

Worship 2019:

A Selection of Sermons with Order- of-service Context



Unitarian-Universalist Church of the South
Hills (Sunnyhill), Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania



Rev. Jim Magaw

with Graduates of the Sunnyhill Sermon-Writing Class for
the Prior Year (2018-2019)

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1. Introduction, Rev. Jim Magaw

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Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life— life passed through the fire of thought.” These words still ring as true as ever, even after more than 150 years. What I attempt to do through my preaching (with varying degrees of success), and through the sermon writing class I teach each year, is to put forth not just abstract treatises or personal opinions but rather something that reflects both intimacy (my own personal experience) and ultimacy (universal truth and meaning) in such a way that it challenges and inspires the listener.

In my experience, good preaching always points toward transformation—whether it is on the personal or societal level. The sermons I have heard that stick with me most are those that have inspired me to work for change, both in my own life and in the life of the larger community. And “life passed through the fire of thought” is the best way I know to convey both the vulnerability and the theological grounding that are necessary to inspire meaningful transformation.

For the past four years, it has been my pleasure to teach sermon writing classes for Sunnyhill members and friends using *The Shared Pulpit: A Sermon Seminar for Lay People* by Erika Hewitt¹. I have been extremely impressed with the thoughtfulness exhibited by participants, and their work reflects well on the congregation as a whole and its commitment to shared ministry. This congregation, which began as a lay-led fellowship, has a long and proud history of lay-led services, and this class has helped facilitate high-quality sermons and services led by members.

It has been a great pleasure to work with Sunnyhill member Valerie Powell to help put together this volume which includes some of my sermons from 2019 and the sermons of sermon writing class participants from that year. I hope that these sermons will continue to inspire and transform, and I look forward to future collaborations like this one.

Reference:

¹Hewitt, Erika, *The Shared Pulpit: A Sermon Seminar for Lay People*. (Boston, Skinner House Books, 2014.) ISBN: 978-1-55896-722-9



Service for January 20, 2019

Order of Service:

Gathering Music: “Clair de lune” [C. Debussy], Trey Reichenfeld

Opening Words: “Lift Up Your Eyes” [Maya Angelou]

Hymn: “I’ve Got Peace Like a River”

Story: “The Good Samaritan” [Chris Buice]

Special Music: “Why? (The King of Love Is Dead)” [Nina Simone]

Musical Meditation: “There Is More Love”

Sermon: “MLK and Racial Barriers,” Rev. Jim Magaw

Hymn: “I’m On My Way”

Closing Words: “Making Justice Real” [Rosemary Bray McNatt]

Sermon: “MLK and Racial Barriers,” Rev. Jim Magaw

If you watched the Super Bowl on television last year, you may remember a certain commercial for Dodge Ram pickup trucks that prominently featured a recording of a portion of a speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. The part of the speech included in the commercial was about service to others, and said, in part:

“You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know [Einstein’s] theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.”

It’s a great and noble sentiment, and one that we desperately need to keep in mind. But it was shocking to me, as I suspect it was for many of you, to hear the voice of Martin Luther King being used to sell cars. In fact, my jaw dropped when I saw that commercial. And I thought to myself, “What were they thinking?”

The speech which that particular quote comes from was called “The Drum Major Instinct,” and it was one of King’s finest pieces of oratory. But using it in a car commercial was not only absurd and disrespectful but also not at all in keeping with the speech itself.

In that very same speech, King warns about how automobile manufacturers try to lure you into spending more money than you have on a car that you don’t need. He said:

“Do you ever see people buy cars that they can’t even begin to buy in terms of their income? You’ve seen people riding around in Cadillacs and Chryslers who don’t earn enough to have a good [Model-T] Ford. But it feeds a repressed ego . .

“Now the presence of this instinct,” King said, “explains why we are so often taken by advertisers. You know, those gentlemen of massive verbal persuasion. And they have a way of saying things to you that kind of gets you into buying. In order to be a man of distinction, you must drink this whiskey. In order to make your neighbors envious, you must drive this type of car . . . And . . . before you know it, you’re just buying that stuff.”

Those are the words of King from the very same speech quoted by an automobile manufacturer in a car commercial on national television on Super Bowl Sunday.

I'm not aware of any more compelling evidence for the idea that we as a society have somehow gone through the Looking Glass from Alice in Wonderland and are now living in a world in which down is up, wrong is right, and fiction is fact.

And it is heartbreaking to see the words and the image of King being used merely as window-dressing to prop up the status quo of toxic capitalism while forgetting the radical message beneath those words and images.

In our current "through-the-Looking-Glass" world, there is a popular delusion that race no longer matters, that the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s accomplished what it set out to do—that we are essentially living in a triumphant, post-racial era.

One of the MLK quotes that often gets trotted out at this time of the year, especially by post-racialists, is this one:

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Very often when this quote is used today, it is to reinforce the mistaken idea that we have reached that point dreamed of by King, that it is only the content of one's character that matters now and not the color of one's skin.

In fact, you may recall when Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, there was a strong feeling in the air that having a black president proved the point that race was no longer much of an issue in the United States. Surely if America can elect a black man as president, then it must be a sign that we are finally, once-and-for-all, done with racism in this country.

Sadly, it's hard to imagine anything that could be much further from the truth. But to understand the myth of post-racialism, it is important to understand the concept of racial assimilation.

The idea behind racial assimilation was that, if equal opportunity were given to everyone in America, regardless of their race, then race itself would no longer be an issue. The theory was that, once all barriers to opportunity were transcended, once people of color were in positions of leadership in our country, then assimilation would have been achieved and we would be living King's dream.

And the election of Obama seemed to represent the breaking of the final barrier to equality for all.

Unfortunately, it has become painfully clear in recent years that the assimilationist approach to race has failed. As stated by Khalil Gibran Muhammad, professor of history, race and public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School:

"We now live in a post-assimilation America. The 50-year-old rules for racial advancement are obsolete. There is no racial barrier left to break. There is no office in the land to which an African-American can ascend — from mayor to attorney general and the presidency — that will serve as a magical platform for saving black people and our nation's soul from its racist past. We cannot engineer a more equitable nation simply by dressing up institutions in more shades of brown. Instead, we must confront structural racism and the values of our institutions."

Muhammad goes on to say: "Mr. Obama's election was by any historical measure the apex of the civil rights period — so many black, white, Latino and Asian-Americans saw him as the fulfillment of Dr. King's vision. The notion that the blood and courage of civil rights heroes had led to that moment was captured by the iconography of the campaign. Obama supporters

from Atlanta to Chicago wore T-shirts illustrated with the profiles of Dr. King and Mr. Obama side by side. Jay-Z expressed the liturgy of the age in verse: 'Rosa Parks sat so Martin Luther could walk/Martin Luther walked so Barack Obama could run/Barack Obama ran so all the children could fly.'"

But it's just not that simple. We can elect a dozen black presidents and still be plagued by the evils of racism. No amount of individual achievement can undo the structural racism that continues to haunt this country. And we're doing a grave disservice to the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr., when we remember only the rhetoric and the symbols of King while forgetting the deeper systemic changes for which he was working.

In his last book, written in 1967, titled "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?" King warned of the delusions that were present at that time and that are, sadly, still present today. He wrote:

"The majority of white Americans consider themselves sincerely committed to justice for [black people]. They believe that American society is essentially hospitable to fair play and to steady growth toward a middle-class utopia embodying racial harmony. But unfortunately this is a fantasy of self-deception and comfortable vanity."

King himself never believed that individual achievement toward white, middle-class assimilation was the ultimate goal of his work. He never believed that the success of a few would mean the liberation of all. He saw such thinking as delusional.

Instead, he was working toward an America in which we would all become "creative dissenters" and would hold ourselves accountable "to a higher destiny."

What King recognized over 50 years ago—and what we need to recognize today—is that, again in the words of Professor Muhammad:

". . . institutions are far more powerful than individuals, no matter how many people of color can be counted in leadership. Structural racism is immune to identity politics. That Eric Holder and Loretta Lynch became attorneys general, for example, was the starting point for the possibility of federal criminal justice reform — not the reform itself."

How many times have we seen this dangerous mistake play out—how many times have we seen examples of individual achievement used as a cover for the absence of real reform? Over and over again, the American people have been duped into believing that the exceptional individual in some way proves that we have arrived at the promised land, when in fact we have not even begun to live into the reality of equality and justice for all.

As I've said before, the radical legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. has been sanitized and white-washed to a great extent in recent years. Rather than being seen as the impassioned firebrand for racial and economic justice that he was, he is often portrayed as a sort of black teddy bear for societal change in America—someone who politely advocated for incremental change without disrupting our regularly-scheduled programming. And that's just not right.

We're living in dangerous times. There are so many distractions from the work before us. Each day, the current administration in Washington manages to come up with yet another assault on common decency and common sense. Each day, there's a new excuse for feeling overwhelmed or despairing. Each day, the sheer volume of absurdity seems to numb us, to lull us into a sense of powerlessness and complacency.

But we must not become complacent.

Martin King Luther did not fight and die just to become a soundbite in yet another corporate public relations ploy. He did not fight and die just to become a touchstone for the delusion of post-racialism. He did not fight and die just to become a poster-child for the myth of individual exceptionalism.

King fought and died in the hope of sparking real and lasting transformation and in the hope of building a resistance to conformity to unjust systems of oppression.

The following words of King himself have never been more true than they are today:

“This hour in history needs a dedicated circle of transformed nonconformists. Our planet teeters on the brink of . . . annihilation; dangerous passions of pride, hatred, and selfishness are enthroned in our lives; truth lies prostrate on the rugged hills of nameless calvaries; and people do reverence before false gods of nationalism and materialism.

“The saving of our world from impending doom will come, not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority.”

The false gods that King named are alive and well today. We see before us an ever-growing abundance of evidence of nationalism and materialism run amok. The dangerous passions of pride, hatred and selfishness are enthroned not just in our own lives but also in the life of our nation. And truth itself—lying wounded and bleeding on the ground—is endangered in a way that it has never been before.

Our hope—our only hope—lies in what King called creative maladjustment, in refusing to be lulled into complacency, in recognizing and calling out injustices when we see them and demanding something more than lip service and window dressing.

I hope and pray that we might all become transformed non-conformists, bringers of truth in an era of deception, disciples of love in a time of hatred and fear.

May it be so. Amen!



Service for February 3, 2019

Order of Service:

Opening Words: “A Circle of Trust” [Parker Palmer]

Lighting the Chalice: “Blessed Is the Fire” [Eric Heller-Wagner]

Blessed is the fire that burns deep in the soul.
It is the fire of reason; the fire of compassion;
the fire of community; the fire of justice; the fire of faith.
It is the fire of love burning deep in the human heart.

Hymn: “Gather the Spirit”

Story: “The Fifty-Dollar Bill” [Faye Morgensen]

Musical Meditation: “Find a Stillness”

Sermon: “Trust in an Era of Distrust,” Rev. Jim Magaw

Hymn: “How Can I Keep from Singing”

Closing Words: “Trust the Home That Is Each Other” [Fred LaMotte]

Sermon: “Trust in an Era of Mistrust,” Rev. Jim Magaw

As a nation, we are facing an unprecedented crisis of trust. This crisis plays out in a number of ways and on a number of different levels, from institutional distrust to social distrust to personal distrust. Here are just a few statistics that illustrate the extent of our current crisis of trust.

According to Gallup polls, forty years ago, in 1979, 65 percent of Americans said they trusted the church or organized religion a great deal or quite a lot. Today that number has dropped to 38 percent. Over that same time period, trust in the U.S. Congress has fallen from 34 percent to 11 percent; trust in our public schools has fallen from 53 percent to 29 percent; and trust in banks has dropped from 60 percent to 30 percent.

Trust in nearly all of our major institutions, from government to financial to educational to religious institutions, has fallen sharply over the past 40 years—in some cases dropping by half or even more.

In many cases, as we all know, this lack of trust is entirely justified. The sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church have eroded trust in all religious institutions. Government corruption and abuse of power has decreased trust in government from the municipal to the national level. Our nation’s largest banks have demonstrated time and time again, in scandal after scandal, that they have betrayed the public trust and are looking out for their own interests far more than they are that of the public.

But it’s not just trust in major institutions that has suffered in recent decades; our trust in one another has fallen precipitously as well.

According to the Pew Research Center, “a generation ago about half of all Americans felt they could trust the people around them, but now less than a third think other people are trustworthy. Young people are the most distrustful of all; only about 19 percent of millennials believe other people can be trusted.”

Why is trust important? In this day and age isn’t it naïve to think that trust matters at all? But it *is* important.

As Columbia University economist Joseph Stiglitz said: “Trust is what makes contracts, plans and everyday transactions possible; it facilitates the democratic process, from voting to law creation, and is necessary for social stability. It is essential for our lives. It is trust, more than money, that makes the world go round.”

There has to be some level of trust or we simply cannot function as individuals or as a society. When I get on an airplane, I must have some level of trust in the pilot’s ability to operate the aircraft safely and responsibly; when I buy groceries, I must have at least a modicum of trust that the food I buy will not make me and my family sick; when I come to church, I must trust that the people who are here with me are not here to harm me but to help one another.

Every aspect of our lives depends on having some level of trust. Trust is extremely important to us as human beings. Without it, the fabric of our lives becomes torn and tattered. Without trust, it is impossible to function, either as individuals or as members of the larger community.

So, what *is* trust, how did we get to this place of *dis*trust, and what, if anything, can we do to regain trust in our institutions and in each other?

There are a number of definitions of trust, but one that I like and find useful comes from Rachel Botsman, author and lecturer at Oxford University’s business school. Botsman defines trust as “a confident relationship to the unknown.” A confident relationship to the unknown.

Using this definition, it’s easy to see why our particular era is one characterized by *dis*trust. Given the rapid pace of change and societal upheaval and apparent political, financial and environmental chaos, our relationship to the unknown is anything *but* confident. There are so many disturbing trends and such a lack of clarity about our future that our relationship to the unknown is one of stark fear and terror rather than one of confidence.

And one of the chief drivers of this distrust, this fear-based relationship to the unknown, has to do with growing economic and social inequalities in our country. To understand these inequalities, it is important to keep in mind that our American-style system of capitalism is premised on a fundamental distrust of one another.

