



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

Homily at the Memorial Service for Kevin Backman
given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on June 29, 2012

The night I learned of Kevin's death, I sat down and started making a list of people in our church we should call, people who were close enough to Kevin that they should hear the sad news directly. It was a long list. I don't know if we were actually able to do this, but we tried. Making that list showed me that in the three years he was a member here, Kevin touched a lot of lives. He certainly touched mine.

If you knew Kevin at all, you know that life did not come easy for him. He was a sensitive guy, who wore his heart on his sleeve; you never had to wonder if he was having a good day or a bad day, because it was obvious. Kevin did not always make it easy for people around him, because he could get so wrapped up in his own troubles. He could be needy and demanding. But I'm pretty sure he was harder on himself than on anyone else. He could be his own worst enemy.

But Kevin was one of the most generous and big-hearted people I have ever known, and I loved him. I have nothing but respect for him, for the fact that, though it wasn't easy to be Kevin Backman, he didn't try to hide who he was or pretend he was something that he was not. At an early age, when he came out as a gay man, the cost to Kevin was high. But he was true to himself. And that must have taken so much courage and strength. Perhaps some of his challenging behavior was due to some of those burdens he had to bear.

Nobody tried harder than Kevin. I think he was always doing the best he could, and you can't ask more of anyone than that.

Earlier this week I talked to Rev. John Gibbons, minister of the First Parish in Bedford and a friend of mine. John has known Kevin for over 30 years, since he served as minister at the UU congregation of Mendon & Uxbridge. John says that every year at Christmastime, he'd get a call from Kevin, as well as the occasional e-mail or chain letter, which usually tended toward the sappy and sentimental.

Something I love about John is how creative he is as a preacher. He gets away with things that most of us wouldn't even try. He told me a story, that Kevin told me once too. It was an Easter Sunday in Bedford, when Kevin was a young adult. In the sermon John told a story of a man who was dying in a hospital cancer ward. Not able to leave, he put a poster in his window that said "Bring me pizza!" And people did. John thought this was an Easter story, so he included it in his

sermon. It happens that Kevin was a pizza delivery guy at the time, so he and Kevin hatched a plan. When John came to the climax of the story, Kevin bust into the sanctuary, in his uniform, carrying boxes and boxes of pizza. He called out in that strong and wonderful voice of his, "Anybody call for pizza?"

John would have liked to be here today, but is out of town. He wanted me to remind you of Kevin's laugh--"his unique, volcanic, room-rattling, frequent laugh." John said, "Kevin had a heart of gold and wanted to do good, in his relationships and in the world, and people took advantage of him." He also said Kevin was "unnaturally skillful at burning bridges and at self-defeating behavior." But he observed that Kevin was healthy enough to find a church community wherever he lived, and go to it, and find a community to be part of. Not only that, he was smart about how churches can and should work. One of my regrets about his death is that we have lost a potentially great leader here. Kevin had just agreed to be the clerk to our Board of Trustees, and I hoped that he would grow into one of our key leaders. We needed him. Kevin was UU to the core--he really lived our principles, he lived the golden rule, he was generous to a fault. John Gibbons said, "Kevin was always striving, and in spite of it all, he never gave up." Just before we hung up, he said, "I loved Kevin, and I'm sad."

Kevin was on a lifelong quest to find a place to belong. As a young child he was in foster care until he was adopted by his parents, Anita and Carl, when he was about three. Unfortunately these transitions were very hard for him. He did not get what he needed as an infant and little child, and he spent the rest of his life trying to find that love and acceptance. The tragedy of Kevin's life was that when he did find it, he didn't always believe it was real.

But I want you to know that I think Kevin found at least some of what he was looking for in his last few years. In this church, he found a number of people who loved him, appreciated him, and cared for him. And Kevin gave back, at least as much as he got.

