



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“There is a Season”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on September 19, 2010

My son and I have been building a wooden sailboat, about 15 feet long, for the past two summers. It's been a great blessing and a lot of fun to have this project to work on with him. We've learned a lot, and made some mistakes, which thankfully are often fixable when you're working with wood. And the boat looks really beautiful! But this summer there was a time, when we were starting the finishing process, that it seemed like everything we did went wrong, and needed to be undone, and then redone. One step forward, two steps back.

One hot day, working out in our driveway after the shade had come there in mid afternoon, our neighbor walked by, pushing her son in a stroller and walking the dog. “How's it going?” she asked. Being hot and frustrated at the time, I said, “Not so good. Sometimes I just want to put a gun to my head.” She walked on home, and I went back to work.

But a minute later my heart sank. I remembered, of course, that my neighbor's brother had taken his own life just a few years ago. How could I have been so insensitive, and so stupid? I looked across the street. They were still outside, so I put down my tools and walked over. “I'm so sorry,” I said. “That was a terrible thing to say.”

“Oh it's okay,” she replied. “I understand. My husband and I even catch ourselves saying things like that every once in a while. Don't worry about it. But thanks.” We stood there and talked for a few minutes, and then I went back to my work. And my heart was lighter. It seemed like a little miracle. In the course of just a few minutes, I had done something harmful, I'd realized it and regretted it, I'd apologized and had been forgiven. Just like that. In traditional religious language I had sinned, had felt contrition, had made confession, had received absolution and found reconciliation--all of this in five minutes! So the lesson is, boatbuilding puts you in a state of grace. Not really. But I do find that there is something about working with your hands, doing slow, deliberate work, that grounds centers me. It's like prayer, or any spiritual practice. And you have something to show for it as the end!

In the Jewish calendar, yesterday was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The Jewish New Year was just over a week ago, and at the start of the new year Jews fast and pray, they search their hearts and confess to God the ways they have sinned. This allows them to make a clean start. Think of it as spiritual housecleaning.

The book of Ecclesiastes says, “for everything there is a season.” As fall comes to New England, as we turn toward cooler weather and shorter days, as we begin a new church year, this is good time to search our hearts and deal with what we find there. Think of it as putting things in order. Every fall I spend a day cleaning up our garage, dealing with what’s accumulated there over the summer, so the cars will fit back in when the snow falls. We’ve been doing some some cleaning up and clearing out around the church too, and it feels great! It can also be hard--it forces you to deal with that stuff, to make choices, to let some things go.

We live in a culture that doesn’t seem to encourage taking responsibility and admitting mistakes. We are told, if you get in a traffic accident and it’s clearly your fault, that you still shouldn’t say “I’m sorry I rear-ended you and damaged your car,” because that is an admission of guilt and it will be used against you. Celebrities and politicians, when they get caught doing something wrong or embarrassing, often seek the help of public relations consultants before they make those high-profile apologies, but they seem more interested in rehabilitating their image than truly seeking forgiveness from those they have hurt, or taking responsibility for what they have done.

It’s hard to do this, because to do so puts you in the power down position. To confess, to ask forgiveness, is to put your life in another’s hands. It’s to give up control. It’s to say, “I need you. I can’t be whole without you.” It’s hard. And still, it is one of the most powerful and beautiful things a human being can do. “I am sorry. Can you forgive me?” Now that’s one way to transform a situation or a relationship. “I made a mistake. I am full of regret. I want to make amends.”

True confession is a gift to the one who receives it, and is liberating for the one who offers it. We don’t make a habit of offering a time for confession in our Sunday service, but maybe we should. Liberal religion has moved away from sin, probably out of a healthy and life-affirming response to the ways human depravity is so emphasized in some traditions. We want to say “I’m ok and you’re ok.” But what do we do when I’m not ok, or what I did is not ok? We need ways to confess our faults, seek forgiveness and reconciliation, so we can then make a fresh start.

The word sin can get mixed up with all those rules that religions tend to come up with. I don’t believe we are born with sin in us. How could anyone who has ever held a little baby believe that? But I do know that our human nature leads us to make mistakes, to harm ourselves and others, to commit sins. If you doubt me, look around you at our world. Most of the messes we have made are due to our unbridled hunger, our greed, our laziness, our violence, our insecurity, our self-centeredness. Hey, you could make a list of these major faults, the things that lead to most of our troubles, you could call them “things you want to avoid”, or “some unhelpful human traits.” Or you could call them what what they’ve been called for centuries, the seven deadly sins: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride.