In the eighteenth century, around the time the United States was founded, Adam Smith put forth the idea “that we would do better to trust in the pursuit of self-interest [rather] than in the good intentions of those who pursue the general interest. If everyone looked out for just himself [Smith argued], we would reach an equilibrium that was not just comfortable but also productive, in which the economy was fully efficient.”

It’s an appealing idea. It’s also morally bankrupt and inherently dangerous. The idea that selfishness is good has been the source of untold suffering over the last few hundred years. Even though Adam Smith himself later embraced a more balanced view of self-interest and the common good, we keep doubling down on the idea of selfishness as a virtue—apparently believing that any day now we’ll hit the selfishness jackpot and everything will be all right.

But things are far from all right. In the so-called economic recovery that has taken place over the past 10 years, one percent of the U.S. population has taken home 95 percent of the increased income that has been generated.

Based on our experience of the past 10 years, the only thing that we can be confident about in our relationship to the unknown is that, unless our path is radically altered, things are going to get a lot worse for most of us. If any kind of trust is to be restored, we need wholesale reform and we need it now.

As long as our current trend of growing disparities between the economic haves and have-nots continues, there will be no meaningful increase in trust in our financial and governmental institutions. Confidence has been greatly eroded, and it will take a lot of work for it to be rebuilt.

Now, I mentioned earlier that only 19 percent of millennials believe that other people can be trusted. However, it is among this same group that there are some genuinely hopeful signs of a new kind of trust emerging. This new trend in trust is worth examining because it points to a possible way forward.

This trend is perhaps best illustrated by the success of Uber, the ride-sharing app that has become so enormously popular, especially among millennials. Every day in this country, some 5 million people get into a car with a stranger through Uber—seemingly contradicting the distrust that is endemic in our society. How can this be?

As Rachel Botsman points out, trust has “evolved in three significant chapters throughout the course of human history: local, institutional and what we're now entering, distributed.”

For centuries, up until the mid-1800s, all trust was local and built around close-knit relationships. Most people lived in small towns or villages, and, when they wanted to borrow money or ask for a favor, those around them knew exactly who they were and what they were getting into.

But, as people increasingly moved to larger cities, local lenders were replaced by “large corporations who did not know us as individuals.” In Botsman’s words, “We started to place our trust in black-box systems of authority, things like legal contracts and regulation and insurance, and less trust directly in other people. Trust became institutional and commission-based.”

As I mentioned earlier, trust in institutions has eroded greatly in recent decades for some very good reasons. However, as the digital age has taken hold in our society, institutional trust in its old form seems less and less relevant and less practical than it used to be because of the way trust is now distributed.

For example, if you stay in a hotel room—any big, corporate-type hotel—you are probably much more likely to leave your towels on the floor than you are if you stay at an Airbnb—at least in part because you know that you will be rated online by the Airbnb host, just as the host knows that they will be rated by you.

Trust, in the case of Airbnb and similar digital-age businesses, is distributed. It doesn’t just run one way or the other; it is distributed all around. A similar phenomenon is at work with Uber and other ride-sharing apps.

The underlying concepts that are enabling this new kind of distributed trust to emerge are: transparency, inclusivity, and accountability.

Even though millennials are less trusting than any previous generation, they are beginning to find a new kind of distributed trust through organizations that are transparent (as opposed to old-school corporations that are opaque by their very nature), inclusive (meaning anybody with the app can participate and is given a voice), and accountable (through feedback that is accessible to anyone).

Any organization that wants to succeed in this new era would do well to pay attention to the idea of distributed trust and strive for transparency, inclusivity and accountability. Those values are certainly at the center of what we try to do here at Sunnyhill and are expressed in our Unitarian Universalist principles as well.

In fact, there's a statement at the end of our seven principles which reads: "As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support." So the idea of distributed trust is built into our primary foundational document.

Unfortunately, we're probably not going to be able to re-build all of our major institutions from scratch—at least not right away. But there are beginning to be viable alternatives to the opaque, exclusive, unaccountable institutions that have come to dominate the American economic, governmental, and social landscapes. Community banking, to cite just one example, is an idea whose time has come and is built on the idea of distributed trust.

And those corporations and organizations that cannot be built from scratch will need to be reformed with these same three values in mind. Reforms and regulations based in transparency, inclusivity, and accountability are sorely needed to restore trust and to begin to enable our institutions to function in a healthy way.

What's true for organizations is true for individuals as well. If we are to regain trust in one another, we will only do so through a willingness to be vulnerable—a willingness that will allow us to be more transparent and accountable with those we know and to be more inclusive with those we don't know.

As has been observed a lot in recent years, we are living in interesting times. New technologies can be used either to build more walls of distrust *or* to create opportunities for bringing down walls through new kinds of trust. The choice is ours.

One thing that I'm certain about, amid all the tumult and the strife of our world, is that any hope we have for a better future will depend on our ability to rebuild trust—trust in our institutions, trust in our neighbors, trust in ourselves.

And the only way this trust will be rebuilt will be from the bottom up--understanding that systems built purely on self-interest and greed are unsustainable; understanding that concern for the common good is not a naïve pipedream but a basic building block of human society; understanding that, in the end, relationships are all we have and that, without trust, those relationships and life itself are ultimately meaningless.

While we tend to think of trust on a grand scale, the truth is that trust—especially personal trust—is built from small gestures over time. In a recent presentation titled "The Anatomy of Trust," Brene Brown "explained how trust is a lot like a marble jar, which was a discipline and reward system her daughter's teacher used in the classroom. If the class did positive things, marbles went in the jar and [there would be] a party when the jar [was] full. If the class did something negative, then marbles are taken out of the jar.

"When her daughter came home from school hurt and afraid to trust again because some friends broke her trust, Brown said to her, 'Trust is like a marble jar. You share those hard stories and those hard things that are happening to you with friends who over time you've filled up their marble jar. They've done thing after thing after thing where you know you can trust this person.'" Occasionally, as a result of broken trust, some of the marbles are lost, but there's still a foundation to build upon.

My hope and my prayer is that we will continue to fill up our individual jars with marbles of trust in such a way that, together, we can rebuild trustworthy institutions committed to transparency, inclusivity, and accountability.

May it be so. Amen!



Service for March 24, 2019

Order of Service:

Opening Words: “Givers and Receivers” [Fred Rogers]

Lighting the Chalice: “The Gift of This Day” Bruce Southworth]

For the gift of this day and for our community
of caring and compassion, we give thanks.
We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith.
May our many sparks meet and merge
in a communion of heart and soul.

Hymn: “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” [Fred Rogers]

Story: “Never Perfect, Always Enough” [Fred Rogers, adapted]

Special Music: “It’s Such a Good Feeling” [Fred Rogers]

Musical Meditation: “I Know This Rose Will Open”

Sermon: “A Tale of Two Freds,” Rev. Jim Magaw

Hymn: “There’s a River Flowin’ in My Soul”

Closing Words: “The Best of Whoever You Are” [Fred Rogers]

Sermon: “Tale of Two Freds,” Rev. Jim Magaw

At the heart of our mission statement are these words: “to build a just and compassionate community within and beyond Sunnyhill.” Compassionate thought and action are at the heart of nearly every religious tradition, including ours.

“Compassion” means ‘to endure [something] with another person,’ to put ourselves in somebody else’s shoes, to sense their pain as though it were our own, and to enter generously into their point of view.

“That’s why compassion is aptly summed up in the Golden Rule, which asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else.”

It is said that a [skeptic] approached Hillel [a rabbi who was a contemporary of Jesus] and promised to convert to Judaism if Hillel could recite the entire Torah while he stood on one leg. Hillel replied: “What is hateful to yourself, do not do to [anyone else]. That is the whole of the Torah, and the remainder is but commentary.”

Some version of the Golden Rule can be found in virtually every holy book—in the Torah, in the Christian scriptures, in the Quran, in Confucius, everywhere. Furthermore, most faith tradi-

tions insist that you cannot confine your benevolence and caring to your own group; you must have concern for everybody—even your enemies.

And yet, some people who seem to be religious leaders, who claim to be religious leaders, exhibit very little compassion, while others clearly lead lives centered upon this vitally important concept. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan friar and one of my favorite writers, said:

“[The] belief systems of much [of] religion are probably the major cause of [lack of religious sentiment] in the world today, because people see that religion has not generally created people who are that different, more caring, or less prejudiced than other people.”

He goes on: “In fact, they are often worse because they think they have God on their small side. I wish I did not have to say this, but religion either produces the very best people or the very worst.”

So, if compassion is at the heart of most religious traditions, then why aren't religious people more compassionate? Clearly, some religious people really are more compassionate, but others are not.

As a case study in religious compassion or a lack thereof, I'd like to look at two famous Freds: Fred Phelps and Fred Rogers.

Both were born in America around the same time (1928 and 1929). Both were ordained ministers. Both lived very public lives. Both were considered “religious” people.

But in most other ways, they could not be more different from each other.

Fred Phelps was the minister of the Westboro Baptist Church—the group that became infamous for picketing at military funerals and other events, holding signs with hate-filled, vile messages, such as:

“God Hates the USA/Thank God for 9/11,” “America is Doomed,” “God Hates Fags,” “Thank God for Dead Soldiers,” “You’re Going to Hell,” and “God Hates You.”

Phelps was an ordained Baptist minister and an attorney. In his early years as a lawyer, he was a civil rights advocate. In fact, he received awards from the Greater Kansas City Chapter of Blacks in Government and the Bonner Springs branch of the NAACP, for his work on behalf of black clients.

But, at some point, something snapped for Phelps. It was as if his anger erupted and could never be contained from that point forward. He was disbarred in 1977 after having pursued a personal vendetta against a court reporter who he was convinced had it in for him in some way. He badgered this woman in court mercilessly, calling her a slut and accusing her of all kinds of what he called sexual perversions.

Eventually, he lost his license to practice law, both in the state of Kansas and in federal courts.

The focus of his work then turned to his church and the famous, or infamous, protests that they staged and continued to stage even after his death.

Phelps referred to himself as an Old School Baptist who adhered to the five central tenets of Calvinism. Those five were:

- The total depravity of humankind: the idea that there is no inherent good in anyone human. We are all hopeless sinners.

- Unconditional election: that there were a few select people whom God has chosen to send to heaven after their deaths, not based on their faith or their behavior, but selected arbitrarily. All the rest are bound for hell no matter what they believe or what they practice.
- Limited atonement: the idea that Jesus died to make up for the sins, not of all humanity, but just for those limited few, whether they deserve it or not.
- Irresistible grace: that is, the saving grace of God will be extended only to those few whom he has selected, whether they choose it or not, and this same grace is not available to any others. [This is an idea I'll return to in just a few minutes.] And--
- Perseverance of saints: which is the notion that those who have been selected by God will ultimately prevail, whether here on earth or in heaven.

Most theologians would consider Phelps not just a Calvinist, but a hyper-Calvinist because he took each of these five tenets of Calvinism to an extreme. He believed that the venom-filled garbage that he and his followers spouted was justified because he saw himself as representing an angry and vengeful God, a God that permits no real possibility of transformation for anyone, a God that is interested only in punishment, except for those select few who will end up in paradise.

It is said that our image of God creates us. And that statement certainly seems to hold true for Fred Phelps. He became the angry, vengeful, merciless God of his imagination.

In contrast, let's consider a very different Fred—Fred Rogers, known far and wide as Mr. Rogers from the children's television program “Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.”

Rogers was a good Pittsburgher, born about 40 miles southeast of here in Latrobe. He earned his undergraduate degree in music composition and started out working in music production for NBC in New York.

From the very start, he was fascinated by television and the power that it held to do good or bad in the world, especially for children. He began working at WQED in Pittsburgh in 1954 as a puppeteer for the local children's program “The Children's Corner.” He earned his master of divinity degree at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and was ordained as a Presbyterian minister during this same time.

Eventually, Rogers developed his own show, Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, a nationally syndicated public television program which he hosted from 1968-2001. He considered his work with children his ministry.

I didn't discover Mr. Rogers until I was an adolescent and pretty cynical about television programming for children, so I'm somewhat ashamed to say that I remember making fun of him when I was in my early teens. He was an easy target for adolescent humor.

But as I grew older, I began to appreciate the ways in which this quiet, gentle man was in fact a powerful force for good in the world.

To get some sense of just how powerful Fred Rogers was, I suggest you watch a video available on YouTube of his testimony before the United States Senate in 1969. It's also featured in the wonderful documentary film, “Won't You Be My Neighbor,” which was released last year.

The Senate hearing took place to decide how much funding PBS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting would receive in an upcoming appropriations bill. Originally, public televi-

sion was to receive a \$20 million grant, but President Nixon, in his budget, proposed slashing funding to \$10 million because of all the money that was being spent at that time on the war in Vietnam.

The chair of the Senate committee was John Pastore, a rather gruff and no-nonsense gentleman from Rhode Island, who, at first seemed impatient with Rogers and his testimony. But as Fred Rogers continued to speak, you could see Pastore begin to soften.

Among other things, Rogers said, “I feel that if we in public television can only make it clear that feelings are mentionable and manageable, we will have done a great service . . . I think that it’s much more dramatic that two men could be working out their feelings of anger—much more dramatic than showing . . . gunfire.”

At the end of just six minutes of Rogers testimony, Senator Pastore said, “It looks like you just earned the \$20 million.” The subsequent congressional appropriation increased PBS funding from \$9 million to \$22 million.

Although he was a Presbyterian, Fred Rogers was not a strict Calvinist in his religious outlook. For Fred Rogers, God was love. God was not some grumpy old white guy in the sky visiting all manner of plagues and violence upon hopeless sinners. God was love.

It's hard to imagine two religious figures who had theologies and ways of living their faith that were more different than these two Freds—Fred Phelps and Fred Rogers. They were the embodiment of what Richard Rohr meant when he said that “religion either produces the very best people or the very worst.”

For these two individuals, the chief difference, the one theological distinction between the two of them that was crystal clear was the concept of grace.

For Phelps, grace was something that could only be bestowed by God and could only be given to the elect few. For Rogers, grace was something that each of us could both receive and give each and every day. Grace was something freely available to all, and something in which everyone could participate. For Rogers, grace was the unearned love that we have received freely simply by virtue of being alive, something that once received must be passed on to others.

