"An Ethic of Risk and Radical Acceptance,"
a sermon given by Nancy Rusk
on July 12, 2015

Today we are living in an era of celebration. Consider the recent federal acknowledgement and legalization of marriage for gay men and lesbians. Consider the confederate flag over the South Carolina State House coming down. And the loss of endorsements of Donald Trump due to his racist and ethnic remarks toward those who are Mexican.

And we are also living in times of danger and fear. Federal legislation does not mean "everything's gonna be alright". We see this daily in the racial tension and atrocities that have been committed even by those wearing badges of legal authority. Making a law does not mean that society changes over night.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way. Ch. 1, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens

Sometimes I'm concerned that in our fast moving world what happens this week becomes yesterday's news. Yesterday's news was about a life taken, or a child being injured or shot because he or she was black or brown. For the families of those directly affected however yesterday news is is a present reality. For us who live in protected or safe space, life hasn't changed that much. Or has it? Maybe we are more aware, more outspoken in the face of oppression, racism, homophobia, or when rights and dignity are denied. Perhaps we recognize that our work has just begun.

When you're lovers in a dangerous time
Sometimes you're made to feel as if your love's a crime --
But nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight --
Got to kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight
When you're lovers in a dangerous time.
Bruce Cockburn, "Lovers in a Dangerous Time," 1981

We are situated in a time when awareness is on our side, when change is happening, but the struggle has not yet been won. The ongoing struggle for a world based on love, compassion, and care demands an ethic of risk.

Let's begin with a working definition of ethics as "moral principles that govern a person's or group's behavior." In our particular lives the "group" that contributes to shaping our moral and ethical values and shapes our moral behavior is our beloved faith community. We do not make behavioral choices and decisions in isolation, but rather as social beings, products of personal and communal experiences, of stories, and of structures that influence our understanding of right and wrong.

A few months ago I had a conversation with Rev. Clarkson about my being a humanist, in particular a Buddhist humanist. I prefer to use this identity as opposed to atheist because I do believe in a spark of divinity that occurs between people. I believe in a spiritual energy that connects us one to another. It is because of this belief that I am a member of this congregation. But it doesn't stop there. I also believe that there is power in being a part of (in this case) this Beloved Community. This call is to participate in the lives of one another and in the community, and I use this word to identify both the micro community of Haverhill and the macro communities such as our nation and our world. And as we know this participation at times demands an ethic of risk.

During this same conversation Reverend Clarkson lent me a book by Sharon Welch entitled *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*. I draw from her work briefly this morning.

Welch uses the word "Risk" to mean seeing all that needs to be repaired, acting without the illusion of certainty or victory, joining in solidarity and community with others, working without waiting for (or necessarily even wanting) conventional political power, and always moving forward in bravery and commitment, and often not knowing what the outcome will be.

"I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what." Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee

In Welch's work we are asked to consider what improbable task, with which unpredictable results, shall we undertake today?

In her book Welch encourages us forward not in a chain of singular unrelated actions, but rather living an ethic that takes into consideration the long haul, and an ethic that inspires us to reject both despair and complacency.

If you want to go fast go alone... If you want to go far go together.
An African Proverb often attributed to Nelson Mandela

That which is broken and needs fixing, and it's not just deep-seated societal problems, but she goes so far as to challenge Western constructions of what constitutes ethical responsibility and what counts as goodness. She challenges Euro American middle-class cynicism which, in the face of issues that feel too large and too complex often leads to a paralysis of will, sanctions to do nothing, and disregards our moral obligation to work on structural, long-term issues; all of which serves to preserve gross societal inequities and problems.

From this body of work comes a definition of maturity as the recognition of the depth of evil in the world and hence the need to act. It also calls for an acceptance that barriers to justice will not be removed by any one group or one generation, and thus the need to accept the world of limits. This is a call then for the responsible action of engagement in community reflection. This includes “mutually self-critical engagement" and accountability, in order to build the conditions for the pursuit of justice and peace, and sustain moral action and political activism. This encouragement to do this work collectively is also powerful in its rendering of a joyful and passionate path towards justice, even while acknowledging our limitations. (Notes from Rabbi Sue Fendrick, of Social action.com)

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed I have to cast my lot with those who age after age,
perversely, with no extraordinary power,
*reconstitute the world. “*Natural Resources,” Adrienne Rich

Often when we hear the word risk it conjures up feelings of fear. In Buddhist tradition taking risk requires an ability to overcome our delusions around fear by a practice of calming and insight. In the Zen tradition we get to this place of calm or peace through "radical acceptance." Here is a Zen story about this state of mind:

A fierce and terrifying band of samurai was riding through the countryside, bringing fear and harm wherever they went. As they were approaching one particular town, all the monks in the town's monastery fled, except for the abbot. When the band of warriors entered the monastery, they found the abbot sitting at the front of the shrine room in perfect posture. The fierce leader took out his sword and said, "Don't you know who I am? Don't you know that I'm the sort of person who could run you through with my sword without batting an eye?" The Zen master responded, "And I, sir, am the sort of man who could be run through by a sword without batting an eye.”

