"Cracked and Broken"
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
September 17, 2017

It's a busy night. The restaurant is bustling with the weekend dinner rush.
Diners chat happily at their tables. The hostess graciously moves to an empty table followed by a train of hungry guests. And then, the frazzled server comes rushing from the kitchen with a heavy tray, snaking around the tables towards their destination. But, then . . . CRASH . . . the contents of the tray tumble to the ground. Cracked and broken dishware lay on the floor amidst piles of ruined food.

Have you seen this happen? Have even been the one carrying the tray!? Unfortunately, I have.

Cracking or breaking something can be distressing. Even if it's not particularly valuable, the sudden shift from a whole object to a broken one can startle or shock us. Yet sometimes the object *is* very valuable or meaningful to us. And, the sight of something precious now in pieces can be upsetting, even heartbreaking.

I suspect we all know something of this experience, because so many things do crack and break. Our cars get dented. Our dishes—even the family heirlooms—get dropped. We slip and fall, spraining a muscle or breaking a bone. Just keeping ourselves and our things in one piece can sometimes take a lot of effort. We organize and clean; we protect and insure; we plan and we hope.

But still, sometimes things go awry. Things crack and break. *We* crack and break—sometimes our bodies, sometimes our hearts and spirits. *And then what?*

I believe that part of what religion does, what First Parish does, is help us make sense of things cracking and breaking. This is what Stephen Prothero argues in his book, *God is Not One*—suggesting that religions are based on how they define a problem and a solution to that problem. For example, in Christianity, the problem is sin and the solution is salvation; in Islam the problem is pride and the solution is submission; in Buddhism the problem is suffering and the solution is awakening; and so on.

Of course, these short summaries belie the many details and nuances within these religious ideas. Yet, what I like about Prothero's approach is that the common ground is how to respond to a sense that something is not right with our world.

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What about us? What do Unitarian Universalists think is the problem? The solution? Well, as a non-creedal religious tradition, there is not a single *official* set of beliefs or language about how to describe what's wrong, nor how to fix it. Indeed, if there is one constancy across this congregation and pretty much all Unitarian Universalist congregations, it's that we do not all agree or hold the same point of view on pretty much anything—whether it's the color to paint the sanctuary walls, the very best hymn, or how to most effectively address racial injustice in our nation.

But I also know that many of us walk through these doors week after week because we believe there *is* something here that we share. We believe that there is something here that will make a difference in our life . . . that may help us to live more fully or live with more peace and hope. We arrive here searching for connection, for meaning, for a way to make sense of a world in which things can feel cracked and broken . . . in which *we* feel cracked and broken in some way, to some degree. And, hopefully, something here might help heal us or, at least, help us to get through.

While we may not have a single religious story about the problem and the solution, we do emerge from religious traditions that have shaped this congregation.

Historically, this congregation was first a Puritan Christian church, then a Unitarian congregation, and, since a 1961 merger, a Unitarian Universalist congregation. As a Puritan Christian church, the problem would have an inherently sinful nature from which we could not ever free ourselves. Our salvation had to come from beyond our wretchedness. The solution comes from God through the life and death of his *perfect*, sinless son, Jesus. For many, this Christian story has both helped to make sense of the brokenness they feel *and* given them hope in an escape from the weight of sin.

However, for others, this story falls short. The depiction of human nature as utterly depraved by sin seems to undercut the *good* that is present in us. And the idea that we are helpless in the moral destiny of ourselves and our world can feel irresponsible, even dangerous. Don't our actions, our efforts to better ourselves and the world matter? Are we really not capable of doing *any* good?

Such questions are similar to those that the early Unitarians were asking. They began to tell a different story, saying that like Jesus, we too are children of God. The spark of divinity, the capacity for good, is within us all. Salvation does not come from without . . . salvation comes from within, from our efforts to do good, to do better, to make a better world. Salvation comes from character.

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These tenants become the DNA of this congregation as the religious focus shifted from what we believed to what we *did* with our lives. We feel this pulse in the meals made for those who are recovering from surgery, in the many gifts purchased at Christmas for survivors of domestic violence and their children. We feel this pulse on the list-serv as requests to carpool to rallies circulate and in the Lydia Maria Child Fund which promises new possibilities of social action. As I have heard some of you say, we come here to be a better person and to make a better world. This all emerges from our Unitarian roots.

