

“An Easter People,”
a sermon preached by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist
on May 13, 2007

I was talking with one of you this week, and our conversation touched on some of the problems of the world—and my mind jumped from wars to famine to oppression to environmental desegregation, all in a split second—and I said, “You know, sometimes I wish I lived a hundred years ago, when I wouldn’t know about a tragedy that happened on the other side of the world.”

Do any of you ever feel that way? In this day of global communication and 24-hour cable news, we know not only about the trouble in our own community, but about trouble around the world. I don’t know about you, but at times I feel overwhelmed by all the sadness and suffering in the world.

And then I have a night like this past Wednesday. We had a meeting here for parents of youth who will be graduating from high school this spring. We’ll celebrate this passage in a ceremony we call Bridging on June 10. So we were talking about what it’s like to be a parent with a child about to leave home. I said I thought it required parents to both let go and still stay connected. It was a good conversation—people shared their hopes and fears openly, the joys and the real losses they have experienced as parents.

After the meeting, I got in my car to drive home, and though it was after 8 o’clock, there was still light in the sky. And it was warm, so as I drove north on Rt. 125, I had my car window down. At the top of the hill where Barker’s farm is, in the twilight I could see that the apple trees were in bloom. And I remembered why I became a minister; what a privilege it is to be with people at pivotal moments in their lives, and what a challenge it is to live in a world of such great suffering and such sublime beauty—a world where governments support genocide and where apple trees bloom on a warm spring night.

Even though it would be easy to turn away from what is painful, or ugly or threatening, as people of faith we are called to bear witness to the reality of the world, to be present to the joy and sorrow, as best we can. But how do we do this?

We live in a world that moves way too fast—at a pace that is becoming unhealthy for humans. It is only in recent years that we have had the ability to be so instantly connected. Our spirituality hasn’t caught up with our technology—we forget that just because we can be connected doesn’t mean it’s good for us—we need Sabbath time,

quiet time, time to turn off our phones and computers and listen to each other and to our own hearts.

This week I heard stories from two different people about how it can sometimes be overwhelming here at North Parish—what an active congregation we are, with people always asking you—from the pulpit and at coffee hour—to get involved, to sign up for something, to give more, to join a committee. What if you just want to come to church and feed your own soul? What if you need, really need, to be able to do that for a while? I hope we are a church that supports and affirms that too.

What would happen if we said, let's all slow down. What if right now we said, let's stop, and be quiet, and count to ten.

What happened? Did you hear a bird singing, or become aware of your own breathing? Was it a moment of relief, or was it an awkward silence, something you were happy to see end?

What would it be like to begin our meetings with a period of silence? To occasionally eat a meal with others in silence?

The North Parish is a church where commitment to social action is pretty widely shared. It's an essential part of who we are, and this is a good thing. What you may not know is this is not always the case in UU congregations. We like to say we carry our faith out into the world, but in some churches the social action folks are a small group, and over time they can become frustrated with people who don't seem to be as committed, and their voices become more shrill, which of course doesn't help their cause and there gets to be this weird split between the action people and the "spiritual" people. As if it was either/or.

So I'm grateful for the wide support for social action here, and for the ways the Social Action committee is helping the rest of us to connect with projects that help us live out our faith. And I'm aware that we aren't all the same, that we are at different places in our lives. If you are someone who needs to just come to church for a while, and not say yes to anything yet, but to listening to the longing of your soul, you ought to be able to do that here. In our eagerness to do good works I hope we aren't being too busy—I hope we can find a balance between action and contemplation.

In seminary I learned a word called praxis—it sounds like practice, but it's different. Praxis is a process of taking action, reflecting on that action, and then letting

that reflection inform future action. For example, you could go and visit a person in prison sponsored by our Partakers group, and then gather with others in the group to reflect on your experience—what it was like to enter that world, what thoughts and feelings it brought up, how it affected you—personally, spiritually, theologically. This can involve prayer or readings from wisdom sources—the point is to take the time to more deeply explore the experience in a reflective way.

