



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

---

“A Fire in Winter,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on March 3, 2013

A couple of months ago, not long after the terrible shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, one of you challenged me to preach about this--about violence and guns and how we might respond as people of faith. One way would be to engage the current debate--I could tell you my views, and after the service you'd tell me yours. But would anything change? And can we all agree that something does need to change?

I grew up bird hunting with my dad and brother and grandfather. I loved walking the fields and woods with them and a dog; I loved the smell of gunpowder in a spent shotgun shell. I had mixed feelings about shooting birds, but we ate what we killed, and they tasted good. A couple of years ago at our church auction, I won a target shooting session and people seemed to think that was hilarious, that their minister would want to shoot a gun. We are all more complex than we at first appear--let's hope we continue to surprise one another!

My point is, the gun issue is not a simple one. Plenty of good and responsible people hunt and shoot guns--it's a longstanding part of our culture. And some people do terrible things with guns--as they do with other kinds of objects. If you do have guns, please keep them locked up, away from children. Be careful and responsible.

I'm tired of the extremists on both ends of the debate, and in other debates in our country, who seem more interested in scoring points and demonizing the other rather than working to make things better. To that end, let's look deeper, at the culture of violence in our country.

Can we admit that we do have a culture of violence here? We spend almost as much on our military as the rest of the world combined. We also have the highest rate of personal gun ownership in the world. The percentage of people we keep in prison is three times more than any other nation in the world.

So we lead the world in military spending, in putting people behind bars, and in arming ourselves. What's that about? We are the land of the free and the home of the brave. What are we afraid of?

The poet Robert Bly says there's a shadow side<sup>1</sup> to our national psyche, our image of America as free and right and just. The things that don't fit our idealized image, we push away, into the

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Bly articulates this idea of our national shadow in *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*.

shadows. Politicians take advantage of this; they know being “tough on crime” and locking people up may not be good policy, but it evokes people’s fears and keeps them in office.

The same thing happens when it comes to war. If you can dehumanize the people of another nation, then it’s not hard to galvanize support for war. This happened in the first Gulf war, when a story was told on floor of Congress that Iraqi soldiers invading Kuwait had unplugged incubators with babies in them, proving the Iraqis to be barbarians, and stoking the rush to war. But that story was simply not true.<sup>2</sup>

Have you ever thought about the fact that, in this country, we tend to approach our problems by declaring war on them? In the sixties, there was the “war on poverty.” During the Reagan administration, we started a “war on drugs.” And the attacks of September 11 caused us to declare a “war on terror.”

Our track record in fighting these wars is not very good. Maybe we need to find a better metaphor! Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas says we played right into the terrorists’ hands when we declared war. If we had called the killers murderers, which they were, we would have much more sympathy in the Muslim world, which abhors murder as much as we do.<sup>3</sup>

Instead, eleven and a half years ago, we started bombing Afghanistan from 50,000 feet. I had just started divinity school, and that winter took a class called, “Compassion, Forgiveness, Nonviolence: An Image of Trinity.” Desmond Tutu, who was living on our campus then, spoke to us about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and how South Africa had, against all odds, overcome apartheid and found a way toward truth telling about its past and forgiveness and reconciliation among its people.

At some point our conversation turned to September 11 and our country’s military response. Archbishop Tutu looked at us and asked, “Why are Americans, who are such generous, hopeful people, also so vindictive?”

Around that time, Jeremiah Wright, who became infamous as Barack Obama’s pastor, preached a sermon that later caused problems for candidate Obama. In that sermon he described the history of American violence against civilians--from killing native Americans and taking their land, to enslaving Africans and bringing them to our shores, to using the atomic bomb against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to recent bombings of civilians in Grenada, Panama, Sudan and Iraq. Following September 11, he said, “now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost.”<sup>4</sup>

My hope is that some day, our country might do some of its own soul searching, and undertake a process like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. But I’m not holding my

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Christian Science Monitor* reported on this story, available online at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0906/p25s02-cogn.html>

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Hauerwas post-September 11 essay available online at <http://today.duke.edu/showcase/mmedia/features/911/site/hauerwas.html>

<sup>4</sup> Reporting on this sermon available online at <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=4719157&page=1>

breath. Because our tendency is to say the problem is somewhere else, rather than in our own heart and minds, our government and culture.

I know it is hard to hear Rev. Wright's words, but he is telling the truth, that you reap what you sow.<sup>5</sup> We as a nation have been willing, since our beginning, to use force to get what we want. We have been a major exporter of weapons of mass destruction. We have armed ourselves to the teeth. And we wonder why we have a problem with violence in our land?