Over the course of their lives, they both became like the image of God that they believed in. On one had the God of vengeance; on the other hand, the God of compassion.

Although Fred Phelps and Fred Rogers did not, as far as I know, ever meet each other, there was an intersection of sorts for the two of them that occurred in May 2003.

Hundreds of people gathered that day in Heinz Hall for Fred Rogers memorial service. He was remembered as a person who exuded kindness and compassion, especially toward children. His trademark cardigan sweaters (knitted by his mother) and his sneakers were remembered with fondness.

Meanwhile, outside the hall, a group from the Westboro Baptist Church stood with their hateful signs and torn American flags. Among the group was an eight-year-old girl, one of Fred Phelps' grandchildren who was made to carry a sign.

And, at that moment, the contrast between these two men could not have been more clear. Amy Davidson Sorkin, a writer for the New Yorker put it this way:

“One can see, in the hanging of hateful signs on children, the very opposite of Fred Rogers’ life’s project, which was to treat young people both morally and as serious moral actors. Rog-

ers spoke of the intense drama of one's earliest years . . . and the way that friendship, above all, was orienting. Of the two Freds, he's the one who endures. Phelps, and all his vitriol, will spin away."

Ours is and must continue to be a religious tradition based in compassion. Unitarianism and Universalism are, at their heart, a rejection of the strict Calvinist doctrines that can lead toward a religion based in fear and hatred.

If we have any concept of a higher power, it is one that "suffers with" rather than one that visits suffering upon all of humankind. It is a God of compassion and grace freely given, the spirit of Big Love among us.

My hope and my prayer is that we will work to find that place of compassion, that place of "suffering with," in all that we do with all of our neighbors—those next door and those who are separated from us by barriers of race and class and geography—so that everyone might become, in the words of Fred Rogers, "the best of whoever we are."

May it be so. Amen!



Service for March 31, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Mary-Jo Hennessy, Worship Associate

Opening Words: "Come One, Come All" [Ian Riddell]

Lighting the Chalice: "Open to Unexpected Answers" [Julianne Lepp]

May the light of our chalice remind us
that this is a community of warmth,
of wisdom, and welcoming of multiple truths.

Hymn: "Come Sing a Song with Me"

Musical Meditation: "Voice Still and Small"

Reading: "I Am Transgender" [Robbi Cohn]

Sermon: "Transgender Visibility," Rev. Jim Magaw

Hymn: "Where You Go (I Will Go)" [Shoshana Jedwab]

Extinguishing the Chalice:

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth,
The warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Closing Words: "As We Go Forward" [Cheryl Block]

Sermon: "Transgender Visibility," Rev. Jim Magaw

Last Sunday, at our Pathways membership class, we went around the circle and shared our spiritual journeys—and especially what led us here to Sunnyhill. It's my favorite part of each Pathways class because I get to learn something important about each of the people who share. Of the nine new people present at last week's session, six or seven said that they came here, at least in part, because they saw our rainbow flag flying out front.

People are showing up at our door, including many of you here today, because we are willing to make a statement about being welcoming to all, including LGBTQ people—and not just welcoming but committed to building a community within and beyond our walls in which there is safety and justice for people of all sexual identities and gender expressions.

Over the last six months or so, we've also started displaying not just the traditional rainbow pride flag but also a couple of other flags as well on a rotating basis. One of them is the pink and blue transgender pride flag, which we are flying today.

Last fall, when we had the transgender pride flag up, around the time of the transgender day of remembrance in November, three people on three different days stopped by the church and came in the building just to tell me how much it meant to them to see us flying that flag—two of them were mothers of transgender children and the other person was transgender themselves.

Of course, we've also had some pushback against our flags.

Some of you will recall that, just after we re-opened the doors to our building about a year and a half ago, our rainbow flag was stolen a couple of times. I've also fielded several phone calls from people who identified themselves as Christians who wanted to let me know that, as pastor of this church, I might be leading my flock straight to hell because of our flag and our public stance on LGBTQ welcoming and LGBTQ justice.

I don't happen to agree with them. In fact, based on my own understanding of the Bible and the message of Jesus, we're doing exactly what **every** church ought to be doing.

But the message I want to deliver to you today is that, while our rainbow and transgender pride flags are important symbols, they are only the **starting** point for us as Unitarian Universalists.

It's not about the flag—it's about living into what the flag stands for, which is full inclusion, open-hearted welcoming, and real and enduring justice for LGBTQ people. In other words, we need to walk the talk—especially with regard to transgender issues, which is our learning edge as a congregation and as UUs.

Last November, I delivered a sermon talking about how transgender people are being specifically targeted by the U.S. administration as part of an effort to dehumanize them and erase their identities. I cited a number of examples of how this effort has played out and a number of things that we can do to resist and fight against the dehumanization and erasure of transgender people's identities.

Today, March 31, is the International Transgender Day of Visibility, dedicated to celebrating transgender people and raising awareness of discrimination faced by transgender people worldwide. It is especially important for us as Unitarian Universalists to celebrate this holiday this year, particularly in light of a recent article on transgender issues that was published in our denominational magazine, UU World, and the reaction to this article.

But before we get into the problems with the UU World article, I just want to remind you of the meanings of a few of the terms I'm using this morning.

First of all, sex and gender are different terms that mean different things. When we are born, a physician or nurse or midwife takes a look at our genitals, and on the basis of what they see or don't see, we are assigned a sex—female or male.

Gender, on the other hand, is not something that is assigned at birth. Gender, instead, is who we know ourselves to be—female, male, non-binary, gender-queer or agender. Gender sometimes defies any simple, binary description or conceptualization. Although it is a complex matter, one thing is clear—both from a scientific point of view and from a psychological or anthropological perspective: gender is **not** merely a matter of what genitalia you were born with.

The term “transgender” has evolved in meaning over the last couple of decades and is now generally used to refer to all people who transgress dominant conceptions of gender, or at least all people who identify themselves as doing so.

So “transgender” is a term that's not limited to people who have undergone hormone therapy or gender reassignment surgery. Rather, it is a term for all people who, as I said, transgress or vary from the dominant conceptions of gender as being strictly either male or female.

The term “cisgender” means that your gender (the gender you know yourself to be) corresponds with the sex you were assigned as having at birth. So, I, for example, at birth was designated as a male and I know myself to be a male, so I am cisgender.

The reason this term, “cisgender,” is important is because without it, people tend to divide everyone into “normal” or “abnormal.” Either you're just a normal, regular person or you're some kind of freak or aberration. So, the “cisgender” designation is a way of normalizing transgender people and not “othering” them.

Back to the UU World article. It was written by a cisgender woman who had the best of intentions—to talk about her personal learnings about transgender issues as a UU.

Unfortunately, the article contained some inaccurate definitions, errors of language, and even a couple of slurs. Furthermore, both the author of the article and the editor of UU World spoke with a transgender UU who had pointed out these inaccuracies, errors and slurs before the article was published, but they went ahead and published the article anyway.

After the article was published and some transgender people spoke up about their problems with the article, the harm that was caused was further compounded by the reactions of some cisgender people who said that transgender complaints about the article were too harsh or did not take into account the authors good intentions.

As I mentioned in a sermon a few weeks ago, despite good intentions, we can still do harm. And that was the case with this UU World article. I don't think that anyone doubts the author's and editor's good intentions. But, when something we do or say causes harm to someone who is a member of a marginalized community, we need to listen to what they have to say, and we need to take responsibility for the hurt that has been caused.

Many of you will recall that, a couple of years ago, this congregation went through the process of renewing our status as a “Welcoming Congregation,” which involved a thorough assessment of where we stood with being welcoming of LGBTQ people and some educational programs and other actions to help us become more welcoming.

It became pretty clear that transgender issues represent our “learning edge”—both as a congregation and as members of the larger UU denomination. We are fairly welcoming and inclusive for people who are lesbian, gay and bisexual, but we still have some work to do to become more fully welcoming for people who are transgender, non-binary and genderqueer.

In fact: “A [recent] survey of 278 trans UUs, published in January by TRUUST, the transgender UU religious professional organization, found that 72 percent do not feel their congregation is completely inclusive of them. They point to a lack of pronoun awareness and bathroom accessibility, as well as to disparaging comments, gendered language in worship, and just plain awkward social interactions.”

Here at Sunnyhill, we have a restroom that is designated as “gender neutral” but we do not have signs that recognize that people should use whichever restroom matches their self-perceived and self-known gender.

Also, while some of us have put our pronouns on our nametags, many have not. And let me tell you why the nametag issue is important.

Most of us who are cisgender, myself included, have never experienced having been “misgendered” or called something other than the gender we know ourselves to be. So, from this privileged, cisgender point of view, putting pronouns on your nametag may seem unnecessary or silly. But it’s not silly. When we put our pronouns on our nametags, we are making a statement that we understand that gender is more complex than merely what meets the eye, and we are saying that we are committed to respecting your gender whatever it may be and however you may appear.

In this congregation, we have transgender, gender non-conforming, and genderqueer people. By having pronouns on **all** of our nametags we are expressing solidarity with those whose gender expressions have been unrecognized or marginalized.

So in a few minutes, as we pass the baskets for our offering, we’ll also be passing pronoun stickers that you can put on your nametags, for those of you who have permanent nametags, as an act of solidarity.

Beyond restrooms and nametags, we are also committing as a congregation to follow the “Five Practices of Welcoming” identified by the UUA. These five are:

1. Become a Welcoming Congregation—which we have done.
2. Have Welcoming Services—which means, having services like this one, which center the issues and experiences of LGBTQ people (especially those in the TQ categories as that’s where our growing edge is).
3. Recognize Welcoming Days of Observance—including today’s Transgender Day of Visibility and other such occasions.
4. Participate in a Welcoming Congregational Module—which means, at least once a year, participate in a seminar or webinar related to LGBTQ issues. And
5. Support a Welcoming Project—which means partnering with organizations in our community to work on a specific project or projects that benefit the LGBTQ community beyond our congregation.

Those Five Practices of Welcoming require everyone's participation in one way or another, so we need your help to be successful. But we also need a strong LGBTQ Justice Team to hold me and the congregation as a whole accountable for following these practices.

We are a growing, busy congregation, and, with everything that's going on here, it is sometimes the case that we don't do all that we can and perhaps should be doing with regard to being truly welcoming. I need the help of a strong LGBTQ Justice Team to give me and other church leaders some prompts and reminders about what we ought to be doing, and to help organize some of that work.

So, I ask all of you who are willing to be involved in this effort—including but not limited to those of you who are LGBTQ—to become members of this team. You don't have to be LGBTQ to be a team member, but we'll have a stronger team if it represents everyone in the congregation.

Christi Kreg has agreed to become the new leader of this team as Ron Smutny has recently stepped down from this position. And I'd like to once again publicly recognize the work of Ron and of BK, who spearheaded our Welcoming Congregation Renewal process a couple of years ago. Thank you so much for what you and your team have done for this congregation.

If you'd like to get involved with the LGBTQ Justice Team, Christi will be hosting a meeting next Sunday, April 7, before our service at 9:00 a.m. in the Red Oak Room. Just show up and help us if you can.

We have made great strides as a denomination and as a congregation in becoming truly welcoming of all. And in many ways, we're way ahead of other denominations and congregations. Our rainbow flag serves as both a beacon of inclusion and a symbol of our welcoming intentions. But we still have more work to do to live into our full welcoming potential.

My hope and my prayer is that each of us will do what we can, in ways both small and large, to help our congregation become more fully inclusive, more open-heartedly welcoming, and more passionately committed to real and enduring justice for LGBTQ people.

May it be so. Amen!



6. Service for April 7, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Joe Shaughnessy, Worship Associate

Opening Words: “As Surely as We Belong to the Universe” [Margaret Keip]

Lighting the Chalice: “For the Web of Life” [Paul Sprecher]

We light this chalice for the web of life which sustains us,
For the Earth, the Sky, Above and Below, and
For our Mother Earth, and for the Mystery.

Hymn: “Blue Boat Home”

Story: “To Whom Does the Land Belong?”

Musical Meditation: “Find a Stillness”

Sermon: “The Earth, Whole & Broken,” Rev. Jim Magaw

Hymn: “For the Earth Forever Turning”

Closing Words: “Be a Branch of the Tree of Life” [Norman V. Naylor]

Sermon: “The Earth: Whole and Broken,” Rev. Jim Magaw

One of the great truths I have discovered again and again is that, in order to grow spiritually or emotionally or in just about any other way, we must be able to hold in tension two or more seemingly disparate ideas. It’s hardly ever the case that something is either this **or** that. Rather, it’s almost always this **and** that.

It is by noticing these tensions, holding them together without immediately trying to resolve them, and struggling with them, that we are able to grow and transform as individuals and as members of larger communities.

During my first year of seminary, when I was still living in North Carolina, I was working each morning at a men’s homeless shelter. I was there Monday through Friday 6:30 a.m. – 8:30 a.m., working at the front desk and helping to run a recovery group, and then I would walk two blocks to my nine-to-five job as a fundraiser for a major university.

While the geographic distance between those two places was only a couple of blocks, they were actually worlds apart.

At the shelter, I was dealing with people who had not a dime to their name. At work, I was dealing with people who had given—or were considering giving—multi-million-dollar gifts to fund professorships or scholarships or other major endowments.

At the shelter, everything was falling apart or held together through temporary, makeshift means. Everything at my office, by contrast, was pristine by comparison—fresh paint, new carpeting, state-of-the-art technology.

At the shelter, the clients were mostly invisible to the world at large unless something went very wrong. At my office, our donors were among the most visible people in our society.

Two worlds just two blocks apart. And I dwelt in both.

Learning to hold that disparity was great training for ministry. When you set out on a path of service to the wider world, you soon find out that everywhere there are huge chasms of difference. Many of them are the results of terrible and often shameful injustices.

But whatever their origins or reason for existence, you must recognize that they exist before you can hope to do anything approaching meaningful service. It requires a great deal of hard work to hold both in one's consciousness—especially without attempting immediately to judge or resolve them in some way.

But that embrace of all things exactly as they are is a necessary first step.

