

“Religion 101,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on February 7, 2010

“This is not the age of information,” the poet says. “Forget the news, and the radio, and the blurred screen. People are hungry.”¹

People are hungry. You can see evidence of that hunger all around. Restaurants serve jumbo sized meals and a convenience store chain sells not only a drink called the “Big Gulp®,” but also a “Super Big Gulp®,” and a “Double Gulp®.” There are hundreds of TV channels and millions of pages on the internet that promise to inform and entertain us (and do plenty to distract us), there are online social networks like Facebook and Twitter that promise to help us connect with others in this fast-paced world. Not only are people hungry, but we are in a hurry, so we eat on the go, or we multitask, eating at our desks or in front of the TV or computer.

What we don’t do so much anymore is gather around a table to share a meal and some time together. Sometimes it seems we’ve forgotten how to eat, and what constitutes real food. The poet David Whyte is a prophet of our time, calling us to our senses. He sees that we are drowning in a sea of information, that we are surrounded by cheap and fast food in a culture build on consumption, and that in the midst of all this stuff, we are starving. “People are hungry,” he says, “and one good word is bread/for a thousand.”

For me that one good word is God, the name for that force which we can’t explain or fully comprehend, that one which is always more, always beyond, but still, here with us if we will but ask, and pay attention. Sixteen hundred years ago, St. Augustine addressed these words to God: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” Our hearts are hungry, our souls are restless, these days, because we have set up a thousand different things as gods.

I heard a sermon podcast from Grace Cathedral in San Francisco a little over a year ago. The preacher² was reminding his northern California congregation, in the weeks leading up to Christmas, to remember what was important. He said, “I’m not telling you that you shouldn’t wish for an iPhone for Christmas--there’s nothing wrong with that. Just remember that it’s not God.”

In this church we are intentional about our theological diversity. We say, whoever you are, wherever you are on the theological spectrum, wherever you are on life’s journey, we welcome you here. We try to throw the church doors open wide. And this is good.

¹ These lines are from the morning’s reading, the poem “Loaves and Fishes,” by David Whyte.

² The Very Rev. Alan Jones, formerly dean of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco.

But what happens when people get here? Being welcoming in itself is not enough--we need to have a message, we need to have good news to share, we need to have something to offer to this tired old world.

And we do have it. It is the core of our Universalist faith--our affirmation of a God whose other name is Love, a God so unlike that thunderbolt-throwing, punishing, judgmental God some of us grew up with, and that some of us are still carrying around with us, or still running away from. We have good news to share, of a loving and life-affirming God, and this is news our world is hungry for. The problem, to my mind, is that we don't really believe it. We want to believe, but we haven't tested it, we haven't practiced it, we haven't lived it that way we could.

I had a revelation this week. It came, as revelations do, unexpectedly. It was in my weekly meeting with Sally Liebermann, our Director of Religious Education. We were talking about religious education for our children and youth. I was telling her about a conversation I'd had recently with other ministers, and about something I'd read, and our conversation was bouncing around when we had this "ah ha" moment. We acknowledged that we are at a point of opportunity here. The church is growing a bit and our spirits are strong. After a few years of necessary introspection and inner work, we are throwing the doors open and people are coming in. This is good. But it is not enough. It's not enough to invite people to the meal and make a place at the table. You need to give them something nourishing to eat.

The revelation was this--we need to offer a good, solid grounding in religious education and spiritual formation not only for our children and youth, but for everyone here in this community who wants to be part of it, who wants to go deeper in the spiritual life, who wants to develop their own language of reverence and their own spiritual practice. For everyone who is hungry, we need to offer what I'm calling Religion 101.

When I was the assistant minister at the UU church in North Andover, I ran the Coming of Age program there. We have our own COA program here, that will continue to develop as our youth program grows. The program I led in North Andover asked the youth and their adult mentors to wrestle with the big religious questions. Every year some of those mentors would say to me, "I wish I had stated on this when I was a teenager too." Here are the questions we focused on: What is God? What is the nature of good and evil? How do we understand death and dying? What is worship? What are the sources and inspiration of our faith? What about spiritual practices? What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist? And how do we serve others?