In addition to having a responsible and adult conversation about guns, can we look in the mirror and take a hard look at our tendency to use force and violence? Can we call the administration to account for its secretive use of drones to kill people? Can we ask ourselves, why did it take the Newtown shootings to get our attention? Almost every day young black people in the inner city are dying from gun violence. Did we only start to pay attention, only start to care, when it affected little suburban white kids?

Yes, there is plenty for us talk about, plenty to mourn and lament and confess, as a nation and as individuals. It would be easy to despair about the prevalence of violence and the fact that the kind of change that is needed is hard.

If you're wondering, "Is there any hope?," hang on. If you read the blurb about this sermon and are thinking, "I thought this was supposed to be uplifting," don't give up yet. The kind of change I long for is hard, and takes time, and there's no guarantee it is coming. But who would have thought our culture would have changed its attitude about smoking in public places? Not long ago, who would have thought that same sex marriage would be legal? Who would have thought that Boston would have a Gay Men's Chorus and they would be singing in a church, of all places, the way they did here last night? They are hoping to sing soon at Fenway Park--talk about coming out, a chorus of gay men singing at a baseball game!

In our reading this morning, Desmond Tutu talks about his own experience of human crimes and cruelty. But he says, this is not the whole story: "We are indeed made for something more. We are made for goodness... Why else do we get so outraged by wrong? When we hear of any egregious act, we are appalled. Isn't that an incredible assertion about us? Evil and wrong are aberrations. If wrong was the norm, it wouldn't be news... The norm is goodness."<sup>6</sup>

A few days after the Newtown shootings, we had one of our vespers services here. Sally and I talked about a way to quietly remember and honor the victims. We put candles, one for each life lost, on a table here, and invited people to come forward in silence and light those candles. We had them on our altar table the following Sunday, the day of our living nativity, and again on Christmas Eve. Lighting those candles at Christmas was a way to hold those lives lost, and all those suffering families and communities, in our hearts.

I took a picture of that table with 28 candles, and put it up on Facebook. Two of my friends from high school wrote comments that said, "Thank you for making it 28." You see, we included the shooter who died that day, Adam Lanza, and his mother Nancy. A woman I knew from divinity

---

<sup>5</sup> Galatians 6:7: Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.

<sup>6</sup> Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *Made for Goodness* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

school wrote to me about this. She said a colleague of hers had rung their church bell 26 times, but rejected the idea that all 28 should be remembered. She asked me, "How did you explain the 28 candles to folks who might have not approved of your decision to light candles for all who lost their lives that day?"

I wrote back: "Maybe it's our Universalism, but we didn't really consider excluding the Lanzas. Nancy is definitely a victim, and it seems that Adam is, in some way, too. How else can you explain this terrible tragedy? I don't know. I actually didn't hear an objection from anyone in the congregation."

Our Universalist faith is that no one is beyond God's love, that nobody gets left behind. That in the end, Love wins. Some days it's hard to remember this. But what if, when the brokenness of the world gets you down, you remember that your dismay at what is bad or wrong is just a painful reminder that we are made for goodness?

If Desmond Tutu, who witnessed so much pain and hurt, and was part of so much forgiveness and healing, can keep his heart open and hopeful, then can't we try too? This week, can you look for the good in others, and in yourself? Will you look for good even in those who bother you, and annoy you?

Desmond Tutu offers us a way to be more human in these troubled times. He says, in his own prayer practice, "I am learning to shut up more in the presence of God." He says, putting yourself in the presence of that source of life and love is "like when you sit in front of a fire in winter. You are just there in front of the fire. You don't have to be smart or anything. The fire warms you."<sup>7</sup>

We all need some warmth, some light, some love. So put yourself in that presence, and bask in its glow. Every day. Remember that there is within you goodness and wholeness. Do this for yourself and for the world. Hear these words now, a prayer from Desmond Tutu, the voice of God coming through that man of courage and grace:

You don't believe that I am with you. But I am there.  
When you stop running from the pain, and turn to face it,  
When you can step into the agony and let it be,  
When you can turn to your own suffering and know its name,  
Then you will see me.  
You will see me in the heart of it with you.  
It doesn't matter if your body is wracked by pain  
Or your mind is spiraling through aches and anguish.  
When you stop running you will see me.  
I will not forsake you. I cannot abandon you.  
You are not alone.  
I am with you.<sup>8</sup>

Amen.

---

<sup>7</sup> From an interview on National Public Radio, text available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124539592>

<sup>8</sup> From *Made for Goodness*, p, 110.