So what about Unitarian *Universalism*? Like the Unitarians, the Universalists began with Christians dissatisfied with the traditional story. If God, if the ultimate reality, was indeed love, than how could it be that a loving God would ever punish anyone? Universalist founder Hosea Ballou questioned what parent would rejoice in the suffering of a child. Rather, he believed that the gift of universal salvation and the promise that we are *all* loved, "kindles the sacred fire of love and unbounded benevolence to mankind."

Today, Unitarian Universalism promotes and affirms a set of shared principles. The first of these principles affirms, "the worth and dignity of every person." While this is a phrase rich in varied meaning and application, for me I hear in it echoes of both the Unitarian claim that goodness resides in each of us and the Universalist claims of fully inclusive salvation—that we are *all* good enough, we *all* have value and worth; we *all* deserve to be treated with dignity.

Sometimes I fear that emphasizing a better self, a better world, more love, more justice has an unintentional consequence of creating a sense that we are never good enough—not as individuals, not as citizens, not as parents, not as friends, not as members of First Parish. Yes, our Unitarian DNA challenges us to live our values, to show our beliefs in our actions. But also, this emphasis is rooted in the belief that there is goodness in all of us.

And, our Universalist roots affirm that we are loved just as we are—that we do not have to prove how good we are to be loved, that we do not have to be perfect to earn our worth. Rather, every person is good enough. Every person has worth and dignity.

We all show up here as we are. We show up as people who carry within ourselves a capacity for goodness. And we show up as people who are not all put together, who have some cracks and some scars, who have been hurt by others and who have hurt others . . . even those we love.

I guess this is when I confess that this is the sermon that I also need to hear. Perhaps more than once, I have been accused of being a perfectionist. I bristle whenever I hear this *. . . I*

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mean, I know I'm not perfect . . . geez, I've been trying for years to be perfect and I keep falling short. Ok, so maybe I do struggle a bit with being a perfectionist . . . which is to say that I am inclined to strive to be better, to do better, to not screw up, to not fall short, to not disappoint. Perhaps this feels familiar to some of you also?

And yet, I do screw up. I do disappoint others. I do fall short. And, frankly, sometimes I'm just kind of a jerk . . . even to those I care about. So am I good enough?Good enough to be a minister? Your minister? Good enough to be loved?

My Unitarian Universalist faith says yes. That you and me and every one of us has worth and dignity. That we all can show up as we are and be met with respect and care. This doesn't mean we are all going to agree—heaven's no! And it doesn't mean that we won't have conflict. Nor does it mean that there will not be times when we hurt or disappoint one another. But, my hope is that we can all show up here and be met with the open minds and loving hearts that we promise in our covenant. We may not have shared religious beliefs about God or the afterlife, but we do share a covenant and principles that call us to be together in certain ways. That call us to recognize the diversity among us as an invitation and a challenge to be in relationship with people with whom we do not always agree.

Our program year last Spring ended with some conflict in our congregation over a staffing change—conflict that has left some of us still hurting and disappointed with those who made the decision and others hurt that their difficult decision was challenged. Conflict is an uncomfortable place to be. And yet, no organization, certainly not a UU congregation, is going to escape it! During my internship in the Sherborn UU congregation, the minister would tell the new members class that the test of their membership commitment would come when the church disappointed them. For some of you, now has been one of those times. Perhaps for others it was a past event or will be another one yet to come.

Because we show up here as we are, as cracked and broken people, so also this community will also have its conflicts and its cracks. And yet, the challenge is not to be perfect—"forget your perfect offering," Leonard Cohen sings, "there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."

Whether the cracks that trouble us are about First Parish, our marriage, a friendship, or the fractured social and political landscape of our country, Cohen challenges us to look at cracks in a different way—to find the light. As poetry, there is no simple, analytic distillation of Cohen's line. What I hear in his words is a love song to the experience of being truly human . . . of showing up as we are. And, I hear an invitation to accept that

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things are not going to always stay in one piece, be perfect, or work out exactly as we'd like them to.

How do we live in that world? A cracked and broken world?

Those can be tough questions for Unitarian Universalists—or for us perfectionists—that always want everything to be Right . . . with a capital R. Of course, it *is* good to have values and visions that orient our actions. Hoping for and working towards a better world should not be set aside. But, I guess what I'm saying is that I hope that one of those orienting values will be to live with compassion for the cracks within ourselves and in others. And perhaps that way, the cracks will bring the light of deeper connections and a love that embraces us all as we are.

Amen.
I love you.
May light shine through us all.

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