



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Work of the Church,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on June 7, 2015

“Blessed are those who know the work of the church is the transformation of society.”¹ Those words from the responsive reading echo the mission statement we started using here a couple of years ago; we say our mission is to be a faith community transforming lives and the world. This day, when we hold our annual meeting, is a good time to step back and reflect on this; to ask “What is our work?, Where are we going?, And how are we going to get from here to there?”

Too often the church is seen as a guardian of the status quo, or a refuge from the “real” world. But our history and tradition tell us this is not who we are at all. From the Hebrew prophets to the diverse early Jesus communities to the radical reformers in Europe; from the early Unitarians and Universalists in this country to the transcendentalists, to the humanist and social gospel movements of the 20th century, our faith tradition has always been one that is seeking a better life for people here on earth, has always been one open to being led by the Spirit to new and fresh understandings for the living of these days, has always been about seeking transformation, wanting and working to build the common good and renew the face of the earth.

This is the work of the church. So how do we move toward that transformation? What is it we are called to do and be in this place and time?

That, my friends, is the question you have to answer. Because you are the church. I have some ideas, but this is your church. One reason we come together as a community is because we need one another—we won’t all answer this question of our vocation in the same way. We will find different ways to do this work of transforming the world, and here we will find companions for the task, and as we undertake it, we will be led to places we did not plan to go.²

This is the work of being a community of faith. You do it one day at a time. It helps if you start by asking, “What am I called to do, who am I called to be, in this place and time? And who are we as a congregation called to be? What is the work that we can and should be doing? What is the work that is needed, and what is the work that will make our hearts glad?” You don’t ask these questions just once; you keep asking them, because the answers are going to change and evolve as you keep on this journey. As Antonio Machado said, “You make the path by walking.”

¹ From the responsive reading “Blessed Are Those” by John Buehrens, #728 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

² “There’s a saying (source unknown): “How do we know God is with us? Because we will be led to places we did not plan to go.”

There's a word that gets kicked around theology schools, that shows up sometimes in conversations on religion and spirituality, a word you should know. That word is "formation." When I was about to head off to divinity school, I was having a conversation one day with my minister. I was telling him about an article I'd read that said people at midlife are looking for a different kind of education. Rather than seeking specific skills and knowledge, rather than seeking more credentials, a new certification or diploma, midlife learners are seeking transformation, a new way of being. They are looking to be change and grow, to become more fully who they were born to be.

Though I had no idea what the path ahead looked like, or where it was going to lead, I knew that I needed to go off to this strange place called seminary where they would be asking the questions that I wanted to wrestle with; where I would be shaken up and shaped into who I was meant to be, the person I wanted to become, though at that point I knew almost nothing about it. My minister listened to all this, and he said, "So it sounds like you are going to div school for formation." Exactly.

Formation is the process of becoming who you were born to be. It's what the Skin Horse is talking about in that beloved children's book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*. The little rabbit asks the old horse, "What is REAL?...Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

And the Skin Horse responds, "It doesn't happen all at once, you become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in your joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Isn't that what church is—a place where we can be real? The UU theologian James Luther Adams put it this way, he said, "Church is a place where you get to practice what it means to be human."

And formation is the process of becoming real. Seeking and articulating and living the life that is yours. When I first had the crazy idea of going off to divinity school, my wife Tracey wasn't so sure. This big change scared me too, but I couldn't even name it out loud at the time. Tracey was more articulate about it. One day she told me, "I didn't marry a minister." We both worried about how we were going to navigate that change, what we now laugh about as my version of a midlife crisis. We struggled with this, but we stayed open to one other, and we made a path by walking together.

One day, a couple of years later, I said to her, "You know what you said about not marrying a minister? You actually did marry one. Just back then you didn't know it and neither did I. I haven't traded in one life for another. I've just become more fully who I am, who I was meant to be."

Our theme this month is formation. It's a time to ask, who are we, as individuals and as a congregation? And who are we becoming? Who are we meant to be? What are we passionate about? What is it that we have to do? What is it that we can't not do?

A week from now, we celebrate Religious Education Sunday, the end of our church school year. What we do with our children and youth is all about faith formation. The following Sunday we'll say goodbye to Julie Lombard, who's been our intern here for two years, which has certainly been a process of formation for her.

I'm thinking I will carry this theme of formation into my preaching this summer. Because there are specific steps that one can take, there are tangible ways and practices that can help you travel this journey. Which is the journey home—home to yourself, home to finding a Beloved Community of friends and companions, home to God.

For now, I simply want to lift up the idea of our work as being this work of being changed, so we can help change our world for the better. Mahatma Gandhi said, "If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him." The process of formation requires that we be open and willing to being changed.

One thing I love about being your minister at this particular moment is that there is so much cool stuff going on here! The energy in this community is palpable. As that sage Master Yoda would say, "Strong is the Spirit in this one!" And we are just getting started!

This sermon is one that you get to finish. Because you are the church. Your lives are what give it shape and meaning and purpose. The work of the church is your work, is our work, to do. What are we being formed into? Where will we be called to go?

My prayer for our church is this: that we will be ever open to the Spirit that is stirring in our midst, that we will say yes to life and yes to truth, that we will always stand on the side of Love and Justice, cost with it may. That we will not shrink back from the struggle or the challenge; that we will not fear what is unfamiliar or uncertain. That we will open our eyes and our hearts to see all the good that we have right here, right now, and embracing these blessings, we will be compelled to seek even higher and deeper ways of living out our call as people of faith. That we will always open our arms to reach out in care and in service to those who are hungry for what we have to give.

The work of the church is nothing less than the healing and blessing and transformation of this world. It's up to you and to me, it's up to us, how we will get from here to there, to that land where we're bound.

Amen.