The work of transformation requires us to hold in a similar way this fundamental disparity: (A) the way things are and (B) the way things might be. Our tendency is to glance at A (but not too closely) and then try to wish our way into B. Or, if we happen to be pretty comfortable with the way things are for us (without regard for the rest of the world), then we don't even worry much about either A or B.

But transformation can occur only when, together, we shine a light on how things are right now, and then, together, discern how to live our way into what might be. In this way, we do not transcend the present world. Rather, we incarnate the world that might be. And I'll talk more about incarnating the world that might be on Easter in just a couple of weeks.

Nowhere is this tension between what is and what might be more visible than in the natural world at this moment—and particularly in our relationship with the earth as human beings.

On one hand, the earth is broken. Our climate has become dangerously de-stabilized, the polar ice caps are melting, native species of plants and animals are dying off at an alarming rate. On the other hand, the earth is whole. It continues to be resilient and self-sustaining, capable of nurturing everyone and everything, and amazingly beautiful.

The earth is broken *and* whole. These days, what tends to happen as religious liberals is that we're able to see the brokenness very clearly. We're able to point to and enumerate all of the things that are wrong and why they are wrong and how they should be instead. But, when we dwell only on the brokenness, a couple of things happen that keep us from making things better.

The first is that we get overwhelmed. When we see the immensity of the challenges that we are facing, especially on the environmental front, we feel completely overwhelmed. And, when we are overwhelmed, we tend to freeze and do nothing. You might think that focusing on all of the things that are wrong would motivate us to make them right, but very often our emphasis on brokenness keeps us from doing anything to work toward restoring wholeness.

The second thing that happens when we see only the brokenness of the world is that all of the joy of living disappears. How can we possibly experience joy when the earth is burning? Isn't there something wrong with us if we dare to be joyful while the natural world is crying out in pain? But the truth is the *only* way we'll be able to do the work that needs to be done is to restore a sense of joy to the work that is before us. The *way* that we approach the work has an important effect on the outcome of that work.

So, if we are serious about our work for environmental justice, then we have to be able to sense and celebrate the beauty and the wholeness of the earth, even and especially amidst the brokenness.

Carol Lee Sanchez is an artist and poet who believes that Euro-Americans waste resources and destroy the environment "because they are not spiritually connected to this land-base, because they have no ancient mythos or legendary origins rooted to this land . . ."

She articulates the "concept of 'relationship' or relatedness and the idea of the sacred in our lives, from a Native American-American Indian perspective and suggests some ways of embracing a Tribal way of thinking." Sanchez posits that there is nothing in this world that can be called unnatural or separated from Nature: "Indians say that to live a good life is to walk in Beauty."

Sanchez recommends an exercise called a "beauty walk," which involves walking around the area where you are and becoming aware of what's really there—recognizing both the beauty and the brokenness of our surroundings with our eyes wide open, becoming cognizant of the beauty even *within* the brokenness itself.

It is only when we have recognized and fully embraced the reality and fundamental disparities that exist in the natural world that we can begin to discern what needs to be done and to engage in that work wholeheartedly and with a sense of true purpose and real joy.

What we're doing when we engage in exercises like a beauty walk is to shift our narrative about ourselves and our world.

Most of the time, people are able to make meaning of their lives and of the world. But when that ability is compromised, when something gets in the way of this meaning-making ability, people need some help.

And the help that's needed most often comes in the form of a living, breathing person who can walk or sit with the person whose world is shattered as we, together, reconstruct meaning. This process involves working with trauma, which can be defined as the inability to tell one's own story, in such a way that eventually the trauma itself becomes integrated into that larger story. People are really amazing in their ability to right themselves after being knocked over by the awfulness of life. But most of us need someone next to us while we work our way toward a new center of balance. Fortunately, some of us are willing to step forward to be that someone. We bless each other when we are able to recognize, together, not just the brokenness, but also the light, that is revealed through the cracks in our shattered world.

And when the earth itself is experiencing trauma, when the earth itself is showing cracks and crevices and other signs of brokenness, then it is up to us to be the ones to re-tell the story of the earth, its goodness and its ability, with our help, to heal itself.

There's a lot of trauma present in the world right now. And things seem to be happening at such a rapid pace that there has not been an opportunity to re-frame and re-tell the story of the earth. But that's exactly what must be done if we are to have any hope of doing the healing work that needs to be done.

In the end, we realize that wholeness and brokenness are not, in fact, separate entities, but that wholeness, in the largest meaning of the term, encompasses brokenness as well. As Parker Palmer wrote:

"Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. Knowing this gives me hope that human wholeness — mine, yours, ours — need not be a utopian dream, if we can use devastation as a seedbed for new life . . ."

Embracing brokenness as one aspect of wholeness can help us as we work to overcome the lethargy caused by overwhelm, and it can help us infuse this work with an appreciation for beauty and a real sense of joy.

Our Green Sanctuary Team has been hard at work over the past year putting together our Green Sanctuary application for the UUA, and that application has now been completed. The application itself is 24 pages in length, and that's not counting various appendices that were also required. The team will be presenting the information contained in the application to the congregation over the next several weeks.

The Green Sanctuary process is intended to help UU congregations educate themselves and create projects in four focus areas:

- Worship and Celebration: finding ways of celebrating staying focused on the environment.
- Religious Education: educating children, youth, and adults about environmental issues.
Sustainable Living: learning to be more responsible stewards of our resources as individuals and as a church. And,
- Environmental Justice: working with marginalized communities that are hardest hit by environmental crises.

The church needs your help in all four of these areas, but especially in the area of environmental justice. The environmental justice projects that the Green Sanctuary Team has chosen focus on our neighbors who have been directly affected by fracking and by lead water contamination. Our congregation will be partnering with the Center for Coalfield Justice and the Southwestern Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project to address these issues.

The work that we will do as a congregation will include showing up at community meetings, knocking on doors, making phone calls, and working with other faith-based communities to help educate and organize around these issues that are affecting so many people in our own backyard.

Our Green Sanctuary Team has done some great work leading up to this point, and they will continue to do great work organizing our environmental justice efforts going forward. But I want to be very clear that this work is the work of the entire congregation, not just the Green Sanctuary Team.

If we are to succeed in our efforts, it really does mean that everyone will need to be involved in some way with this effort. It cannot be a matter of the Green Sanctuary Team doing all the work on our behalf. We each need to step up.

Recognizing that everyone has differing skills, abilities, and time availability, there will be a wide array of options for how you can participate, but participation will be required if we are to succeed in these ambitious efforts.

More information will be forthcoming about the particulars of these projects and how and when your help is needed. But I urge you to step forward to help when you are asked to do so.

As we move ahead with this vitally important work, I hope and pray that our actions will be informed by both the brokenness and the wholeness of the earth and that our work will be infused with real joy and an enduring love for the natural world from which we have sprung and to which we will all return.

May it be so. Amen!



7. Service for April 14, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Bradley Convis, Worship Associate

Opening Words: “Our Souls Speak Spring” [Evin Carville-Ziemer]

Lighting the Chalice: “For Holy Days” [Dillman Baker Sorrells]

For holy days on which we recall the old stories,
we light the flame. For Passover, which reminds us
of the courage of those seeking freedom, we light the flame.
For gathering today in this sacred space, we light the flame.

Hymn: “Sing and Rejoice”

Story: “Capturing Spring”

Musical Meditation: “Spirit of Life”

Reading: “Desert Spring” [Victoria E. Safford]

Sermon: “Passover Journeys,” Rev. Jim Magaw

Hymn: “Oshana, Shira Oshana”

Closing Words: “Our Journey Together” [Debra Haffner]

Sermon: “Passover Journeys,” Rev. Jim Magaw

The Jewish Passover holiday and the Christian celebration of Holy Week occur around the same time each year. Today, which is Palm Sunday in the Christian liturgical calendar, was the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem six days before Passover. And the Last Supper was, itself, a Passover meal. So, there are a number of ways in which the Jewish and Christian holidays are intertwined.

Passover is named for the last of the ten plagues that were unleashed upon Egypt as part of divine plan to convince Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery. This final plague involved the death of every first-born child in Egypt, with the exception of the Jewish children whose families marked their doors with the blood of a lamb and were spared or “passed over” by the plague.

(And, by the way, it’s no coincidence that the story of Good Friday and Easter use that same “blood of the lamb” metaphor that comes from the Passover story.)

Passover meals, or Seders, commemorate the liberation of the Israelites, their hasty exodus from Egypt, their 40-year journey through the desert, and their eventual arrival at the Promised Land. They had to leave in a hurry, out of fear that Pharaoh might change his mind (which he actually did).

In fact, they left in such a hurry that they couldn't even wait for their bread to rise and so they took with them unleavened bread—which is why only unleavened bread is eaten as part of the Passover celebration. And each part of the Passover Seder meal symbolizes a part of the story of Exodus.

Whenever I revisit the Passover story, I am reminded of what a wonderful metaphor it is for sudden, unexpected journeys that we sometimes find ourselves taking, both as individuals and as members of larger communities. At some point in our lives, I think that each of us takes some kind of Passover journey, some kind of unexpected trip through the wilderness that changes us in ways that we could not have possibly imagined beforehand.

I've had several such journeys. One that I remember especially well occurred when I was 21-years-old and found my life spiraling downward. I was a college student, but I was dropping out of classes after I experienced the painful breakup of my first significant romantic relationship, and I was struggling with depression and substance abuse.

I was excruciatingly unhappy, but I was deeply ashamed of failing and unable or unwilling to ask for help. Things finally came to a head when I disappeared on a bender for a few days and my roommate called my parents, which led to a series of events, culminating just a couple of days later with my sudden departure from college in Ohio and moving to North Carolina to live with my sister while I sorted things out and got my head straight.

I left Ohio with only what could fit into the trunk and backseat of my sister's car—essentially just some clothes, a toothbrush and my guitar.

At the time, the thought was that it would take a few months to accomplish that task of "getting my head straight," though it actually took some 15 or 20 years—still much shorter than the 40 years it took the Israelites to find the promised land. Some might question whether Chapel Hill, North Carolina, qualifies as the land of milk and honey, but it is known to people who live there as the "Southern Part of Heaven," so it's close enough.

The journey upon which I embarked took me on a winding path which led me to the successful completion of college, led me into years of therapy, led me into a 12-step program that helped save my life, led me into a relationship that helped me grow immeasurably, led me into a series of jobs of all kinds, led me to an unexpected career in University fundraising, led me to interesting friendships and transformational spiritual experiences, led me to my current marriage and parenthood, and eventually led me to seminary, which was the beginning of the current chapter of my life and itself a whole new journey.

I wasn't aware that it was a journey while it was going on. It just felt like chaos and trying to do whatever was the next right thing to do. But, in retrospect, it's clear that it was in fact a journey and that it did lead somewhere and that I was truly, deeply and forever changed by the experience.

We've all had such journeys, whether large or small, and they make us who we are. If we are willing to be changed by these experiences, if we are open to the wisdom that makes itself known to us as we go, if we are willing to leave quickly when called to do so and to enter into the wilderness of the great unknown, then we are on the path to meaningful transformation and it *will* make a difference in our lives and the lives of those who know us and love us along the way.

In addition to individual journeys, we also enter into communal Passover journeys. This church is engaged in just such a trip of discovery. We left the comfort of our old home, spent

some time in the wilderness of the Mt. Lebanon Recreation Center, and eventually found our way back here, but our rebuilt home turned out not to be the end of the path but only the beginning. And we are now starting to discern what is next for us as a congregation.

We, as a society, are engaged in a Passover journey. In the wake of 9/11, in the wake of global climate destabilization, in the wake of the political unrest that culminated in the 2016 elections, in the wake of all these changes and crises, we as a country, as a people, are clearly on a journey through the wilderness.

Rabbi Susan Schnur has a custom of sending out “spiritual homework” to those who participate in the Passover Seder she hosts each year. A few weeks before the holiday she sends an assignment to her guests so they can start to contextualize the meaning of Passover in their individual and collective lives. Not long after 9/11, she sent the following pre-Seder assignment to her guests—and it seems just as relevant now as it was then. She said:

“Imagine you are Moses taking leave of a mutilated world to trudge across the desert. Your 40-year plan is to re-socialize a tribe, to create a new, improved version of humanity that will spread crucial societal corrections throughout the land. This tribe will have a bone-deep understanding of why democracy, respect, justice and compassion are simply the way to go.

“What one item do you, as Moses, need to pack in your L.L. Bean duffel bag in order to best accomplish this task? What one thing will most help us transform ourselves—and one another—from being miserable human beings who are enslaving and enslaved, territorial and selfish, into human beings who create . . . a world that is safe and wise and takes care of everybody?”

What is the one thing, or the few things we need to pack, to take with us on this journey? One answer to this question is beautifully articulated in the following poem, “Passover Remembered,” by Alla Renee Bozarth:

Pack Nothing.
Bring only your determination to serve
and your willingness to be free.

Don't wait for the bread to rise.
Take nourishment for the journey,
but eat standing, be ready
to move at a moment's notice.

Do not hesitate to leave
your old ways behind—
fear, silence, submission . . .

Do not take time to explain to the neighbors.
Tell only a few trusted friends and family members.

Then begin quickly,
before you have time to sink back
into the old slavery.

Set out in the dark.
I will send fire to warm and encourage you.

I will be with you in the fire
and I will be with you in the cloud.

You will learn to eat new food
and find refuge in new places.
I will give you dreams in the desert
to guide you safely home to that place
you have not yet seen.

The stories you tell one another around your fires
in the dark will make you strong and wise.

Outsiders will attack you,
and some who follow you,
and at times you will weary
and turn on each other
from fear and fatigue and
blind forgetfulness.

You have been preparing for this for hundreds of years.
I am sending you into the wilderness to make a way
and to learn my ways more deeply.

Those who fight you will teach you.
Those who fear you will strengthen you.
Those who follow you may forget you.
Only be faithful. This alone matters.

Some of you will die in the desert,
for the way is longer than anyone imagined.
Some of you will give birth.

Some will join other tribes along the way,
and some will simply stop and create
new families in a welcoming oasis.

Some of you will be so changed
by weathers and wanderings
that even your closest friends
will have to learn your features
as though for the first time.
Some of you will not change at all.

