

“Why We’re Here,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on September 20, 2009

Reading: Deuteronomy 30:11-14, 19

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. ... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.

The reading I chose for this morning, from the book of Deuteronomy, way back near the beginning of the Hebrew Bible, comes at a pivotal moment in the life of people of Israel, who, after escaping from slavery in Egypt, had been wandering in the wilderness for a long time. Moses knew them pretty well. And he was not going to get to the promised land with them, so this was his chance to give them some parting words. And he told them, “Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live.”

It seems so obvious. It’s like a parent saying to a child who’s leaving for college, “Remember how I raised you, and do the right thing.” It seems so obvious, at least in the abstract, what we ought to do. Given the alternative, who wouldn’t “choose life?”

Now I know that this phrase has been used by folks on one side of the abortion issue, but that is not what I am thinking about today. And neither was Moses. To paraphrase, he was saying to them, “You are on the brink of a new era. You will have choices to make. Which way will you go?” He says it’s not that complicated: “The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart . . .” But it is up to you to choose.

We face choices all the time, some big and some small. Most of us want to do the right thing most of the time. But it’s not that simple. Sometimes we aren’t entirely sure what is right, and even if we are, it can be hard to do the right thing. One thing I do know--we usually have a choice, and our choices have consequences. We build our lives, one step at a time, by the little choices that we make. In one of the Harry Potter books, Albus Dumbledore, the wise headmaster at Hogwarts, says, “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”

One of the beautiful, and difficult, parts of being human is that we get to choose. And I hope and trust that being part of a faith community like this one will help you to make good and life-affirming choices.

We're at the start of a new church year. Yesterday the Board of Trustees held their annual retreat, meeting for the better part of the day. It was a chance to get to know one another better and do some visioning and planning for this church year. We spent some time talking about and wondering about our mission. Our purpose. Why we're here. I shared with them an article in the current *UU World* magazine, that I commend to you. It's only two pages long, and it asks a poignant question: are a public, or a private church? Are we primarily oriented toward those who are already here, or are we here in order to serve those in the wider community? Are we mostly taking care of our own needs, or are we out there, taking a stand and serving the need of the world?

As those of you who have been around here for a while know, this congregation has faced some challenges over the past few years. Conflicts that simmered here for some time boiled over in the spring of 2006, when the minister resigned and the music director was fired. Those events brought on more conflict and threatened to split the church. It was a hard time. But the people here faced the problems, and worked on them, and struggled to restore trust in this community. Slowly things got better, and seemed more hopeful, and after two years of interim ministry, you were ready for a new beginning.

This church has rightly been focused on its internal workings for the past few years. There were things that needed attention. And even so, you didn't give up the ways you were serving the community, such as feeding the hungry at community meals, and hosting the food pantry and drop-in center.

In my first year with you, I was clear that my job was to get to know you; to be present and available to you, to be your pastor. Now that we've been together for a year, I wonder about what lies ahead. What are we called to do together? What is the mission of this congregation? I don't intend to stop paying attention to the inside things, and neither do the other leaders here. There's still plenty to do, but I wonder if it's time now to look more outside our walls. I wonder, are we ready to make the commitment to being a public church?

Yesterday the Board identified two things for us to focus on this year. One is a program for adult religious education--classes and workshops to help you go deeper in your spiritual life. And the other is to focus on social justice--ways for us to put our faith into action in order to help heal and change our world. If either of these excite you, please find the Adult Education or Social Action table at coffee hour today. We're not asking you to join a committee, not yet--just to start a conversation and see what develops.

Earlier this week, I met with Eric Hakansson, and we talked about his plans to go to the National Equality March in Washington on October 11. I was so moved by his commitment that I asked him if he would speak to you today. It wasn't his idea. And I didn't get the sense that he so much wanted to go to DC, as he felt that he had to go. "It's something that I can't not do," he told me. Our conversation got me excited, and I started wondering if a group of us might go down there together, maybe carpool or charter a bus even. I called a couple of other UU ministers to see if folks in their churches were thinking about this--maybe we could join together?