We need both action and contemplation—some of us need more of one than the other, but I hope we will find ways to nurture both. And this could just be me, but my sense is that our active side here is pretty well developed, and we need room for the quiet, contemplative side. What I'm talking about is not mindless naval gazing. My experience of prayer and meditation is that it is both comforting and challenging. It's not withdrawing from reality, it helps one to wake up to what is real.

It's interesting that, on this day when we remember and celebrate mothers, we call attention to the genocide in Darfur; that we try to hold both of these things. Of course the reality is that for some, Mother's Day is a joyous celebration, and for others it brings feelings of sorrow or loss. I trust that many of you already know that the first call for a Mother's Day came from the Unitarian Julia Ward Howe, following the carnage of the Civil War, as a protest against the waste and ruin of war by women who'd lost their sons. What would our world would be like if women were in charge? It's not hard to imagine that things might be better, is it?

I really appreciate how Cara, in her words about the crisis in Darfur, asked us to try to imagine this devastation, caused by human hands, coming to those we love. It's hard to do. It is so tempting to turn away, to not want to even imagine the terrible things that we humans can do to each other. It is a sign of spiritual maturity to be willing to risk discomfort, to put yourself in a place where you are forced to face things you'd rather not.

It's something I appreciate about the seasons of year—both church and the natural world. Different times call to be in different places. It's what Wendell Berry asks for in this little prayer: "At night make me one with the darkness, in the morning make me one with the light."

I wasn't here with you on Easter, because I was sick with the flu. It just so happens that we are still in the Easter season—did you know that? In the church

calendar this is the sixth Sunday of Easter. My sermon for Easter was going to be called “Something Happened.” I never wrote it, but in a nutshell, here it is:

After Jesus was killed, the disciples went back to their lives. The fishermen went back to fishing. But something happened. They experienced his presence in their midst. But the stories tell us that they didn’t even recognize him at first. Isn’t that curious? William Sloane Coffin said, “It’s clear that Christ’s appearances were not those of a resurrected corpse, but more akin to intense visionary experiences.”

The way I understand the Easter story is that Jesus inspired a sense of radical community among his followers that even death could not destroy. His crucifixion on what gets called ‘Good Friday’ was not the end of the story. Something happened among the disciples, they were inspired to go out and tell stories about their experiences, and these stories spread far and wide.

Now I know that given how Christianity gets practiced in many places these days, even the word Christian is problematic for some of you. But I do feel called, since I have come to embrace a liberal Christianity as both a life giving and a challenging path, and since it is the root of both our Unitarian and Universalist traditions, I do feel called to gently advocate for this religion of Jesus. I feel called to try and articulate an accessible Christianity, not because I want to convert you, but because I believe you might find nourishment there too.

I like the description of Christians as “Easter people living in a Good Friday world.” At first this might sound sugary and simplistic. It’s anything but. It is choosing to trust in the good even when the world seems to be going to hell around you. It is saying that love is stronger even than death. It’s being a person of faith, living in hope in spite of all evidence to the contrary.¹

Think about it. By all accounts, the disciples disbanded when Jesus was killed. This should have been the end of the story. We live in a world that still kills its prophets. But was Martin Luther King’s dream stopped by an assassin’s bullet? No—others continue to carry it forward.

My faith is not that God is in heaven and all is right with the world; rather it is that in this broken and hurting and beautiful world, we are, as Desmond Tutu says, “God bearers.” We are all God has--we are the ones who are called to heal and bless and redeem our world.

¹ Hebrews 11:1 “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

No matter what our theological orientation, I'd say we're called to be Easter people living in this Good Friday world. We're called to affirm that love is stronger than death; that we are people standing on the side of love. Some days this is easier than others, and that's why we need each other.

I know this to be true—there is a spirit that lives among us, that longs to break into our lives, to bless and disrupt them. God continues to call us, again and again, to open our hearts, to be healed, to be transformed. And then to take that love, that blessing, and share it with others.

Amen.

