to run faster and faster to get things done. My grandparents had a cross-stitch sampler that read, "The hurrier I go, the behinder I get." Paradoxically, it is slowing down--making time to pray or meditate, time to be open to the wonder and mystery that surrounds us--that can actually help make our work more fruitful and productive.

One of the participants in the prayer group this week told us how he prays in the car, after midnight, on his way to his night shift work. Some nights he opens the sunroof as the drives

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Merton, from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

<sup>4</sup> Wendell Berry, "A Purification."

down the highway, so he can see the moon and stars. He told us how his 45 minutes of prayer in the car opens him up to the presence of God, and makes him glad and grateful. His kind of spacious and joyful spirituality, that's what I want.

How do you get it? You start by slowing down, by making the commitment to be less busy. It's possible to be an unbusy person! Will you join me in that? You know, you can be unbusy anywhere!

For some of you, this will be harder than for others. You who are parents of young children, you have plenty of busyness built into your lives right now. Maybe it's even a good kind of busyness. You may need quiet and stillness more than the rest of us. I hope you will let us know how we can help you find that.

One of the most countercultural things you can do is slow down, and do less, so you can be more. To have faith in that.

Hear these words from a prayer in honor of Oscar Romero:

This is what we are about:

We plant seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything  
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something,  
and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,  
an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.<sup>5</sup>

My spiritual companions, we want to build a land where love and justice prevail. We long for that day when justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. Will we build that land by anxiety and worry and busyness? No.

This is what we are about--planting seeds, having hope, doing what we can. Trusting that we are part of something much larger than ourselves. Being grateful, and glad, for these lives, and this good work, we have been given.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Ken Untener, "The Romero Prayer," available online at [http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers/archbishop\\_romero\\_prayer.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers/archbishop_romero_prayer.cfm)