Some will be abandoned
by your dearest loves
and misunderstood by those
who have known you since birth
and feel abandoned by you.

Some will find new friendship

in unlikely faces, and old friends
as faithful and true as the pillar of God's flame . . .

Such urgency as you now bear
may embarrass your children
who will know little of these times.

Sing songs as you go,
and hold close together.
You may at times grow
confused and lose your way.

Continue to call each other
by the names I've given you,
to help remember who you are.
You will get where you are going
by remembering who you are.

Touch each other
and keep telling the stories
of old bondage and of how
I delivered you.

Tell your children lest they forget
and fall into danger— remind them
even they were not born in freedom
but under a bondage they no longer
remember, which is still with them, if unseen.

Or they were born in the open desert
where no signposts are.

Make maps as you go,
remembering the way back
from before you were born.

So long ago you fell
into slavery, slipped
into it unawares,
out of hunger and need.

You left your famished country
for freedom and food in a new land,
but you fell unconscious and passive,
and slavery overtook you as you fell
asleep in the ease of your life.

You no longer told stories of home
to remember who you were.

Do not let your children sleep
through the journey's hardship.
Keep them awake and walking
on their own feet so that you both
remain strong and on course.

So you will be only
the first of many waves
of deliverance on these
desert seas.

It is the first of many
beginnings— your Paschaltide.
Remain true to this mystery.

Pass on the whole story.
I spared you all
by calling you forth
from your chains.

Do not go back.
I am with you now
and I am waiting for you.

My hope and my prayer is that, as we embark on our own Passover journeys—as individuals, as a church, as a nation—we will pack lightly, bringing with us only our determination to serve and our willingness to be free, and that the experience of the journey itself will lead us toward a place of healing, wholeness and freedom for all.

May it be so. Amen!



Service for April 21, 2019

8. Order of Service:

Welcome: Rebecca Senneway, Worship Associate

Opening Words: "Story of Hope and Rebirth" [Ian Riddell]

Lighting the Chalice:

We light our chalice to celebrate
The warmth and beauty of spring,
The miracle of life emerging from earth,
And the healing power of love.

Hymn: "Morning Has Broken"

Story for All Ages: "Maushop the Giant"

Special Music: "Hallelujah" [Leonard Cohen]

Musical Meditation: "I Know This Rose Will Open"

Reading: Mark 16:1-8

Sermon: "Practice Resurrection"

Hymn: "Alleluia Chaconne"

Closing Words: "While It Was Still Dark" [Jan Richardson]

Sermon: "Practice Resurrection," Rev. Jim Magaw

From the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 16, verses 1-8:

"When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.

"They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

"As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.'

"So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

And that's where the Gospel of Mark, the oldest of the four gospels, originally ends—with the tomb empty and the followers of Jesus terrified and amazed. In later years, there were some additional verses tacked on to Mark's account, but originally it ended in mystery—not a mystery that can be solved like an Agatha Christie book, but rather the kind of mystery that utterly defies explanation. In fact, it's the kind of mystery that is only belittled by attempts at explanation.

At Jerusalem's Church of All Nations, located next to the Garden of Gethsemane, the meditative silence of the chapel is sometimes disturbed by noisy tour guides coming through with groups of tourists. So the church posted a sign just outside its entrance that says: "No explanations inside the church."

In a recent Christian Century article, Episcopal priest Jim Friedrich said that “No explanations inside the church” might be pretty good advice to preachers on Easter Sunday. We get into trouble when we try to explain the resurrection, when we try to provide justifications or arguments about how or whether Jesus was literally raised from the dead.

And, honestly, that goes double for UU ministers. We get into trouble either way—whether we are trying to explain why the resurrection happened or why it didn’t. So, many of us simply don’t go there at all.

The idea of resurrection, the deep metaphor of new life rising from the death and destruction, the realization of the oneness of life and death in the larger spiral-shaped patterns of existence, is not something that **can** be explained—either to justify it or to deny it.

But If Easter is **not** about explanations, about how being literally raised from the dead might or might not occur, then what **is** it about? I would suggest to you that it is about how we **live** the metaphor of resurrection in our place and time.

Orthodox theologian Patriarch Athenágoras puts it this way: “The Resurrection is not the resuscitation of a body; it is the beginning of the transfiguration of the world.” In other words, it is about how we **practice** resurrection individually and communally.

Practicing resurrection means living in a way that is counter-cultural, it means refusing to accept things as they are handed to us by the powers that be, but instead insisting on bringing into existence—incarnating—world that we want for ourselves and for others. Wendell Berry’s poem “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front” speaks of this kind of resistance. Here’s an excerpt from that poem:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.
So, friends, every day do something
that won’t compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands. . .
Ask the questions that have no answers.
. . . Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.

Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophesy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
Listen to carrion — put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.
. . . Swear allegiance
to what is nighest in your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

In Wendell Berry's vision, resurrection is what happens when you refuse to go through life unthinkingly, when you instead resist the pull toward mindless conformity to the expectations of a corrupt society. Resurrection is what happens when we, as individuals and as members of larger communities, decide to stop cooperating with a culture of death and instead embody a culture of new life.

Last week, I shared with you some of my own experiences of the journey that led me through places and experiences and relationships that changed me, that made me who I am, that eventually led me here.

All of our journeys, all the things we have ever thought and done have led us to this very moment and this particular place. Certainly, there are elements of randomness to those journeys, and there are moments of complete ignorance about what we are doing and how we got here. Nothing is necessarily pre-ordained. And, yet, here we are.

Our being right here, right now, in the presence of those gathered around us, represents the culmination of our journey up to this point. But it's not the end of the journey. The challenge of this moment, of every moment, is to answer: how will we incarnate, how will we embody what is next for us? How will we, in this moment, practice resurrection?

And the truth is that you can't really practice resurrection until you have experienced something like the tomb.

In her book, "Proverbs of Ashes," UU theologian Rebecca Parker tells a story of a low moment in her life, a time when she was dealing with recently unearthed memories of childhood trauma and with the end of a marriage. She writes:

"I spiraled into grief and self-directed anger. One night I came to the end of my will to live. I just wanted the anguish to stop. It was a cold, clear night. I lived at the top of a hill above a

lake and sometime after midnight I left my house and started walking down the hill. The water would be cold enough. I could walk into it, then swim, then let go, [and] sink down into the darkness... I had no second thoughts. I was set on my course.

“At the bottom of the hill, I had only a small grassy rise to cross before I came to the water's edge. I crested the familiar rise and began the descent to the welcoming water when I was caught short by a barrier that hadn't been there before. It looked like a long line of oddly shaped sawhorses, laid out to the left and to the right, the width of the grassy field. In the dark I couldn't see a way to get around either end, but it looked like I could climb over the middle. I quickened my pace, impelled by the grief that wouldn't let go of me. As I got closer, the dark forms before my eyes seemed to be moving. I squinted to understand what I was seeing.

She continues: “The odd bunchy shapes were a line of human beings bundled up in parkas and hats. The stick shapes weren't sawhorses. They were telescopes. It was the Seattle Astronomy Club. Before I could make my way through the line, one of [the club members] looked up from his eyeglass and, presuming me to be an astronomer, said with enthusiasm, ‘I've got it focused perfectly on Jupiter. Come, take a look.’ I didn't want to be rude or give away my reason for being there, so I bent down and looked through the telescope. There was Jupiter, banded red and glowing! ‘Isn't it great?’ he said. It was great. Jupiter was beautiful through the telescope.

“I couldn't kill myself in the presence of these people who had gotten up in the middle of a cold night, with their home-built Radio Shack telescopes, to look at the planets and the stars. The beauty of the night sky, the dew-wet grass at my feet, and the Seattle Astronomy Club kept me in this world.

Parker concludes by saying, “It would be wrong to think of this moment as one in which joy triumphed over despair, good came out of bad, or love of life defeated desire for death. I did not defeat negative feelings of anguish and despair because I saw something more lovely and good. My heart was still breaking with grief, but I became able to feel more. I was able to place that grief within a larger heart, within a wider embrace that could hold sorrow and joy, loss and illumination, death and life.”

Resurrection starts to happen when we are able to hold our broken-heartedness and grief in the bigger container of what Parker calls a larger heart, a wider embrace that can hold all joy and sorrow, all loss and illumination, all life and death. In this context, resurrection doesn't look so much like a merry triumph over death as it does a willingness to accept the ultimate mystery of emptiness and what might emerge from it—whether it is the emptiness of the tomb or the emptiness of our own grief and deep sense of loss.

We don't practice resurrection by arguing about whether Jesus was or was not literally raised from the dead a couple of thousand years ago. We practice resurrection by becoming evidence of its existence here and now, by beginning, in this moment, to transform and transfigure our own lives and the life of our world. We practice resurrection by proclaiming “Hallelujah,” whether holy or broken.

Remember the sign that said “No explanations in the church”? A church that aspires to be a living, breathing, growing, transforming, presence in the world is not one that spends all its time explaining. A living church is one that, instead, embodies the changes that it wants in the world, that resurrects itself to become part of that larger heart that holds all.

The larger heart calls us to live now, to live fully, to live like we mean it. In his poem, “Easter Exultet,” James Broughton writes:

Shake out your qualms.
Shake up your dreams.
Deepen your roots.
Extend your branches.
Trust deep water
and head for the open,
even if your vision
shipwrecks you.
Quit your addiction
to sneer and complain.
Open a lookout.
Dance on a brink.
Run with your wildfire.
You are closer to glory
leaping an abyss
than upholstering a rut.
Not dawdling.
Not doubting.

Intrepid all the way
Walk toward clarity.
At every crossroad
Be prepared
to bump into wonder.
Only love prevails.
En route to disaster
insist on canticles.
Lift your ineffable
out of the mundane.
Nothing perishes;
nothing survives;
everything transforms!
Honeymoon with Big Joy!

On this Easter Sunday, I hope and pray that we will start to practice resurrection, that we will raise from the mystery of emptiness something like wonder, that we will leave behind our explanations of what has or has not been, and instead work to embrace what yet might be.

May it be so. Amen!

9. Service for May 26, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Kelley Anderson, Worship Associate

Opening Words: “All This Talk of Saving Souls” [Linda M. Underwood]

Lighting the Chalice: “A Flame to Light Our Path” [Debra Burrell]

Fire consumes, and casts a bright light.
May our chalice flame consume our regrets for the past,
our fears about the future, and our worries about today.
May it light for us a path of joy and peace.

Hymn: “When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place”

Story for All Ages: “The Answer Is in Your Hands,” Jen McGlothlin

Special Music: “Who Knows Where the Seasons Go” [Larry Nickel], Sunnyhill Choir

Meditation and Prayer: “A Prayer for Desert Times” [Margaret A. Keip]

Musical Meditation: “Voice Still and Small”

Sermon: “Soda Pop Salvation,” Dr. Jeffrey Vipperman

Hymn: “One More Step”

Offering/Offertory: “On the Turning Away” [Gilmour/Moore], Jeff Vipperman and Mary Pratt

Closing Words: “As We Depart, One from Another” [James A. Hobart]

Sermon: “Soda Pop Salvation,” Dr. Jeffrey Vipperman

“Salvation” can come in many forms, often in the small and surprising ways. It is there for the taking through everyday acts of love and kindness. A reflection on a trip to Maine provided the seeds to turn an incongruous religious upbringing into a people-centered view of salvation.

While driving around during my first vacation in Maine, I noticed a large, hand-lettered sign on a building that read... “Redemption Center.” I didn’t find it particularly unusual, after all, I was raised in the bible belt of the deep south and we were in a rural town of about 2,000 people. As my wife and I continued to drive around taking in the bucolic scenery, I was quite surprised when I saw yet *another*! And another! I didn’t see any tents to hold a revival and they certainly didn’t look like churches, so I wondered in jest: ‘could these be some form of a “drive-up salvation stand?”’ perhaps like getting married at a Las Vegas wedding chapel.

As it turns out, Maine charges a deposit on every beverage container sold, which can later be “redeemed” at one of the many state-sanctioned “Redemption Centers.”

With my jokes about the “drive up salvation stands,” I had tried to mask this situation with a little humor. But underneath this, I still felt a gnawing pain from my religious upbringing.

I was 25 years old at the time, in between finishing a year as a Research Associate and moving from VA to North Carolina to start a PhD program. In addition to arduous studies of engineering, I had seven years prior embarked upon an intense period of self-discovery soon after arriving at college. This journey began from the initial inspiration and encouragement of my first, close college friend. I examined my past experiences that had shaped me, as well as clarifying

and working to fulfill my personal and professional goals. An education that I value perhaps, more so than my technical education. In retrospect, I consider it a form of “spiritual retooling,” through meditation, metaphysical studies, self-help groups, and reading lots of great books. However, I still carried a lot of resentments toward “church” and religion, in general.

My childhood hometown is 10 miles SE of where GA, FL, and Alabama meet. It’s a place where, not only is college football a religion, but *religion* is a religion. There was an ever-present, somewhat antagonistic competition among the local denominations, primarily centered around which one is, *really* right. It prompted me to write a jingle, later in life called “My God’s better than your God.” It goes like this: “My God’s better than your God! I’m going to heaven and you’re not!” ...and that’s as far as I got.

The church I attended could be construed as “fire and brimstone,” where each Sunday we heard about the concepts of heaven, hell, rapture, and salvation. These words, in addition to “savior,” “glorious,” “God” and “sin” can unfortunately still illicit ill feelings.

We also learned that dancing would take you straight to hell. There is even a joke about my old denomination that goes like this: Why does the church frown on divorce? Because they are afraid that dancing might break out...

Week after week, the sermons were an uncomfortable experience, not to mention the confrontations by well-intentioned congregants, concerning as to why I was not yet *saved*. Which, I wasn’t *really* sure what that meant anyway, other than maybe going down before the hundreds of church members to be greeted by the minister during the invitational hymn and subsequently being baptized to join the church.

My first takeaway as a preadolescent was that any decisions regarding my spirituality should include me. And my second was that there was a quite a long, and seemingly insurmountable list of requirements to make it through the gates of heaven, ... the culmination of our presumed lifelong goal. I also didn’t understand how I could be so flawed; I thought I was a pretty good kid. And finally, in the end, it appeared to me that the fate of my soul rested upon the whims of... *a pretty wrathful God*.

