



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“What You Need to Hear,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on March 27, 2011

There are two questions I regularly ask myself as a preacher: “What do you need to hear right now? And what do I need to say?” I hope my preaching is an ongoing conversation between us, between what is stirring in you and in me.

If I have a sense of what you are seeking here, it’s because you tell me. You tell me your stories, and I am honored to receive them. I have the privilege of reflecting on, and reflecting back, what you share. I get to see firsthand the power of community to connect, to redeem, to heal.

“We need a community,” Elaine Prevallet writes, “a church or a covenant group within a church – some group of friends . . . who are willing to risk grounding their lives in values that may make them marginal to the larger culture, who are willing to be responsible with and for and to each other, who are not afraid to ask hard questions.

“We need them to help us recognize that our own individual gift—who I am--is for something, has a unique role to play, a contribution to make. We need them to help us name the gift and find its place within a frame; we need them to keep us accountable and honest and steady in a culture geared toward constant change. The pull of individualism is so strong that we cannot afford to go it alone. We have to find or create communities – containers – if we are to be faithful to God’s call.”¹

What she says is true--we can’t afford to go it alone, if we want to be faithful--that is, if we want to live vital and connected and meaningful and helpful lives.

That doesn’t mean I’m against solitude. Hardly. But I can’t imagine not being part of a community like this one, and I wonder about the people who don’t have this; who aren’t in church on Sunday morning--who are at the grocery store or reading the paper or doing something else--do they know what they are missing? Do they have a place in their lives where others know their name, and not only that, know something of their story? Are there people who will come and visit them when they are ill, or send them a card when a loved one dies? Do they have a place to go when they are lonely or joyous, a place where they might share these things, a place where they might sense the presence of the holy? Do they have friends with whom they can engage the deepest questions and risk sharing their most heartfelt longings? I hope so.

¹ Elaine Prevallet, S.L., “Minding the Call,” *Weavings*, May/June 1996.

And do they have a place that calls them to live for more than themselves? It was that great humanitarian Albert Schweitzer who said, "The only ones of you who will be truly happy are those who have found and learned how to serve." One reason to be part of a community like this one is because we help you to be happy--we provide you with ways to serve.

For the past two months we've been hearing testimonials; from the staff about how they see their work here as ministry, and from members of the congregation about what this church means to them, and how they are living out their faith. We've been telling the stories of our ministry to one other. Next Saturday night is our stewardship dinner--that's when we'll ask you to fill out your pledge card and make your financial commitment for the coming year. Today is my chance to tell you what you need to hear about this, but I have a problem, because you don't all need to hear the same thing.

When my son was in sixth grade they spend months preparing for a visit to a place called Exchange City. This is a pretend town, created in an old school, where every student gets a job for the day, and they learn about work and money and other things. Well, as the day for the field trip got closer, we noticed that Will was more and more anxious. Something was going on, but we had no idea what it was. Finally we realized it was the trip to Exchange City. It turns out that the year before, the sixth graders had not behaved well. So for months the teachers had been warning the students, threatening them with dire consequences if they went there and misbehaved.

The idea that this day was going to be filled with out of control kids and angry teachers was enough to make our quiet child nervous about the whole thing. Though he was not going to be one of those rowdy kids, he'd taken in everything the teachers had been saying. He didn't really need to hear those lectures about the consequences of bad behavior, but he did. My hunch is that the few kids who did need to hear those warnings probably tuned them out. You know, the way the adults always talk in the Charlie Brown TV shows: "Wont wah, wont wah, wont wah."

Today I'm particularly aware that when it comes to money and the church, you don't all need to hear the same thing.

Some of you are out of work and struggling to make ends meet. You feel bad that you can't give much, or anything, right now. You've told me so. You understand more than most what a privilege it is to be able to give. You need to hear that it's okay, that there are other ways to contribute to this community too, and that we understand you'll be glad to contribute more when you are able. You need to hear that your worth is way more than what's in your bank account.