The following is the UUSC Justice Sunday message, which was a part of the May 13 service. The first speaker was Cara Marshall:

This spring, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee focused its Justice Sunday program on the genocide that continues to devastate the Darfur region of the Sudan, and UU's across the country are focusing on this issue. Reverend Bill Sinkford, President of the UUA, visited refugee camps in Chad last November. More than 400,000 people have been killed, and more than 2.5 million have been forced to flee and are now refugees. An estimated 3.5 million men, women and children are completely reliant on international aid for survival.

Darfur is a Texas-sized region of the Sudan, Africa's largest country. The 38 million people that live in Sudan represent several ethnic groups and speak more than 100 languages. Over the last several years, the Sudanese government has been battling rebel groups. The Sudanese army has joined forces with the government-backed Janjaweed militias, which were then set loose upon civilians who happened to share the same ethnicity as the African rebel groups.

The Janjaweed commit unspeakable brutalities. Survivors' testimonies are strikingly similar: Janjaweed appear in a village, bomb or burn houses and fields, slaughter livestock, brutally murder men and boys, rape women, kill children, and capture youth as slaves. The Sudanese military is often present when the Janjaweed attack, and the Air force bombs and shells villages to provide cover.

In hearing about a tragedy of such large scale, it's human nature to become overwhelmed. None of us can picture hundreds of thousands or millions of human lives, and particularly in something this complex, and this far away, it's all too easy to feel that while it's very sad, little can be done.

So I ask you to connect on a more personal level. Picture yourself and your family or those you love, and picture the town you live in with the level of devastation that we all saw from the terrible tornado in Kansas. Then picture that this devastation was the result of human hands, hands which after wreaking this havoc, then came through the town and raped and murdered your loved ones in front of you. You are left homeless and bereft, with nothing but the clothes on your back.

To quote from just one victim, Amina Ishaq, age 35 "I lost my daughter in the bombing. Her name was Nada Ismail. She was by a well. When the bombing stopped, we found her and collected the pieces of her body."

It's all too difficult to predict how long, and how much work, it will take to end the tragedy. But all of us need only picture our children, our parents, those who are dearest to us, to know the worth that just one life can carry. And I think that even if what we may do together can only decrease the toll of death and loss not by hundreds of thousands (though of course that would be our hope), but by one innocent life, or a single village, that it is more than worth our time.

After his visit to the refugee camps, the Rev Bill Sinkford asks of us as we enjoy the tulips and lilacs, "During this season of rebirth, when nature bestows her grace so freely upon us all, let us remember our brothers and sisters in exile who long for a peaceful home. Let us begin again in love by renewing our commitment to our most sacred calling. Ours are the only hands on earth."

The second speaker was Pat Grimm:

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As Cara mentioned, sometimes the magnitude of the suffering makes any effort that one of us could make seem futile, there are things that we can do to make a difference.

As we know from the debates going on in our own country between Congress and the President, it costs a lot of money to buy helicopters, warplanes, tanks and fuel. Stopping, or at least reducing the money available to fuel the military can have an impact.

When US investors, especially large endowment funds, retirement funds, and mutual funds systematically eliminated their investments in companies complicit with the South African government or the system of apartheid in the mid 1980's, the economic pressure forced the government there to feel as well as hear our moral outrage.

I was appalled to learn recently that my dollars saved in hopes of retiring some day might end up being used by the Sudanese government. One of the international mutual funds in my retirement account invests my dollars (and lots of others) in one of the large Chinese oil companies that are spending billions of dollars developing oil interests in the Sudan. In many cases, control of land and oil rights is among the motivating forces behind the strife in the Darfur region. And 70-80% of the revenues from oil purchased in the Sudan end up being used to support the military that are committing or providing support to the atrocities.

There are websites that make it very easy to check any mutual funds that you might hold or that may be part of your individual retirement account or your company's pension plan. They are listed on the inserts in your order or service, or we can show you at coffee hour. If you do find that your investments are in funds that have not divested their holdings in companies that are part of the problem, you can switch to other funds, or urge the fund managers to employ a targeted divestment strategy.

You can also call your legislators that the executives of the large investment companies such as Fidelity that you believe that our moral responsibility not to fund such brutalities must outweigh our desire for profit.

For more information about actions that you can take, please visit www.uusc.org, www.savedarfur.org or www.sudandivestment.org.