True to the early Unitarian tradition, many UU churches are still predominately Christian and view Salvation in the biblical sense. However, all of our churches welcome people of many faiths and beliefs.

Salvation and Redemption have many meanings, depending upon the individual, the denomination, or church. But generally, it’s the belief that if you live right... and just, including seeking forgiveness for your wrongs, you will be rewarded. In the monotheistic traditions, salvation is predicated on the bestowment of grace from an *external* deity at the time of passing. Redemption is granted in light of sin and from asking forgiveness. There is the general belief that we are born fundamentally flawed, and must seek salvation from a higher place or face doom in an everlasting afterlife.

In contrast, many eastern traditions believe that salvation is predominately obtained from, *within...*, though a life of helping others, maintaining meditation programs, practicing asceticism, and obtaining wisdom and enlightenment. To them, salvation is available, *here, and now*, through everyday acts of helpfulness. These characteristics are consistent with beliefs of many secular humanists and UUs.

One form of personal salvation in the UU tradition is through recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of every person... - a modern twist on the familiar axiom to “do unto others.” Comedian Steven Colbert once stated that three sacred texts of Unitarianism are the “OT and NT and the Freedom to Be You and ME.”

One of the most notable sermons on redemption in our church’s history was given by Harvard Professor and Unitarian minister James Freeman Clark in 1885. He spoke on the tenant of... “Salvation-by-Character.” He touted it as being: “*the highest peace and joy of which the soul is capable...*” It means heaven **here**... and heaven **hereafter**.... He continues that as long as men believe that heaven is something outward, to be attained by an outward action or belief, they will be apt to postpone such preparation for as long as possible. But when we apprehend the inflexible law of consequences, and know, that as man soweth, so shall he reap...*then*, a new **motive** will be added to increase the *goodness* of the world.

This goodness manifests in part, as unconditional love and acceptance toward one another. Viktor Frankl, in his autobiographical book “Man’s Search for Meaning,” states that “The salvation of man is **through** love and **in** love,” which he called “...the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought & belief **have** to impart.”

...Such a powerful statement, to distill humanity’s quest for the answer to perhaps *our biggest question*, down to the simple act of giving and receiving. In fact, as described in his book, it was acts of essentially love and benevolence toward his captors that greatly contributed to his survival, while housed in various German concentration camps during the second World War.

An important aspect of love is forgiveness. As a psychologist, Dr. Frankl not only ministered to his comrades, but shockingly to Nazi German soldiers, who struggled with the war, being away from their families, or attending to their terrible duties. Such gratuitous counsel afforded him special privileges, for example to care for the infirm, in lieu of performing hard labor that he and others were typically subjected to. Perhaps most striking, he was able to administer care to his dying father in the form of morphine and emotional comfort, after discovering that they were housed in the very same camp. In Dr. Frankl’s eyes, he somehow saw it as a blessing to be able to be there for his father at the end, rather than a bitter loss with malice towards those who detained him. He had somehow managed to see through their actions and recognize them, as human beings who were not fully cognizant of their actions. Many of them went on to become his colleagues after the war.

We have all faced challenges of varying degrees in life, which can sometimes create or re-open emotional scars. As trying as they might be, we *can* have some choice in how we react to them,

as Dr. Frankl demonstrated. They can be catalysts for change and growth, which are sometimes euphemisms for “pain.”

As a kid, I could not reconcile my religious teachings with my beliefs. However, this may have been a blessing, because it helped to set me on a path to try to make some spiritual sense of the world. A path that has led me to this very church and its people. Through this community, I have developed a clearer and simpler image of redemption, which is largely to live by the Golden Rule. To sow ... and reap. I’m by no means perfect at it, but I can keep practicing. For example, I try to remember to put aside the “dailiness” of life and remember- that-heaven **is**, here, and now. And only we can determine how great it is.

Another teaching from Rev. Clark’s “Salvation by Character” sermon mentioned earlier is that “We speak of going to heaven, as if we could be made happy by going to a happy place. But the **true** heaven... is a state of the **soul**.” I could tritely sum up his sermon with a favorite quote from the movie Shawshank Redemption where Morgan Freeman says to: “Get busy living... or Get busy Dying.”

My hope is that each of us can find our salvation. Part of my salvation comes from having forgiveness of the church and people where I grew up. I don’t forgive the people for them... I forgive them, for me... By removing a little resentment from my heart, it makes room for more love. The same love that Victor Frankl professes to be the **key** to our salvation... And I **do** still love many of those people, who are *good* people.

Redemption can be *found* in the smallest of ways and from sources outside ourselves. For example, after passing the “Maine’s Returnable Beverage Container Law” also known as “The Bottle Bill,” an estimated 90 percent of beverage containers are now recycled, more than double the rate expected to be collected in their municipal recycling programs. They have turned ordinary *refuse* into something of *value*. And in doing so, fostered beauty, and environmental health by largely eliminating roadside litter.

Despite first impressions, “Redemption Center” seems to be a *very apt* name for the place where cans & bottles find their worth. In the same way, we must remember to turn each other into something of value, as my first college friend, who started my journey, did for me.

Sources of external redemption have come not only from people, but through admiring the stark beauty of nature, art, and poetry. Or from receiving a simple, unexpected “thank you” or a smile from someone. It can come from music, whether received or created. Or, the little tingly feeling that results from giving to a worthy cause. Other “redemption centers” in life can include remembering to simply relax and breathe when stressed or apologizing when wrong. Trying to find humor in most situations, but *especially* the challenging ones. And helping to build community at Sunnyhill or at large.

And yes, I even get a little salvation every time I return my empty bottles.



10. Service for June 16, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Worship Associate, Rebecca Senneway

Opening Words: from *Sweet Thursday* [John Steinbeck]

Lighting the Chalice: “In a World Filled with Darkness” [Doug Traversa]

In a world filled with the darkness of ignorance,
let us bring the light of reason
In a world filled with the darkness of despair,
let us share the light of hope
In a world filled with the darkness of hate,
let us shine the light of love

Hymn: “Here We Have Gathered”

Story for All Ages: “The Other Side” [Jacqueline Woodson], Madi Senneway

Children's Recessional: "As You Go" [Suzelle Lynch/Ruben Piirainen]

As you go may joy surround you, as you go, go in peace.
Know our love is with you always, as you go, as you go.

Special Music: “What About Love” from *The Color Purple* [Allen/Alton/Vallance], Mary Pratt and Julia Kaufman

Musical Meditation: Spirit of Life

Sermon: “Because I Knew You,” Dolph John Armstrong

Hymn: “Love Will Guide Us”

Offertory: “For Good” from *Wicked* [Stephen Schwartz]

Closing Words: from *East of Eden* [John Steinbeck]

Sermon: “Because I Knew You,” John Armstrong

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I first met Jack Armstrong when I was five years old. He brought me a bicycle that he had fixed up and painted red, his favorite color. A few months later Jack married my mother, and adopted my older sister, my younger brother and me.

Over time Jack and I would develop a mutual affection for one another. But when I was young, we had a rocky relationship. Jack was a “spare the rod and spoil the child” disciplinarian, and I was defiant. A bad combination. Still, I learned a lot from him. He taught me to be self-sufficient; to be good with my hands; to enjoy Shakespeare; and – remarkably – gender equality.

But I was also well schooled in political, religious, ethnic, homophobic, racist and anti-Semitic slurs, which I largely picked up from Jack's many rants. When I was Madi's age, I could have written a lexicon of bigotry. The mere mention of Martin Luther King would set him off. He blamed the Jews for most of the ills of the world. And, sometimes he would slip and make a remark about Italians, which made me wonder what he really thought about his three adopted Viviano children.

In his musical, Into the Woods, Stephen Sondheim warns us:

Careful the things you say
Children will listen
Careful the things you do
Children will see and learn

I heard, I saw, and I learned.

It must seem uncharitable to out Jack as a bigot on Father's Day. To be fair, it was only one aspect of a complex man.

And, I have tried to understand where the anger came from. When he was a young man, racism and anti-Semitism were widespread. Racism was codified under Jim Crow laws. And segregation was practiced as the doctrine of separate but equal – which even a child could see was a charade.

Jewish exclusion laws made Anti-Semitism legal. And powerful men like Joseph Kennedy, Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh were not only openly anti-Semitic, they were pro-Hitler.

In Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1949 musical South Pacific, Lt. Cable sings:

You've got to be taught
Before it's too late
Before you are six
Or seven
Or eight
To hate all the people
Your relatives hate
You've got to
Be carefully taught

Was Jack just carefully taught? And, could there have been an influence that might have changed him?

While most of my bigotry was picked up the way one gets lung cancer from passive cigarette smoke, I was deeply affected by two chilling incidents. The first was an angry, slur-filled lecture about the character of Jews, which Jack gave me after a deal to sell my car to a Jewish friend fell through.

The second occurred after we moved to Virginia.

I attended an all-white high school where Dixie was played at every assembly, and we were expected to stand. It was here that I met Ernest Carlyle Lynch, who taught drafting. One day during class he ran a movie called One Hoe for Kalabo. The film was about the enormous amount of work it took for an African tribe to forge a single hoe for farming. The aptly named Mr. Lynch used it as the basis of a lecture on “the supposed equality” of whites and blacks – insert N-word here. Blacks were inferior and fit only for servitude. He also warned a class of 16-year-old white boys about the dangers of being an “N-lover.”

Fortunately, I had other influences in my life. As a teenager I read and re-read Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, and I devoured the humanist works of John Steinbeck – not knowing, of course, that he was a humanist or what a humanist was.

And my mother quietly provided a counterpoint to dad’s prejudices and gave me permission to question them.

None the less, when I left home, my vision of the world was tainted. I was programmed to define people by their race, religion, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

Steinbeck writes: “When two people meet, each one is changed by the other...”

I don’t know if I’ve changed anyone. But over my lifetime, people I have met have changed me. Some I have known only in passing.

In 1967, I was drafted and sent to Vietnam, where for the first time in my life, I worked, ate and slept side by side with African Americans. In my unit race, ethnicity, and religion didn’t matter. You wanted the best guy in your foxhole. You were trusting him with your life.

In our downtime, we’d talk about home. And I found that we were very much alike. Our differences stemmed from our lives before the war and our expectations when we went home. I came from privilege and had big dreams. Most of the African Americans in my platoon were draftees who came from tough environments. They were poorly educated and would be going home to limited opportunities. They might survive Vietnam, but would they survive going home?

In February 1968, my squad was sent to Bong Son to fortify an important bridge over the Lai Giang River that the Viet Cong wanted desperately to destroy.

One morning, I was building a gun platform on top of the bridge when a familiar figure began climbing the ladder to my position. I had not seen First Sgt. Gustave Caution for several weeks. I had been his jeep driver on a 70-mile, unescorted trip through hostile country, and he held a unique position in my life. He was the first black man with whom I’d ever had a long, frank conversation about life. I mostly listened.

I was surprised to see Sgt. Caution on the bridge. We had been told that he had a nervous breakdown and had been sent to the rear to be discharged. Nearing the end of his career and out of shape, he was still a large, impressive man, and I was a little nervous. It was theatre of the absurd on a stage 18 feet in the air. To my relief, he just wanted to continue our talk. So, again I listened as he told me more about what it was like to be a black man in a white man’s

army. The last thing he said to me before he climbed down the ladder and disappeared was – “someday you will be important, and people – meaning black people – have to be treated better.”

If Martin Luther King had been on top of that bridge, he would have said, “There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but he must take it because his conscience tells him it is right.”

My conscience tells me that Sgt. Caution was right. The disenfranchisement of young black men is a national tragedy. But, too busy with my own life, I have turned a blind eye to it.

Today, in my brief moment of importance, I’m passing Sgt. Caution’s message along. It’s a little late, but it’s a start.

Along the road between the Bong Son bridge and the hillside to the south were several little bamboo shops. One was run by a young girl named Lane, who sold Coca Cola. Several little girls hung out around the shops, but none were like Lane. She had a Mona Lisa smile. She seemed wise beyond her years. And, when she looked at you, it was as if she was peering into your soul. So, even though we were told it wasn’t safe to drink, I bought Coke from Lane almost every day. Coke reminded me of home. And buying it helped Lane.

A few days after Sgt. Caution disappeared, I was standing on that same platform when we began taking enemy fire from the hillside above the shops.

I thought of Lane as I hurried down the ladder to a less exposed position. The firefight was fierce but short – AK-47s are no match for a tank. But I was worried that Lane could have been hurt in the crossfire. When we reopened the bridge, I hurried to her shop, and I was relieved to see her at work and smiling. I bought a Coke.

When I left Bong Son a few days later, Lane gave me a picture of herself, which she had signed on the back – Lane, sell Coca Bong Son. I was moved. Why would Lane want me to remember her? Our attitude toward the Vietnamese people was undeniably racist. We called them gooks and dinks. We dehumanized them. It’s a survival tactic. It’s common in war.

By giving me that picture, Lane had dared me to see the Vietnamese as people. She challenged me to change.

I carried Lane’s picture in my rucksack for months in the jungle, and I still have it today. When I look at it, sometimes I smile.

Sometimes, I see more than Lane. I see the entire war in her face. I see the man I had been, and I feel ashamed.

In July, 1968, I was assigned to an infantry unit that would spearhead an assault in the Central Highlands. I was a demolition specialist, and my job was to blow up some trees in the middle of the landing zone that posed a danger to the helicopters.

I was in the second or third chopper with Captain Robert R. Vaughn, the only black company commander I had ever met. When we landed, we started taking small arms fire from the perimeter. I forgot about my job and dove for cover. When I looked up, I saw Captain Vaughn stand-

ing in the middle of the LZ calmly directing the action as if he were bulletproof. He yelled at me to get the f-up and blow the f-ing trees. I felt like a giant neon arrow was pointing down at me with the words shoot here. But, following his lead, I got the f-up and blew the f-ing trees. The enemy fled, the other two companies landed safely, and we moved out into the jungle.