Some of you are new here and don't know how our finances work. You need to know that every year we have to raise what it costs to run the church. We don't get money from anywhere else, except for some income we receive from our investment account, and we are committed to using less and less of that. The money we have comes from us. You need to hear that the church is not a charity, one you write a check to once a year. It's more like the cable company or your gym, that you pay for every month. Most people here pay their pledges on the same schedule as they themselves get paid. If you make a pledge and can write one check for the whole amount, then

you're probably not pledging enough. Could you give that same amount four times a year? How about every month?

Some of you are uncomfortable hearing talk about money, especially in church. You may be wishing you didn't come today! You need to hear that there's nothing dirty or embarrassing about money--it's just currency, a way to make exchanges between people. What you do with your money, the choices you make, these are moral choices that make a difference in the world. If talk of money makes you squirm, you may have some spiritual work to do around this, and I encourage you to do that work, because it's possible to have a healthier and happier and more productive relationship with money.

Some of you are not giving as generously as you could. Maybe you're afraid of sticking your neck out, or of making a real commitment. You need to know that others are already doing this, and it feels good, really good, to be generous. You need to hear that what you give matters. That we will use your money well, and frugally here. Jim Ryan, our Board chair last year, works with lots of nonprofits and he said he's amazed how much we do with our relatively small budget. We deserve your support, and we need you to give what you are able. And you'll feel good when you know you've made a generous pledge.

Some of you are already giving generously, and gladly. What you need to hear is thank you, and keep it up!

Any of you may wonder, "How much should I pledge?" You need to know that the average pledge last year was about \$1150. Some pledges were for more than that, and some were for less. Most people look at their income and say, "I can give this much a week, or a month." I ask you to spend some time this week, ahead of our Stewardship Dinner next Saturday night, considering what you might give to the church. I hope you'll really wrestle with this--will ask yourself, "How much can I afford to give? What am I willing and able to do for my church? Am I giving the right amount, or can I give more, even a lot more?" If you want to have a conversation about this, just let me know. I would welcome that.

What I hope you won't do is sidestep this conversation, even with yourself, and say, "I'll just give what I gave last year." Now I'm grateful for your support, I am, but I have to ask you, why would you do that, except to avoid the conversation, the potentially uncomfortable conversation about money, about what you're willing to give?

I want this church to be a place of growth and depth and transformation, and I sense you want that too. I don't hear any of you saying, "Let's just do what we did last year." This year we've added some Vespers services and some great new Adult Religious Education programs and our Social Justice Committee is finding new ways to take our faith out into the world. And there is so much we could do.

One of my hopes for the future is that we'll expand our Director of Religious Education position so she could have more time to work with our youth, and help work on adult programs too. We've talked about getting another ministerial intern here, and taking the church outside our walls, making a difference in the city around us. All this takes our efforts, and it takes our money. I'm

glad to be able to make a generous pledge to the church, because it feels good and I know what a difference it makes. And I hope and trust you want to be generous too.

I sense you're here because you know you need this community. What you need to hear is that this community needs you. We need your spirit, your energy, your enthusiasm. We need your effort, your participation, your commitment. And we need your money. Not all of it. But enough of it that we will be healthy and vital, a thriving and happy congregation, a place of liberation and transformation for all who enter here.

Remember that scene Naomi Shihab Nye witnesses in the Albuquerque airport:

"I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world."²

We live in a world that gives us plenty of cause for fear and worry. But that is not the whole story. Not everything is lost. We have one another, and food and stories to share. We have work that calls out to us.

What do you need to hear this day? It's the same as what I need to say to you. We're all in this together. This is the world I want to live in: the shared world. It's the only world worth living in.

For the good work that lies before us, for these companions, for the opportunity to grow and serve, for all these blessings, let us be grateful and let us be glad. And let us say together,

Amen.

² The reading today was the prose poem "Gate 4-A," by Naomi Shihab Nye. You can read it online at http://www.gratefulness.org/readings/nye_gate.htm