



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Catch and Release,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on October 18, 2015

Two weeks from today we will remember those we have loved and lost. We'll bring pictures of loved ones and other mementos and we'll create an altar here, a shrine to those who have died. We'll invite you to speak their names, so we can remember and honor them; those we've lost in this past year and those who left us long ago. It will feel like a memorial service, and it will be good, won't it?

This time of year, there are signs all around that life is fleeting. The color of the leaves, that has been a constant green since April or May, is changing quickly now. You know that those brilliant reds and oranges and yellows are not going to last. This turn toward colder weather is another reminder that those bright and warm autumn days we've been enjoying, they are numbered too.

I am one who can easily make the mistake of assuming that things are just going to keep on being the way they are right now. But life doesn't work that way. I remember stepping into our son's room a few years ago, when he still lived there, and watching him sleep. His body was as long as the bed! When did that happen? I thought of the years when we'd lie in bed together at night, reading stories before bedtime. He was so little then. I realized with some sadness that those days were gone.

Our worship theme this month is letting go. We've been reflecting on what we might want and need to let go of; things and ways of being that no longer serve us, that keep us from being who we might be. There are ways of letting go that are liberating and energizing, once you get past the initial fear and resistance; letting go as becoming something new.

There's another kind of letting go I'm thinking of today, that has to do with loss and endings and death. I'm aware that it is easier to talk about these things than to live them. Several of you in this church have lost your children to death. This is something that most parents who haven't experienced this tragedy have a hard time even imagining. What do you say in the face of such a loss? I suspect those of you who have lost a child would tell us that you like being asked about them because they are never far from your thoughts. You want and need to remember them. You have found a way to go on living, in spite of this awful loss, that I imagine is a balance of both holding on and letting go.

Last Sunday after church I went to visit Jami Cope in the hospital. Jami has lived with a degenerative illness since she was a young woman. When she had a mild heart attack several weeks ago, she seemed to have a curiosity about that; she wondered, “Is this how I'm going to

die?" I was struck by her sense of calm at facing her own death. Jami is under no illusion that she's going to live forever. She has what Buddhism seeks to cultivate, a sense of equanimity, an acceptance of what will come. I have to assume that living all these years with the limitations that her body has forced on her has prepared her well for this big letting go.

In our reading this morning, Mary Oliver describes the woods in fall, when the trees are turning themselves into pillars of light, when all around us is the invitation to remember that life is fleeting:

Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it
go,
to let it go.¹

To let go of one you have held against your bones is no small thing. It's not like dusting off your hands, and saying, "Well, that's over." This kind of letting go is a long, hard process of adjusting to that new reality. As one person put it, "living with an empty chair."

We live in a culture that is uncomfortable with death and grieving, like it's contagious. There's pressure to deal with it and move on. When planning a memorial service, people have told me, "We don't want to focus on death. We want this to be a celebration of life." And yes, it's good and important to remember their life, and we know how to do that here. It's good to tell stories and to laugh together. But we also need to tell the truth that someone has died; that they have left this world, that we are left with loss and grief and there is no quick cure for that. We are left with the

¹ Mary Oliver, "In Blackwater Woods."

hard work of letting go of one we have loved, one we held against our bones because our own life depended on it.

We could do better at naming and accepting this reality; that we live in a transitory world, that change is not an occasional event to gird ourselves against, but the ongoing reality in which we live and move and have our being.

In her classic reflection *Gift From the Sea*, Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote:

We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life,
of love, of relationships.
We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb.
We are afraid it will never return.
We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity;
when the only continuity possible, in life as in love,
is in growth, in fluidity - in freedom,
in the sense that dancers are free, barely touching as they pass,
but partners in the same pattern.
The only real security is not in owning or possessing,
not in demanding or expecting, not in hoping, even.
Security in a relationship lies neither in looking back to what was in nostalgia,
nor forward to what it might be in dread or anticipation,
but living in the present relation-ship and accepting it as it is now.
Relationships must be like islands,
one must accept them for what they are here and now,
within their limits--islands, surrounded and interrupted by the sea,
and continually visited and abandoned by the tides.

You may know that I have a passion for fly fishing. I like reading about it almost as much as getting out and doing it. This talk of letting go reminds me of a few lines from a reflection on life and fishing by Bill Barich. At this time of year, as the fishing season was winding down, he found himself thinking about the passage of time. After a good day of fishing in the late fall, he wrote,

"That night, I stayed up late. I wrote in my notebook and heard the sound of rivers... (I was) feeling blessed by the same sort of luck I'd had (when I started fishing) so long ago, back when I was a novice and the world still looked shiny in every corner. I thought about the friends, lovers, and family I had fished with, where they were now and what they might be doing, and I thought about my father especially and our summer vacations in Minnesota when I was a child and had such certainty about life, before I knew anything about letting go. It must all be catch-and-release in the end, I thought, all part of a flow whose essence we can never truly grasp."²

His words echo this passage by the farmer and writer Wendell Berry:

We clasp the hands of those who go before us,

² Bill Barich, *Crazy for Rivers*.

and the hands of those who come after us;
we enter the little circle of each other's arms,
and the larger circle of lovers whose hands are joined in a dance,
and the larger circle of all creatures, passing in and out of life,
who move also in a dance, to a music so subtle and vast
that no ear hears it except in fragments.³

This thing called life is not something to be figured out; not a problem to be understood and solved. No, it's a mystery and a reality to be lived. Can we practice telling the sometimes hard, sometimes uncomfortable truth that nothing is permanent? That we are each going to die. That we are going to lose those we love. That things we love and depend on are going to come to an end.

Sometime soon we'll welcome new members to the church, and this is always a happy day when we do this. But people also leave the church—they move away, or join a different congregation, and this is sad when we have shared so much together. I think we could do a better job of ritualizing these departures. Of telling the truth that a relationship has ended, saying, "this time together is over, and we send you off with blessings for your journey." Someday I will no longer be your minister. Though I can't even imagine that yet, this too will come to an end. Hopefully no time soon!

I've heard it said that what children really need to learn is how to say hello and how to say goodbye. This is true for all of us. We need to learn how to join in and make connections and hold on, and how, when it's time, to separate, to say goodbye, to let go. Whether we like it or not, life gives us ample opportunities to practice this holding on and letting go, this art of catch and release.

So how do you do this? You practice. You live like this is the one day you've got. You say what it is you want and need to say. Don't put it off. Don't make the mistake of thinking there will always be more time. In particular, practice saying things like, "I love you," and "I forgive you," and "May I have this dance?" Look people in the eye, pay attention to and be grateful for this moment, this very moment.

To live in this world you must be able to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

Even with its pain and struggle, its sorrow and loss, isn't it such a blessing to be here, to be alive?

Amen.

³ Wendell Berry, "The Larger Circle."