During my short time with C-company, I shared a poncho tent with Capt. Vaughn, and I got to know him better. I was impressed by his leadership, his courage, his humility, his sense of humor and his concern for his men. They called him black superman because he regularly exposed himself to enemy fire and survived.

Captain Vaughn was among the best people I have ever known. But I could not understand why a black man would risk his life for a company of mostly white troops. What motivated him to do what he did knowing the racial prejudices he would face back home? I'll never know, but here's my best guess – Capt. Vaughn was an idealist. He had a plan to change the world starting with the people around him. He certainly changed me. He was Superman.

In 1971, I moved to New York City to become an actor. I was taken in by two old college roommates, Sam and Conn.

Shortly before I arrived, Conn told Sam that he was going to tell me that he was gay, and that I would “just have to live with it.” Sam laughed and said, “Conn, he's known for years.” Sam couldn't wait to tell me, and he blurted it out moments after I walked through the door. We all laughed.

But I was hurt that Conn didn't trust me. We had been friends for nearly 10 years. We had worked, played and lived together. In college, he had taught me that it was who you were that mattered, not who you loved.

As it turned out, Conn just wanted to make it perfectly clear that his closet days had ended. He was out, and his boyfriend would be coming over. I was okay with that. But Conn had terrible taste in men.

In the early 1980s, Conn was diagnosed with AIDS. When I learned that he was sick, I had already moved to Pittsburgh – so, on a business trip to New York, I met Conn for lunch. When we parted, I wanted to hug him, but I was afraid. In those days AIDS was a death sentence. After an awkward moment, I stepped in, gave him a long hug, turned and walked away. I couldn't look back.

Billy Conn Fleming died a few months later, and I was thankful I had shown him that I loved him.

Nina and Joe Michowski came into our lives in 1979, when Judy and I bought a small home next door in Bergenfield, New Jersey. We were painting the house one hot afternoon when Joe knocked on the door and invited us to join them for a cold beer. That cold beer led to a warm friendship and later an invitation to join them for a Passover Seder.

One day over another beer, as our friendship and the trust between us grew, Joe told us the harrowing story of how as a young man he had survived the Holocaust. He escaped from a labor camp in Poland and fled into Russia where he was drafted into the army.

Nina had been smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto as a teenager. Because she was a blue-eyed blonde who spoke perfect Polish instead of Yiddish, she was able to pass as a Christian. She hid in plain sight as a clerk in a hotel visited daily by Nazi officers.

After the war, Joe and Nina moved to Israel, where Joe fought in the war of independence. Because work was scarce, they applied for visas and eventually moved to the United States.

Even after the horrors they had lived through and the family members they had lost, Joe and Nina were open and loving. They had earned the right to distrust, to prejudice, to hate, and they had rejected it.

In Nina's eulogy her son Michael wrote:

"...despite all the hardships she endured, Nina never became prejudiced. She would occasionally speak to her grandchildren's Hebrew school about the Holocaust. She always ended with the message that there are good people in all races and that a Polish, Christian woman helped save her life."

When others would say they hate the Germans – Nina would say, in this house we only talk of love. Joe and Nina practiced love. They taught their children love. And, because of our love for them, we named our son after their son, Michael.

I wish my father could have shared a cold beer with Joe and Nina. I wish he could have had a coke with Lane. I wish he could have known Sgt. Caution, Capt. Vaughn and Conn. Like me, I think he would have been changed.

"Try to understand men," Steinbeck writes. "If you understand each other, you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and almost always leads to love."

I hope and pray that we will teach our children love and kindness, tear down the fences that separate us, and allow people into our lives who will change us for the better.



11. Service for June 30, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Kelley Anderson, Worship Associate

Gathering Music: “Fireflies” [Owl City], Crystal Morgan

Opening Words: “Morning Poem” [Mary Oliver]

Lighting the Chalice: [Leslie Pohl-Kosbau]

Flame of fire, spark of the universe
that warmed our ancestral hearth—
agent of life and death,
symbol of truth and freedom.
We strive to understand ourselves
and our earthly home.

Hymn: “For the Beauty of the Earth”

Story for All Ages: “Fireflies” [Julie Brinckloe]

Children's Recessional: “This Little Light of Mine”

Meditation and Prayer: Labyrinth [Leslie Takahashi]

Musical Meditation: Voice Still and Small

Voice still and small, deep inside all, I hear you call, singing.
In storm and rain, sorrow and pain, still we'll remain, singing.
Calming my fears, quenching my tears, through all the years, singing.

Sermon: “I Found God in a Lightning Bug” [Krista Baselj]

Hymn #65 The Sweet June Days

Extinguishing the Chalice: [Elizabeth Selle Jones]

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth,
The warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Closing Words: Fireflies in the Garden [Robert Frost]

Sermon: “I Found God in a Lightning Bug,” Krista Baselj

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I have a deep connection to fireflies. Or as we call them in Western Pennsylvania, lightning bugs. One of my fondest memories as a kid was in mid-June when you'd start to see the yellow dots hovering above the grass as the sun was coming down. I'd rush for one of my mom's old yellow butter containers which we considered Tupperware, and I'd poke a bunch of holes into the lid with a pen. I'd prepare the container with blades of grass and crumbs leftover from dinner, just in case they were hungry. I'd run out to the back yard through the kitchen with the screen door slamming behind me. I'd prance around in my sandals, gently waving my hand for one to land in my palm. I'd slowly close my hand into a limp fist and plop it into its temporary home. Catching as many as I could was the goal. I'd play with them for a bit and when it got pitch dark, I'd set them free. My brother and his friends' firefly activities were different from mine. For them it was less about connecting with nature and more about destroying it. Our

street would be full of squished--- glowing---guts...., remnants of the departed lightning bugs. It was like a nightly insect funeral..... It hurt my heart.

These bugs brought me such joy and I couldn't imagine hurting them. Even then, I saw all living things as inherently good and found a sense of calm when surrounded by the natural world. Access to that sense of calm was imperative to my development. As a child I had frequent worries which kept me up at night. Some common anxious thoughts were "Will I get an A+ on my spelling test? Do my friends like me? Am I getting all the steps right in dance class? Am I making my family proud?" Although I always had a strong support system, my tendency to worry continued throughout adolescence and into adulthood. To this day I still feel comfort when I close my eyes and envision tiny dancing lights and hear the crickets chirping at bedtime. It soothes me to sleep and quiet my doubts.

I'm not the only one in my family who fancies fireflies. My 6-year-old cousin, Julian, has lived most of his life in California, where the firefly species tend to be bioluminescent. They are usually in remote areas with low human populations and have such a dim glow it's barely noticeable. The bright yellow green glow of the fireflies on the east coast are easy to spot and plentiful in populated areas. For the past few years it has become a family tradition that when Julian and his parents come to visit, we have a lightning bug catching party. *-(cont.)-*

My grandparents gifted him with a fancy clear plastic insect container complete with precut holes for airflow. There's even a bendy green handle for easy carrying. It sure beats my butter container. All day he asks, "Is it time to catch the lightning bugs?" "Not yet Julian, it's still daylight," my aunt and uncle remind him. When it's finally dusk, we all get ready to go outside. We can see in the distance a spattering of twinkles. As we grow nearer the creatures are dancing around us. Mostly low to the ground near the grass and then quickly flying overhead in efforts to avoid the inevitable capture. We adults catch a lightning bug in our hand and pass it slowly to Julian. His graceful touch assures the safety of the vulnerable being in his hands. We open the container to drop some inside, so he can view the specimens up close. We catch upwards of a few dozen and then call it quits for the night. It's time for the release. Julian says good-bye to each and every one and attempts to kiss them goodnight. He didn't appear to have a worry in the world. I feel relief in knowing that when he does have a worry, he could simply think back to this special moment for some peace and a breath of fresh air.

These charming stories warm the heart and remind us of the beauty around us. Hearing them told may elicit fuzzy feelings as the words ooze with cuteness. But fireflies are more than cute. Fireflies are special. Not only are they an impressive light source, but a means of connectivity to the universe. A grand statement? Perhaps. But there's more to the story.

In the summer after my sophomore year of college, I was in a peculiar place emotionally. It was always strange coming home after being away for several months living independently on campus, but this time felt different. While most students were enjoying a break from responsibilities, I was crawling out of my skin without my routines. At school I was juggling 18 credits

of classes, dance team practices and performances, a part time job, duties as president of a fundraising event, and involvement in clubs related and unrelated to my major. It was a lot to manage but keeping busy kept me away from my doubts. Now, with time to reflect, questions began to flood my mind. Much like those sleepless nights as a child, the worries consumed me. *-(cont.)-*

In these moments I feel like there's a pound of bricks pushing down on my chest. *-(read rapidly and breathy)-* My palms are sweating. Failure is looming over me. I'm unsure if I should scream or curl up in a ball and sob. I see a tiny dim light but I'm in the bottom of a dark pit and it's impossible to climb out. It's hard to breathe. It's really, really, hard to breathe... it hurts.... *-(long pause)-* I'm missing out on what's happening in this very moment because I'm too focused on what comes next. I'm reviewing to do lists in my head. I'm counting all the things I did wrong and what I could've done differently. I feel like the world is closing in on me. It's dark and cold yet hot and extremely bright at the same time. I know it sounds contradictory but it's just how I feel... it's my anxiety. *-(long pause)-*

I was in desperate need of a walk up the hill to a place where I'd spent many of my high school days. But I was no longer welcome. That year my relationship with my best friend and long-time boyfriend crumbled. Sure, I had experienced heartache before, but this was my first bruised and bleeding broken heart. Who am I without my partner? Am I enough on my own? In the past, I'd turn to prayer for guidance, but my theological ideals were rapidly evolving and my faith was dwindling. *-(cont.)*

Why would god put me through this pain? Is there even a god at all? I felt very alone. My insecurities were just eating away at me bit by bit. Will I be happy again? Will success be in my future? I was unsure of myself and where I stood in the world. It was an identity crisis of sorts, a time of self-discovery. I was shedding the old me and becoming the person I was going to be. I was swimming against the current to restore belief in myself and in something bigger than myself. Where could the light be in all this uncertainty?

After a few weeks of feeling low and attempting to keep busy with extra shifts waiting tables, it was time to head off to a work experience to boost my resume as a future educator. I was set to attend a week-long Peace Camp and act as a counselor for at risk youth sponsored by the Sisters of St. Joseph. Although it wasn't required to be Catholic or even Christian to participate, spiritual elements were embedded into our programming. One evening we took a trip to the mother house. We had a delicious meal of comfort food while the nuns shared stories of their service work. Afterward we wandered to the garden located in the back of the grounds. It was gorgeous. There was a variety of flowers, bushes, and trees. The colors were still vibrant despite the sun's efforts to set. *-(cont.)*

Beyond the garden sat a stone labyrinth, the first I'd ever encountered. Our walk began with the soles of our shoes lightly stepping on each flattened rock. We shared smiles and giggles as we'd pass one another. As the giggles ceased and we each started to engage in the solemn ritual

it began to drizzle. Some counselors ran out swiftly, but myself and a few others chose to brave the rain. I entered into a state of reflection on my year and all the pain and confusion I had been feeling. I was flooded with emotion and began to weep. And right then when I needed some comfort, a firefly landed on my arm. The gentle droplets became rough rapid pellets and so I cupped the creature in my hand just as I did when I was a little girl, and I protected it from the rain. It had a soft glow which seemed to move to the beat of my heart. I felt instant strength and a sense of calm in the storm.

Late poet, Mary Oliver, said “I don't ask for the sights in front of me to change, only the depth of my seeing.” If we look deeper at the natural world around us, there is much to discover about our connection with its rejuvenating powers. In the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, there's a species of fireflies which travel in swarms and act in synchronization. They'll brightly glow together in perfect rhythm and then all dim their lights at once, leaving complete darkness. Viewers have described this phenomenon as if the forest is breathing. Breathing indeed. Nature itself gives us air and we consume it. Breath is what that lightning bug gave to me as I was suffocating in my own doubt. I was lost, and I found God in a lightning bug. It glowed, it stayed with me. The universe knew I was in desperate need of its light. That tiny creature changed me. I'm thankful for that moment where nature held me up when I felt my lowest. I was reminded of the importance of mingling with earthly things to center my mind, body and spirit. Nature has much to reveal about healing. I challenge you, as people of faith or people of curiosity about how everything is connected, to engage with the natural entities around you. Whether it's a hike in the woods, getting your hands dirty in the garden, or simply listening to the birds chirping in the morning, take a moment to connect and just breathe.



12. Service for July 7, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Worship Associate, Joe Shaughnessy

Opening Words: excerpt from “Practicing the Power of Now” [Eckhart Tolle]

Lighting the Chalice: “For Each and All” [Erik Wikstrom]

We light this chalice for all who are here, and all who are not;
For all who have ever walked through our doors,
for those who may yet find this spiritual home.

For each of us and for us all, may this flame burn warm and bright.

Hymn: “Do You Hear?”

Story for All Ages: “A Perfectly Messed Up Story” [Patrick McDonnell], Jen McGlothlin

Special Music: “You Say” [Daigle/Ingram/Mabury], Dawn Moeller

Meditation: “A Space Between” [Steven Shick]

Musical Meditation: “Spirit of Life”

Sermon: “Someone’s Knocking at the Door,” Dawn Moeller

Hymn: “Let ‘Em In” [Paul McCartney]

Closing Words: “Apache Blessing”

Sermon: “Someone’s Knocking at the Door,” Dr. Dawn Moeller

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I would like to start by thanking Reverend Jim for offering the sermon-writing class. It was a really rewarding experience and one that I would certainly recommend to others. And I want to thank everyone in my class for giving me the confidence to write and speak from the heart.

I’ll be talking today about my experiences as a Christian in a UU church. Before I begin, I want to say that I have respect for all belief systems in which its followers seek goodness and truth. Certainly Unitarian Universalism falls into that category.

I’m a Protestant Christian, which means that I am a Trinitarian. I believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. I would describe myself as more of a mystical, experience-based Christian than a strict doctrine-bound Christian. And I believe that God is with us, and that God is for us.

Last summer, I was talking to someone who said she was experiencing the loneliness of an empty nest. She’s a dyed-in-the-wool atheist, so I suggested she check out a UU church close to where she lives, thinking she would feel welcome there. She replied that she had tried a UU church in the past, but there were just too many Christians. As you might imagine, that statement hit a nerve. It made me wonder even more about my own place at Sunnyhill.