I don’t care what you call them, or whether you know them, or whether you can name the ten commandments. Jesus, who didn’t seem to care too much about the rules, said your really only need to know two: Love God with all your heart, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. All the other rules and commandments are variations on those two--love of self and of neighbor, and love of the One in which we live and move and have our being.

You don't have to go to church to confess, but it's as good a place as any. I hope we will be a safe and supportive place for this kind of openness and honesty. Where you might come up front some Sunday morning, light a candle, and say "I need to confess to you that I did something that I regret," or "that was hurtful to another," or "that was harmful to this community."

I had an e-mail conversation with one of you recently about the fact that being in church does not make us immune from being human and making mistakes. I wrote, "folks will sometimes behave badly, hurt others, and then we have to do the work of repairing relationships. But that work--truth telling, apology, forgiveness, reconciliation--is what we ought to be doing in church, yes?"

Doing this is part of what it takes to be a healthy family or community--providing ways to be both accountable to one another. I used to struggle with that word "accountable." It seemed judgmental, and related to top-down authority. But now I understand accountability as simply belonging to one another. Holding ourselves and each other responsible. Being real with one another. We need ways to safely have those difficult conversations when we get hurt or disappointed, or when we hurt or disappoint someone else.

This fall we're going to begin a conversation about a congregational covenant. That is, an articulation about how we want to be together as a community, ways we support one another and what we expect from one another, how we repair relationships when they are strained and how we restore trust when it is broken. There is no set plan for this yet--we are just at the beginning. It needs to be a good and healthy process, which probably means it won't be a speedy one. If this interests you, or if it makes you nervous, then speak to me, or to any member of the Board, or the Committee on Ministry, so you can be part of the conversation.

Every year members of our Board and staff sign a covenant. It articulates how we want to be in relationship with each other, what we expect from one another. We've learned it's better, and more liberating, to make these expectations explicit, rather than assuming we are all on the same page. That's the idea with a congregational covenant--to make what many of us already assume about congregational life explicit, so we are more clear, more transparent.

"For everything there is a season." I chose the reading from Wendell Berry this morning because I love how he describes his annual ritual of cleaning out the outhouse, and cleaning out his office papers, standing out doors and making confession before he returns them to the earth. Imagine him, that Kentucky writer and farmer, standing out in a field in blue jeans and faded shirt, making his confession:

To the sky, to the wind, then,
and to the faithful trees, I confess
my sins: that I have not been happy
enough, considering my good luck;
have listened to too much noise;
have been inattentive to wonders;
have lusted after praise.¹

¹ Wendell Berry, "A Purification."

That's a list of sins that resonates with me. I have not been happy enough, considering my good luck; have listened to too much noise; have been inattentive to wonders; have lusted after praise. I'd love our church to be a safe place to speak about these things--about what in your life keeps you from loving God and loving your neighbor, about the ways you have not been happy enough, or have listened to the wrong voices, or have failed to notice how amazing it is just to be alive, or have depended too much on another's approval. These could be a good topics for Small Group Ministry, which reminds me which will be starting up again soon.

I'm convinced we need to confess, because we are human, and we make mistakes. We carry around with us regrets and misgivings, and these can become heavy burdens. You need to let them go, so you can be free to start again, free to look at this day with amazement and gratitude.

I'm going to end with a prayer, a litany of confession. Will you join me? Your part comes when you hear me say the words "Spirit of Life," and I invite you to respond by saying, "Hear our prayer."

Let us pray. God of many names, holy one in which we live and move and have our being,
We who are gathered here want to be in relationship,
With you, with the good earth, with our family members and friends,
We want to build the beloved community here in our midst.
Spirit of life, hear our prayer.

But we have not always done this. We recall the ways we have fallen short:
The times we have taken life and love for granted,
The ways we have not loved our neighbors as our selves,
Moments when we have chosen fear over faith.
Now in silence we recall our sins.
Spirit of life, hear our prayer.

We confess that we have failed others, and disappointed ourselves.
We remember those things that weigh heavily on our hearts,
and we are sorry.
Spirit of life, hear our prayer.

Hear our prayer, God.
Hear our confession: those things we have done, and those things we have not done,
For all that we regret and repent, forgive us, heal us, bless us.
Spirit of life, hear our prayer.

Spirit of new beginnings, give us the grace to let go of the past.
Grant us the courage to make a fresh start, to try again.
Lead us by love, we pray, into this new day.

Amen.