All this reminded me of when, back in January of 2003, I was in my second year of seminary and our country was on the verge of going to war with Iraq. With a bunch of other church folks, I rode on a bus through the night to stand on the mall in Washington, on the Martin Luther King birthday weekend. We went to say no to an unjust and unjustifiable war. It was a powerful experience. I was moved to see so many people of faith, from various traditions, taking a stand there. I saw signs that read, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” and “Who would Jesus bomb?” and one which originally said “God bless America,” but the word bless was crossed out, and the sign said “God forgive America.”

My conversation with Eric brought all of this back, and I thought, “This is something we as a church could do!” I got really excited about the possibilities. But the next day I realized that I have commitments here that will make it difficult for me to go to Washington on October 11. I’m praying on this, trying to discern where it is that I am supposed to be standing.

I hope that each of you will do that too; ask yourself, what am I called to do with the days I have been given on this earth? That’s my point today. That we each have a choice about how we are going to live. It’s up to each of us to search our own hearts, and ask, what will I choose? Where will I stand? And with whom?

And as a congregation, I hope we will ask ourselves, why are we here? How will we live with that tension between reaching inward and going outward?

There’s an old saying about the church. It begins this way--it says, “The church exists “to comfort the afflicted.” To be a place where people come to find what they are longing for--healing and wholeness for those who are broken, food for those who are hungry, companionship for the lonely and compassion for those who are suffering. This is the church taking care of those who enter it, and though I want to see us develop a more organized and more intentional network of providing care for people, this is something we already do pretty well--welcoming the stranger, comforting those in need, being a warm and loving community.

The whole saying says the church exists “to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable.” To afflict the comfortable does not mean making people squirm for arbitrary or capricious reasons; banging on the pulpit or telling people they are bad or making them feel guilty. No, it means speaking the truth, even when it’s a truth people don’t want to hear. It means taking a stand on the side of those without power, position or privilege. It means questioning and challenging the status quo. There’s nothing wrong with feeding the hungry and providing shelter for the homeless, but if we never do anything about challenging the structures that allow people in this country to go without food or shelter or health care, then we are helping to perpetuate a system that privileges some of us and shortchanges others.

We are part of a tradition that goes back thousands of years. It includes people like Moses, who even though he really didn’t want to, heeded God’s call and went to Pharaoh and demanded, “Let my people go.” It includes people from our own time, like Rosa Parks, who one day decided was no longer going to go along with a system that demeaned her because of the color of her skin. In refusing to move to the back of the bus she effectively said, “I’ve had enough. I’m not going to participate any longer in my own oppression.”¹ This speaking truth to power is what’s called the

¹ See Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 44.

prophetic tradition, and it is grounded in both the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and in the Gospel. We are part of that prophetic tradition; women and men through the ages who have said, that our God is not just a loving God, but also a justice-seeking God; that we are doing holy work when we stand with those at the margins, when we give our hands to struggle, when we work for justice and peace.

So what are we going to do? Will any of us be inspired to join Eric and Phil, and make the trip to Washington and stand for equal rights for our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers?

Why are we here? I have some ideas--I've started a list, but I'm not going to share it with you yet. Because I want to hear your answers. So let's start a conversation about that--about our mission, our purpose, why we're here.

I will say that I know this call to be a public person of faith, to take a stand for what you know is right, to put yourself on the line, can seem risky and scary, even. But it is what we are called to do. It's part of our tradition. It's what gives us the right to call ourselves a church. We won't all do this in the same way. But I can tell you that there is liberation in this--in getting to the point where you can say, "This is where I stand." In joining hands with others to heal and bless the world.

One more thing--please don't hear this call to action with a sense of guilt or ought. Because guilt is a lousy motivator. One of my professors in seminary said to me, "Guilt is an immobilizing emotion." Then she asked me a question that continues to call me to account. She said, "What are you going to do with your privilege?" What are any of us who are relatively comfortable going to do with the gifts we have been given?

Howard Thurman, the great preacher and theologian said, "Don't worry about what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

What makes you come alive is very near you. It is in your heart and mind and soul, if you will but search there. It can be found in your brothers and your sisters too, if you will seek it there. Life and death, blessings and curses, are before you. Do what makes you come alive. Choose life, so that you and your children may live. But not only that, choose life so that your neighbor and your neighbor's children may live, so that justice will roll down like waters and peace will flow like a mighty stream on this our beautiful planet earth.

Amen.