

“Radical Hospitality”

A Sermon by The Reverend Bill Clark

I love that hymn. The one by Rumi. Well, at least the words are by Rumi. Come, come whoever you are. It speaks or rather it sings, loud and clear of welcoming. It speaks of wandering. It speaks of pure and simple hospitality. Come, come whoever you are.

For those who know the works of Rumi and for those who know our hymnal, may have noted that we have not included all the original words in the hymn. Rumi’s original writing states; "Come, come, whoever you are. Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving, Ours is not a caravan of despair. Even if you have broken your vows a thousand times. It doesn't matter. Come, come yet again, come"

Even if you have broken your vows a thousand times. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter if you have fallen off the wagon or used again – Come you are welcome. It doesn’t matter if you have deceived or deprived. Come you are welcome. It doesn’t matter if you have rejected or ridiculed. Come, you are welcome. It doesn’t matter if you are not perfect. Come, yet again come. You are welcome.

This kind of thinking, this kind of living, this kind of welcoming, takes this notion of hospitality far beyond the level of greeters and ushers and a welcoming table. For this is radical hospitality. Radical Hospitality, where we look into the eyes of the stranger and the faces of the wanderer and see the very essence of the holy, the divine, the sacred. This is radical hospitality where we actually take the radical and relational steps of affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. Come, come whoever you are, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again come.

Now this ideal of radical hospitality is best illustrated and demonstrated if one visits a Benedictine monastery. The center of a monk's life in a Benedictine monastery is to welcome the strangers that frequent their doors. It is said that a monk looks at every visitor as if it were Christ himself. A UU colleague recently shared the story of when he was leading a meditation retreat at the Benedictine monastery in Harvard Mass. On the last day of the retreat there was a huge snowstorm. He made the decision he would cut short his final meditation session in order to leave time for the participants to shovel out their cars to drive home. As they approached their cars all the snow was cleared away. Every car window was scrapped and cleared off and shoveled out – ready to go.

Now this he thought was going too far. He approached the head monk and thanked him, but explained they really didn't have to do this they could have shoveled out their cars.

As if speaking to a child the monk replied in a calm voice, "Don't you understand, it was Christ who drove these cars here."

Now I realize some of this high Christology maybe somewhat jarring to some as Unitarian Universalist. Yet, truthfully, I see absolutely no difference in saying one sees the Christ in all beings and us Unitarian Universalist saying we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. Both sentiments speak to the love and value of all human life. Both speak of radical hospitality!

So how do we do this work – this all-important work of welcoming the stranger? How do we stand and say together, come, come whoever you are, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again come? Are we able to clearly say these words and actually mean them? As Unitarian-Universalist we get the opportunity to live out this challenge weekly as we meet and worship together. For we gather on Sunday mornings as theist and atheist, Christians, Muslim and Jews, Buddhist, Pagans, Pantheist trying to find a language acceptable to all, a worship style

agreeable to all and hymns like-able and sing-able to all. This is no easy task believe me. Yet beyond the barriers of language, behind the style of any worship service and beneath the melody line of any sing-able or unsing-able hymn is the very real fact that we are all human beings – human beings here, together, together as stranger and sojourner, wanderer and worshiper, connected in a very real and very holy way.

Radical Hospitality begins by searching out, finding and **feeling** this connection.

This searching and finding the connection is beautifully illustrated in our first reading this morning of the Good Samaritan. A traveler is accosted, robbed, beaten and left to die. The dying man is ignored as he suffers on the side of the road, by the “right” kind of people, acceptable people with solid values and important priorities. These may be people like us. They have things to do. They are trying very hard to get it all done on time. They are not vicious people, but they do consider caution a virtue.

In the story it was the “wrong” kind of person, in the culture of the time – a Samaritan – who stops to help. The Samaritan goes the extra mile and puts himself on the line. He gives his time, energy and resources. (*Radical Hospitality; Homan & Pratt p. xxii*)

The story is really about us and it is about the stranger. It is the story of locating that connection between us and all the strangers we will encounter on our way. It is the story of taking risks and finding the healing power of radical hospitality. Truly, to me the story of the Good Samaritan is about acceptance. Acceptance not in terms of tolerance. Acceptance not in terms of judgment or condoning, as a father will not visit a son because he is living unmarried with a woman or even another man. If I accept this then I am condoning the behavior. Rather the story of the Good Samaritan, the story of radical hospitality is about acceptance meaning receiving and embracing. When we accept in this way we take an open stance, arms open wide, ready to receive, ready to affirm and promote the sacred, the holy, the inherent worth and dignity of all beings.

