

“Abide with Me”
Reverend Dave Franks

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Welcome. I’m out of my virtual library and alas I’m actually behind a pulpit again. Feels good. I might be wearing my preachers robe were it not for the fact that it’s still packed in a wardrobe box that the movers will bring to my new home in St. Petersburg this Tuesday. All kinds of new doings and goings on. That’s what it’s like here at Unitarian Universalists of Clearwater. Though we have been engaged this past year through our computer screens and mobile devices, much has and continues to happen in this congregation. It’s been a full year from this Sunday that we were last in the Octagon. Yes, I know it’s virtually, and one day we will all be sitting in here together again, but we are live in this moment, in this holy place. Welcome.

We have arrived in this place, to this time, made whole; grounded in living our lives as best as we can, working, at times struggling to stay faithful to our values and principles, since we were last gathered in this space, because of a commitment we made to abide with one another. The title of my sermon today, “Abide with Me.” There have been moments when that’s not been easy and indeed, not unlike the story of a man whose oil well had caught fire. It was one of those uncontrollable fires and so he offered a large sum of reward money to whoever could put it out. Well, all the fire companies from the surrounding cities and towns came and tried, but the fire was so intense that no one could get near enough to begin to work on it. Then a small volunteer fire department (you know how I love volunteer fire departments) arrived on the scene. They had one fire truck, one ladder, three buckets of sand, two buckets of water, and one blanket. They came wheeling up to the blaze, quickly jumped out, climbed their ladder, threw on their buckets of water and sand, and the blanket, putting the fire out. The grateful owner of the oil well rushed up to them with the large sum of reward money, handing it over to the volunteer fire chief and asked, “Tell me, how are you going to spend this money?” The fire chief responded, “First of all, we’re going to put new brakes on our truck.”

I imagine, with you, especially as you’ve entered your stewardship drive, that the kind of commitment being asked of you in the days ahead may feel a bit like driving that

volunteer fire truck. There are no brakes holding us back, protecting us, from being about those tasks of putting out fires of injustice, standing shoulder to shoulder in solidarity with those who have no blankets of white privilege to shield them from the flames of racism, sexism, homophobia, or poverty. There are no brakes on this truck with UUC painted on its doors. It may feel unwieldy at times but its purpose, the engine that moves it forward, are all of you who heard the siren's blare and volunteered to climb upon it.

I confess, I wonder what motivates a person to commit, to climb aboard, knowing that the mission is to put out those fires that threaten people's lives, their livelihoods, their dignity, their worth. I'm going to suggest that it has either been a person and/or an experience; often in the early years of lives, that inspires a person to see beyond their own self-interest, empathizing to such a degree with another's plight, to take those actions that lead one to discover, to find in themselves, sometimes by surprise, committed to a belief, a cause, a value, a principle. In the days ahead, especially as you've entered conversations about stewardship and commitment, I invite you to share with one another who that person or experience was that motivated you to first say to yourself, I've got to climb aboard that truck.

For me, that experience happened in the summer of 1969. I was 17 years old. Yes, and the math will tell you I'm now 68 years old. In the late 60s the United Methodist Church was engaged in doing some really interesting programs, particularly relating to youth. One of those in the summer of 1969 was called "Impact 69." 30 teenagers, selected from United Methodist congregations across Southern California, Hawaii, and Arizona, boarded a Greyhound bus for a two-week tour that started in San Diego. We gathered in the social hall of a downtown church and quickly found ourselves feeding the homeless people of that city, to later in the evening coming together in a house on a beach where we were introduced to the French film, "The Red Balloon," and the minister, for whom that house on the beach was his parish, reaching out to those who had made living on the sands of the beach, many homeless, their home, in communal living. Afterward we roasted hotdogs around a beach campfire only to have four good looking guys in their late 20s, (they seemed so old and mature to me) sit down at our campfire and introduced as homosexuals who had come to share with us what their lives were like and the discrimination they faced, even while in the closet. Remember, this was 1969...well before Stonewall.

A day or so later we boarded our bus and headed off to Yuma Indian Reservation where we spent a couple of nights in the homes of the members of that tribe. Again, seeing, listening, learning what life was like living in the barest of conditions and meeting youth who were sent off the reservation for their education. From there back on the bus and off to Phoenix where we toured plush retirement facilities owned by Methodists and then drive a few blocks away and spent the afternoon with those seniors in facilities for whom Medicaid barely paid for their upkeep. We met with a minister whose parish was the local shopping mall so that he could be in service to those who spent beyond their means, as a means to avoid issues they faced in their homes. From there back on the bus and off to more homeless shelters and soup kitchens on the north end of Las Vegas. It was Vegas where we also met with the owners of casinos who spoke about their business and the call girls who chatted with us about what life was like for them.

Eventually, that bus got us back to California where we met with the Black Panthers who told us to go back into our Lilly, white communities and make transformation happen there rather than attempt to make change in Watts. In the afternoon it was over to East L.A. where we sat down in a big circle with the students and leaders of La Raza, who shared their anger and frustration at the deafness of whites to hear, let alone respond to their plight, times of being spat upon and justice denied. And at night we walked the streets of Sunset Strip that was not filled with five-star restaurants, movie theaters, and high fashion shops like it is today, but with head shops, and Hari Krishna followers chanting the Mahā-mantra (the great mantra) "Hare Krishna, Hare Rama." With cymbals on street corners. Incense filled the air and inside those head shops we met with people our age or slightly older, high on whatever and heard their stories of having been kicked out of their affluent homes for experimenting with an idea that just maybe a capitalistic lifestyle wasn't the only one meant for them. I may have met some of you there that evening.

Those two weeks fitted me with the lens by which I came to view the world and what I then knew, and have always known, to this day what my role in it had to be. I got off the bus and jumped onto the fire truck. You see, values and principles on a printed page are only made real by what we have seen, or heard, the persons who entered our lives, the encounters that have called us to action, and in so doing our commitments made.

"Religions start," says Frederick Buechner, "as Frost said poems do, with a lump in the throat, to put it mildly, or with the bush going up in flames, the rain of flowers, the dove coming down from the sky."

"As for the man in the street, wherever their own religion is a matter of more than custom, it is apt to be because, however dimly, a doorway opened to them, a word was spoken, and, however shakily, they responded."

A word spoken, a doorway opened through an experience and/or a person who spoke that word to us, and we responded...finding ourselves, however shakily, committed. Some of us call upon that thou which changes not to see us through our commitments, others of us see what is in nature or under the earth, or in the stars to see us through, but finally it is in how we live into and out from our commitments that have us abiding with one another.

Our closing hymn, "Abide with Me" is our invitation to share in that commitment by which the world still struggles to learn, as it is sung in the closing stanza of this hymn:

We need each other, every passing hour
Channels of grace and life affirming power
Faithful companions, share this path with me.
Through all our fears and hopes, abide with me.

Blessed be, may it be so, and amen.