The peace of Radical acceptance is supported by the insight into and confidence in adaptability. Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard says that "worry is a misuse of the imagination." And offers this alternative: use the imagination in insightful and adaptive ways: accept the facts with realism; know that we can always do better, that we can limit the damage, find an alternative, and rebuild what has been destroyed; take the current situation as the starting point; know how to rapidly identify the positive in adversity; and be free of regret. The underpinning of this process is a serene mind.

An old grandfather is speaking to his grandson about what causes the violence and cruelty in the world. “In each human heart,” he tells the boy, “there are two wolves battling one another— one is fearful and angry, and the other is understanding and kind.” The young boy looks intently into his grandfather’s eyes and asks, “Which one will win?” His grandfather smiles and quietly says, “Whichever one we choose to feed.” Cherokee Legend

Buddhist teacher and psychologist Tara Brach says, “We do have a choice. Meditations that cultivate mindfulness and compassion directly deactivate the anger pathways.. Mindfulness is the “remembering” that helps us pause, recognize, and accept what is happening in the present moment. Once we have opened fully to our living experience, we are more capable of acting in a way that is guided by our innate wisdom and compassion. For the sake of our own inner freedom

and the well- being of others, we can intentionally feed the understanding, accepting, and kind wolf.

Here is the important piece: it is important to understand that Radical Acceptance is not passivity. One might ask “How can acceptance and activism go together?” If we only feed the compassionate, accepting wolf, will we ignore the wrongdoing in our world? How will anyone be motivated to stand up against injustice, to speak truth, to stop wars and to heal our earth, if we don’t feel angry or outraged?

This question returns us to the idea that the ethic of risk requires collective reflection and action, including “mutually self-critical engagement" and accountability, in order to build the conditions for the pursuit of justice and peace, and to sustain moral action and political activism.
Over the last several months we have been pummeled with one story after another of oppressive, violent acts toward black Americans. In the Dominican Republic anyone who looks or has a surname that is Haitian will be thrown out of the country. Haiti and DR share an island and migration has occurred for over 200 years between the two countries. This recent turn of events is built on racism. I suppose that if you are like me you find this disturbing and angering. It can also lend itself to creating an enemy out of the predators of such violence.

However practicing radical acceptance and maintaining an ethic of risk requires that I become aware of how creating an enemy in my mind is yet another form of violence.

To manage the feelings that come with experiencing the volume of atrocities that we are exposed to Tara Brach suggests a reflective practice based on radical acceptance that you may find valuable.

Her practice of a newspaper meditation is based on radical acceptance. Look at the headlines, read a bit, and then stop. In that pause witness your thoughts and allow yourself to acknowledge your growing outrage. Then internally investigate, letting the feelings express themselves fully. She states: “That almost every day, as I’d open to anger and feel its full force, it would unfold into fear — for our world. And as I stayed in direct contact with the fear, it would unfold into grief— for all the suffering and loss. And the grief would unfold into caring about all those beings that were bound to suffer.”

She recognized in her own meditation that in the atrocities that she was reading about that aggressive wolf was being fed, and the pain of that was heartbreaking. She says “Sitting with the feelings that arose in this meditation process left me raw and tender. It reminded me that under my anger and fear was caring about life. And it motivated me to act, not from an anger that focused on an enemy, but from caring.” We are not alone. A growing interfaith peace movement has grown and developed committed to feeding the wise wolf.

A young girl perched on her dad’s shoulders spoke into the attentive crowd: “The Iraqi kids are just like our kids. Please, please . . . don’t let them be hurt.”

The choice of presence and acceptance— feeding the wise, compassionate wolf— fuels the evolutionary current that carries us humans toward peace and full spiritual freedom.

In mourning Nelson Mandela's passing, the world again honored the transformative power of a forgiving heart. Imprisoned in 1962 for his antiapartheid activism, he spent twenty- seven years in jail. For eighteen of those years Mandela was held on Robben Island near Cape Town where prisoners were segregated, deprived of food, subjected to countless indignities, and forced to do hard labor. Yet during this time, he managed to befriend a number of his jailers. Mandela believed that people were kind at their core, "if you could arouse their inherent goodness."

When Mandela was elected president of South Africa, he riveted the world's attention by inviting one of his white jailers to the inaugural ceremony. His dedication to seeking understanding and reconciliation pulled South Africa back from the brink of civil war and allowed the country to make the transition from the racial tyranny of apartheid to a multiracial democracy. Mandela exemplifies our human and evolutionary potential: He stepped beyond the reactivity of hatred and vengeance, and responded to his world with an inclusive, forgiving heart. His capacity for radical acceptance was the very grounds of spiritually engaged activism.

We can feed the wise wolf if we care about peace and learn to pause.

Mattie Stepanek, 13 year- old poet who has since died of muscular dystrophy, wrote about this possibility on the day after September 11: "We need to stop…Just stop…Stop for a moment . . . Before anybody says or does anything that may hurt anyone else…We need to be silent…Just silent…Silent for a moment…Before the future slips away into ashes and dust…Stop. Be silent, and notice…In so many ways we are the same."