What Sally and I realized is that we need to offer a program of basic religious education and spiritual formation for everyone here, that will help you to answer for yourself these questions: How do I understand God, death, and good and evil? How do I worship, pray or meditate, and practice my faith? What does it mean to be a UU and a person of faith?

What we need is a roadmap for how to go deeper in the faith. And it's not rocket science. I see us setting up a program that focuses first on the introductory levels. In school, you don't take specialized courses before you take the intro ones. We need to develop opportunities here for people to grow in their religious life. We already have UU 101, our introduction to this particular church and our history, as well as the history and theology of our tradition. It's a good way to make some connections with the minister and other new folks here. But we need more introduction level courses, on the Bible (coming up!) and other sacred scripture. On theology--exploring how to talk about God and articulating your own theology. On spiritual practice and worship and ways to serve.

We live in a culture in which plenty of people say, "I'm spiritual but not religious." What I think that means is that people feel those spiritual longings, they are looking for ways and places to connect with one another and with the presence of the divine, but they don't expect that to happen in church. They dislike or distrust the church, often for good reason, because the church has often cared more about its own rules and customs and has lost track of how to help people to see that their hunger, their longings, are holy things. "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

The church has often gotten it backwards. The church has acted like it contains God within its walls and that people should come in to get a piece of something holy. But the way it really works is that we have the potential to experience the holy out in the real world all the time--under the wide sky, in the face or touch of another, in any number of ways you could tell me about, ways you have experienced awe and wonder. People come to church, as Alice Walker says, "to share God." We gather here because it's not enough to have these experiences of the holy all by ourselves. In a culture determined to commodify everything, we need to be reminded to be awake to the mystery and wonder and the holiness of life. We need a place to share our sacred stories, to be fed and nourished and strengthened for the living of these days. We need a community where we can lift every voice and sing. We need a place, and practices, sacraments like speaking our truth and lighting candles, where we can lift up what is good and holy. And the wider community needs us.

I was at a meeting of UU ministers a few days ago, and we had a wide ranging discussion of our challenges and blessings. One of them said that he was discouraged about our liberal faith; he despaired that we don't have much to offer our world these days. I said, "Let me tell you about my experience in Haverhill." I said, "People are hungry for our Universalist message of a loving God."

One of the people who best articulates this Universalist theology is the retired Anglican archbishop of Capetown, South Africa, Desmond Tutu. He has lived his faith deeply and openly, and it shows. In South Africa under apartheid, he witnessed great suffering and some of the worst of human behavior, but still, he is so full of hope and love that he glows. Listen to what he said to a reporter at the end of an interview, a reporter who

acknowledged that he was no longer a churchgoer. He wrote, "(Tutu) recognizes a lapsed (believer) when he sees one. He leans towards me one last time and, in a voice barely above a whisper, says:

"You are like so many, my friend. You have everything but, inside, you feel there is something missing: deep down, somewhere, it's not quite OK. Do not worry, do not feel troubled, do not be perplexed. God loves you as you are - with your doubts, with your intellectual reservations, with your inability to make the leap of faith.

"God says, 'I made you, actually, and I made you as you are because I love you... Just be you and know that I affirm you. You are precious. You matter enormously to me. You matter as if you were the only human being and, you know something, I create only masterpieces. I have no doubt at all about your worth. You don't have to do anything. Your worth for me is intrinsic. Please believe that I love you. You are not going to find ultimate satisfaction in anything out there because I made you like me.... I made you for a worshipping creature - and you have worshipped money and fame, I know it - but, ultimately, I am the only one worth worshipping. I won't let you go, my child. I won't give up on you - ever. I won't. I will sit here like the father of the prodigal son, waiting. Come back home, come back home to me, and our celebration will be mind-boggling.'"³

This is good theology, and it is our theology too. My hope is that we will proclaim it boldly. That we will be people doing theology, working out what we believe and practicing our faith. Coming to church, as Alice Walker says, not to find God, but to share God. Coming to church to wake up to the miracle of this life, to the Love that surrounds us, and to this most amazing day⁴ that we have been given.

Amen.

³ Newspaper interview with Desmond Tutu, by Gyles Brandeth, available at www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4723136/My-idea-of-Heaven.html

⁴ e.e. cummings: "i thank You God for most this amazing day"