Every Christmas he made these elaborate gift bags for the church staff, stuffed with delicious things he baked--rum balls, cheesecake, gourmet cookies. When my son went to college last year, Kevin, who was almost always struggling to make ends meet, sent him a gift card for spending money. On move-in day, Kevin left a message on my cell phone, wishing my son well. His voice and the sentiment were so sweet that I saved that message from last August. I'd listen to it every month or two, and be touched again by what a loving and giving and openhearted person Kevin was. I can't believe that he's gone.

But I believe there is a story of redemption here. A story about finding your way home. It's a Universalist story, a story of the power of love. You know the story Jesus told, called the prodigal son. Who goes off looking, seeking, and gets in all kinds of trouble. One day, the story says, he comes to his senses and comes back home, hoping only to be a servant in his father's house. But his father welcomes him back with open arms. He doesn't offer judgment or recrimination, he throws a party! Jesus said that is what God's love for us is like. That there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one who was lost and then comes home, than over 99 who never strayed.

Do you know what the word prodigal means? Spending freely and extravagantly, bordering on recklessness. It's been observed that the real prodigal in the story is not the son, but the father, who gives his love freely, without counting the cost. In that way, Kevin was a prodigal too.

Our Universalist faith is in that God of love, who is always waiting and hoping to welcome us home. We may understand this in different ways, but we assert that God's love is so big, that in the end we will all be reconciled to God, everyone; that we will all find our way home. I think Kevin got a taste of that unconditional love these past few years. We welcomed him here with open arms. We loved him. Earlier this year, he had overextended himself and was burned out, he walked away from the church for a bit. But no one here slammed the door on him, We kept it open, so he could come back. And he did.

He was blessed by the relationships he made here, and we were blessed by him. That's why his death hurts, because the loss that it brings is real and lasting.

But we should take heart. Because the pain and the loss we feel is a sign of the love that we shared, of the ways that Kevin found a place in this community and in our lives. We should take heart, because Kevin helped us to live more deeply into our Universalist faith. He showed up, looking for a place to belong. And he found that here. He belonged, and he thrived here. And we loved him. He had trouble believing that some of the time. But I'm certain that he knew he belonged here. He could even storm off, and when he was ready, come back home.

Even with his struggles, much of the time these last years Kevin was happy. He was happy folding the orders of service, and baking for church functions and preparing last year's Christmas day dinner. He was happy getting dressed up for church and singing in the choir and telling me and others how we ought to be doing things around here, how we could be better. He was happy being with you--he found a family here, people who loved him for who he was, even when it wasn't easy. I hope you see this. I hope you see that Kevin helped us to be better Universalists, that he helped teach us how to love.

It's not just him of course, I see you doing this a lot, opening your hearts to others. It is beautiful to witness, this love in action.

You strengthen and sustain my faith in the power of love, both in our human connections and in that God of love, who wants nothing more than to welcome us home. I hope and trust that Kevin's dear soul is both in our midst, and in the company of all the saints who have gone before us, that great cloud of witnesses. I imagine him now, happy and at peace, and at home, singing with that beautiful voice of his, the words from Amazing Grace: "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun."

Will you join me in prayer?

Dear and loving God, we give thanks for this day we have been given, for these good people here gathered, and especially for life of Kevin Backman, whose death brings us together today. We

give thanks for the years he was in our midst, and for ways he touched and blessed our lives. We pray for Kevin's family and friends in their grief and loss. May they feel love and support on every side, this day and in the days to come.

Remind us, that we are all part of a great and abiding love, that death is part of life, that what is temporal is part of what is eternal. In the midst of death, help us to be aware of the beauty and preciousness of life. Renew in us our commitments, we pray, strengthen us in our faith, so that we might do the work you have given us to do, and be the people we are called to be. Give us the grace to bring more love into this broken and hurting and beautiful world, that we might help to bind up the broken, and feed the hungry, and set the captives free.

These things we pray, in the name of all that is holy, Amen.