Is this work of radical hospitality easy work? Oh, how I wish it was. Yet it is some of the most difficult and rewarding work possible. For it is the work of preparing ourselves to receive others. And, as our second reading stated this morning, only you know what you need to do to make this happen – to prepare yourself to receive others? Is there someone you need to forgive – a parent, spouse, fellow parishioner? Is there someone you need to release – I release you from my expectations for your recovery. I release you from falling off the wagon again, for using again, for letting me down again. Is

there a fear to abandon or an attitude to adjust? I fear my church is changing faster than I am. I don't understand this attitude of gay people wanting to get married. I just don't understand it. We all have weapons to lie down and battles to call off before we can open our hearts.

For you see the work of radical hospitality is not only about opening our homes and our churches. It is about opening our hearts and allowing the stranger, the wanderer, the outsider to come in. This work of radical hospitality can literally save lives.

Take the story of young Kyle. An outsider at his new public school, large glasses adorning his acne covered face. As he walked home from school on a Friday afternoon, John noticed he was carrying what seemed to be all of his books. "What a nerd," John thought to himself. "Who would carry home all of his books on a Friday?"

Just then a bunch of kids ran by Kyle knocking all of his books out of his arms and tripping him so he landed in the dirt. His glasses went flying. Kyle looked up with a terrible sadness in his eyes.

As John wrote, "My heart just opened to him, so I jogged over to him handed his glasses back and said, "Those guys are jerks. They really should get lives."

Kyle thanked him with a huge smile. It was one of those smiles that showed real gratitude.

John helped with his books and they began to walk home together. It turned out they lived near one another. John invited him to play football that weekend with his friends.

The following Monday, Kyle returned to school carrying all his books once again.

“Darn boy, you are gonna build some serious muscles with this pile of books everyday.” Kyle laughed and handed John half the books.

Over the next four years John and Kyle became best friends. Upon graduation, Kyle was named valedictorian and had to prepare a speech.

“Graduation is a time to thank those who helped you make it through those tough years,” he began. “Your parents, teachers, siblings – but mostly your friends. I want to thank a friend of mine, who saved my life one day.” And so Kyle shared the story of meeting John on the way home from school. The day he was carrying all of his books.

“I was going home to kill myself that weekend. I was bringing all of my books home so my mom wouldn’t have to do it later. Thankfully I was saved. My friend saved me from the doing the unspeakable.”

My friends, never underestimate the power of your actions – a smile, a wave, lending a helping hand, opening your heart are simple gestures offering radical hospitality that can literally save lives.

This is the most powerful work we as a human family can possibly do. As we look around our world being ravaged by violence, hatred and warfare. As we look around and read of the continued gun violence in our nation, our wounded warriors we come home damaged – physically – emotionally and spiritually – seeking help and support the heavens cry out for the opening of our hearts.

And thus they open. They open as we offer help and assistance for the hungry here on this beloved Island. They open as we guard ourselves against further hatred and violence in reacting to warfare. And thus they must open here as well as we sit together and build this beloved community of The Unitarian Universalist Society of Martha's Vineyard. For we too, sit with strangers and sojourners, wanderers and worshippers who come through our doors seeking radical hospitality and welcome. We sit with people who may think differently, use different religious language, have different political views and moral values, yet we sit together and do our work of preparation and practice by keeping our hearts open to receive the gift of another human being (heart).

My friends, this is some of the most important work we as a church community can possibly do – to prepare ourselves to receive the strangers. And this is not the work of a membership committee or a hospitality committee or a welcoming committee. This is the work of every member and friend of this church. It is to greet the new comer, the stranger. It is to welcome back those we may not have seen for a while. It is to call those who remain away to let them know their church community misses them. There can be no more important ministry in a church than that of the ministry of radical hospitality.

There is much work to be done in this world. It does appear to me at times we as a human family are becoming more fragmented and drifting further and further apart. And when this despair takes a hold of me, and it does, believe me, I think back to my first time walking into a Unitarian Universalist church. I think of the welcoming I received. I think of the affirmation I was given. And I think of the love that so easily flowed from those around me. I walked in a stranger; abused, addicted, depressed and forlorn. I walked into a Unitarian Universalist church and it saved my life. This is what we can do together. We can save a life and thus save this world one heart at a time.

May it be so. Blessed be.