Since I first started coming to Sunnyhill a few years ago, I have heard the occasional off-handed anti-Christian remark. On the one hand, I never felt that any remark was directed at me personally. And my overall sense was that I was accepted here. Reverend Jim asked me point

blank if I felt welcome... which is a very welcoming thing to ask. (I said yes). And no one has ever hinted that I go back to wherever I came from.

But on the other hand, the remarks have been unsettling, and sometimes upsetting. I got the sense that it would have seemed more natural had I come to Sunnyhill, not as a Christian, but as literally anything else - a Muslim or Jew or Buddhist or even a Druid.

To explain why I choose to attend Sunnyhill when there are plenty of Christian churches up and down the road, I thought it might make sense to directly address two questions: Why I, as a Christian, feel more comfortable at a UU church than at a Christian church; and why I still embrace Christianity despite leaving the church.

I'll start with the first question - why I feel more comfortable at Sunnyhill. Have you ever stepped into a room or building and automatically recoiled on the inside? Something just didn't feel right? That's how I typically feel when I step into a Christian church. The sense I feel is one of "oppression," by which I simply mean a lack of freedom. I step into a Christian church and I feel constrained and want to flee. By contrast, I step into Sunnyhill and I feel free and want to stay.

I realize that I am extraordinarily sensitive to the feeling of being oppressed. When I was a child, our family went to an Assemblies of God church in Virginia, three times a week, where a typical service included praise being shouted to the heavens, healing rituals, and people wildly speaking in tongue while the pastor translated. I admit that, as a kid, I often found the services to be exciting, especially the ones at night. There was an atmosphere of mystery and semi-controlled chaos - kind of like Halloween. The invisible entities of the spirit world were freely addressed, as if they were right above us.

But the Bible was taken very literally, so the services could be scary at times, especially for a kid. The devil was portrayed as a creature that was continually vying for our souls. I recall during one sermon, the pastor pointed down at us from his pulpit and roared a grave warning: Although each of us thought we would make it into the kingdom of heaven, in fact, most of us were dead wrong. We knew what he was saying: After death, most of us were destined to suffer in a fiery hell for all eternity. I remember being troubled by this, which is probably why I remember it at all. But, it was also the first time I remember questioning if it was possible that a pastor could be wrong.

When we were old enough, our Sunday school teachers gathered the kids to reveal to us the prophecies of the end-times. As the teachers described the events that were to take place in the future, it was like being told a scary story around a campfire, only with the chilling knowledge that this story would, one day, come true. We were transfixed by this new information. Afterwards, we had a ton of urgent questions, like: How could the world ever become cashless, requiring people to accept the mark of the beast to buy and sell? And, how could one evil, but charismatic, man (the anti-christ) take over the entire world? We were told that we couldn't yet know how the prophesized events would happen, but we could trust that they would happen.

Family life could also feel scary at times. My family was structured hierarchically, in accordance to the church. When it came to power, there were few checks and balances. History shows that people with too much power often abuse it, and this was certainly the case in my family. As you know, abuses of power are not restricted to the Protestant side of the Christian faith. Last year, we were all outraged to learn the extent to which children have been abused by clergy in the Catholic church - even right here in Pennsylvania. And now the Mennonites and the Amish are in the news for their tolerant stance toward the abuse of children in their communities.

I think I understand why the Unitarian Universalist church was formed. I get why rational people would choose to leave the Christian church and form an oppression-free church of their own. I also understand why it might feel like a real invasion to have someone show up in this safe space and say they are Christian. I am here at Sunnyhill because I too need an oppression-free church. Yet, as you know, I still embrace Christianity. To quote Hamlet, “Ay, there’s the rub.”

Christians are often portrayed in really negative ways. We can be depicted as naive followers of absurdity. What about science? What about reason? I believe in science and reason as they apply to the things of this world. I believe in the scientific method, evolution, and climate change. But for what’s beyond this world, I think there can be a different pathway to understanding - one that sidesteps the thinking mind and directly engages the spirit.

Despite what I see as the oppression of the Christian *church*, I see Christianity itself as being fundamentally about freedom and transcendence. I remember being taught as a kid in church that we have to die to self in order to be re-born in Christ. I didn’t understand that idea at the time - but I do now. At one end of the spectrum, I can go through my life “white-knuckling it,” trying to do things in my own strength, protecting my ego, and looking to others to confirm my value. Unfortunately, there are plenty of days in which I live just like that - feeling myself rooted in this world and at the mercy of life’s events and circumstances.

But at the other end of the spectrum, I believe I can live in a surrendered state, looking beyond my own self, looking to God for assurance, and allowing His spirit to direct my path. The closer I get to this state of grace, the less I worry, the less I feel a need to bolster my image or defend myself, and the less I struggle. At these times I am, as Christians say, “in the world but not of the world.” Ironically, from this more transcendent state, I think I am of greater benefit to the world. This is important to me because Christians are called to serve.

Given my beliefs, you can probably understand that I didn’t exactly flee the Christian church, as some have. I left the church with a heavy heart. I did so because I can’t support a church that condones oppression and suppresses freedom - including freedom of thought, freedom of belief, and freedom from tyranny. At Sunnyhill, I have found people who also seek freedom - for themselves, as well as for others.

I appreciate that we're not pressured to hold to any one strict set of beliefs. To me, pressure to conform to what someone else believes is a type of oppression. We all have our own way of seeing the world. When I try to imagine a world without God - and I've tried many times - I literally cannot do it. It feels to me like I would have to somehow *un-know* what I have known. Personally, I don't think we have a choice in what we believe. We believe what we believe, and we doubt what we doubt. I like that we strive to accept each other's differences at Sunnyhill. Openness to other viewpoints is a sign of a non-corrupt organization. It's the opposite of oppression, and I am really impressed by this.

Some might argue that I should have stayed in the Christian church and fought for freedom. But I just don't see this having much effect. Last year, I went to a fascinating mental health training by a psychologist from Tennessee, Dr. Alan Godwin, who specializes in helping reasonable people deal with unreasonable people - like those who manipulate or bully others. One of his main assertions is that you can't reason with truly unreasonable people. There are degrees of unreasonableness, but truly unreasonable people will never bend or back down. Instead they will always insist that they are right - despite evidence against them and despite how much they might be damaging their relationship with you. Action is often our only choice, like limit-setting or breaking ties. In this regard, I liken the Christian church to an unreasonable person, and am choosing to "vote with my feet."

Now with reasonable people, Godwin says, words do matter. You *can* talk things out. I liken Sunnyhill to a reasonable person, which is why I feel I can talk with you today, even about religious differences. Reasonable people are much easier to get along with. Here, we may not always agree with each other, but we accept that and move on.

I also appreciate the fact that, at Sunnyhill, no one insinuates that certain people are more worthy than others and therefore given all the power. There's respect for position, but no one is expected to submit to anyone else. This is strikingly different from the way I grew up.

And toward those who are disenfranchised, marginalized, or downtrodden, Sunnyhill encourages us not to judge, but to empathize and help. Although this runs counter to some of the practices of the Christian church, to me, empathy is Christ-like. I believe it's what Jesus would do. Luke 23:34 describes that Jesus, in a radical gesture of compassion toward those who were crucifying Him, called out from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Inherent in this plea is the concept of "grace." To me, grace is one of the most beautiful of the Christian concepts. Grace is the favor and mercy that God grants us, even when we don't deserve it. As an imperfect human, the grace of God is something I rely on. And, by following the example of Jesus, it is also something that I try to extend to others. Just as Jesus was betrayed by His friends and crucified by His enemies, we have all been disappointed by people - sometimes just when we needed them the most.

I understand Jesus on the cross, hanging there, tattered and broken. That image means something to me. Perhaps each of us has our own cross to bear. But, to Christians, the cross was not the end of the story for Jesus. In John 16:33, Jesus said to His disciples, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

No - Christianity, as I see it, is not about oppression. Christianity, in its purest form, is about freedom and transcendence.

I do believe that Jesus is the Son of God. He is my Christ and I have invited Him into my heart. That’s what makes me a Christian. But I have many questions, just like, I imagine, most of you. I don’t claim to know the mind of God, or the rightness or wrongness of other paths for other people. I just know that on Sunday mornings, I feel at home here - in this place where all of our many paths converge.

As a Christian at Sunnyhill I am, admittedly, a bit of a square peg in a round hole. However, I am learning to round out my corners - not by changing my beliefs, but by adapting to being surrounded by people with vastly different beliefs. I would like to ask something of you along this line. People have been really wonderful toward me here, but, as I mentioned, I have occasionally felt the sting of ridicule when Christians are talked about. If we really want to be a welcoming congregation, I would ask that you please hold each other accountable when it comes to welcoming Christians. I am told that we’re making progress in this regard - and I think we really are - but I feel we still have a ways to go.

So, that’s the story of one Christian’s curious path to Sunnyhill. Thank you for accepting me into your fold. I hope I can give back as much as I have received. God bless you all.

Sunnyhill Sermon-Writing Saturday Class 2018-19



13. Service for July 21, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Jon Porobil, Worship Associate

Opening Words: “Bold and Courageous Together” [Erika Hewitt]

Lighting the Chalice:

We light this chalice, symbol of all that we are,
all that we have done together, and all that will be,
as we work to encourage those within and beyond our walls.

Hymn: “Just as Long as I Have Breath”

Story for All Ages: “Give and Take” [Chris Raschka]

Meditation and Prayer: “A Space Between” [Steven Shick]

Musical Meditation: “Be Ye Lamps”

Sermon: “Choosing to Listen,” Michael W. Farb

Hymn: “Winds Be Still”

Closing Words: “Notes for a Lecture: Everything I Know about Writing Poetry” [Jane Kenyon, excerpt]

Sermon: “Choosing to Listen,” Michael Farb

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I want to share a couple of stories today about personal choice, or rather what happens when we choose personal indifference. This first story takes place in Minnesota.

My dad took me to my first swimming lesson when I was about eleven. These lessons were offered to community members through our Boy Scout troop. We used our Junior High School indoor pool. My dad was excited about this class and thought it would be great practice for Swimming and Lifesaving merit badges. I really would rather have stayed home those winter Saturdays. I wanted to read comic books and fantasy novels instead.

In the locker room I changed as slowly as possible, but there was no delaying the inevitable. My dad came into the locker room and gave me a look. He told me that class had begun. I left the locker room and sat on tinny-sounding aluminum bleachers with other boys so I could say “here” when the instructor called my name. Later, we were standing in line, taking turns to try the first stroke in a single swimming lane. I stood in line, dripping, dripping, dripping, for my turn. My eyes were on the ground thinking about X-Men or Narnia or something. I felt my dad’s hand on my shoulder, firm but gentle. I looked up at him and he said, “C’mere a minute.” Now, be warned, this usually means whatever he says next is going to be followed with me saying, “I know! I know!” We walked away from the line for a few steps.

He said, “Son, if you don’t keep your place in line, you’ll always be pushed aside. Be assertive.” I hadn’t noticed it was happening, the other boys kept cutting in front of me. I was a little embarrassed to be pulled aside for The Line Talk, but I was mostly angry. I definitely didn’t want to get up this early on a Saturday, and I wanted to be taken advantage of even less.

I think he was offended that I would abdicate my place in line. It was like my dad said to me, “You know if you like eating lunch, you can eat it yourself instead of giving it to the bully.” It’s also possible, from his perspective, with a son consistently a foot taller than other kids, the situation just looked ridiculous. I was personally indifferent, right up to the point where my dad showed me that my peers were taking advantage. Suddenly I cared. I was a painfully shy kid up to The Line Talk at the pool.

In the months that followed, I began to come out of my shell and make friends more easily. I was willing to try new things. I did learn to swim in those first classes. And boy can I manage my place in line now! My dad, seeing his son get walked on over and over, chose to do something. There is something about The Line Talk that remains at the center of my being.

So that was one situation. One more story I want to share takes place the summer after my freshman year in college. I had a summer job down in the Florida Keys. This was at a Boy Scout camp where I held the position of Island Program Mate. My role was to act as a guide for incoming scouts and adults on an island camping experience. Each week I would teach them Island skills: how to avoid tiny jellyfish hiding in the shallow water of mangrove trees, how to recognize a poison-wood tree (don’t touch the bark), how to snorkel, kayak, canoe, and even do a little small-boat sailing. In order to do this, all Program Mates had to experience the full week themselves before scouts arrived.

This was our training week. The training week went well, except for small boat sailing. We were supposed to sail into the wind, and let the wind push us back to the beach. The boats were 15-foot Sunfish, they held 2 people, and had a single sail, and a rudder. Sailing into the wind is tricky since you have to tack. Tacking is the process of zig-zagging across the wind making multiple quick turns. In this way you allow the wind to push your sail, while your boat is pointed at an angle to the wind. It’s slow progress, but it does work, as long as you handle the turns quickly.

My partner and I were both new sailors. We knew what we were supposed to do, but we couldn’t quite get the timing right. Our boat overturned and working on it for what seemed like hours we just couldn’t get it back upright.

During this training run some of the camp leaders were out on small outboard motor boats. They had been circling us like sharks the whole time, shouting encouragement. By the end of the afternoon, they were towing some of us home, a mess of boats trailing ropes, sails, masts, and sailors. I was worried that now I wouldn’t have the sailing skills required to teach the first scouts to arrive in following weeks. I learned to respect the current and the wind. Both of these natural forces wanted to push us and our boat in another direction.

It would have been easy to be indifferent and accept this defeat. Before the scouts arrived we went out again to practice another day. We changed direction effectively this time to make the best use of wind and current. This time, we made it out to the water and back under our own sail. There are forces in our lives that mean to make decisions for us. Some of these may be

natural forces. There may be pressure to Give or Take, whispering in our ears. Some of these pathways in life are forced on us by time, nature, people, or health.

The novelist Gail Carson Levine writes about abdicating personal choice in her book *Ella Enchanted*. This fantasy story is a mash up of *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*, with a twist. At Ella's birth, the fairies come to give her magical gifts, however one gift goes awry. Ella describes this event:

"That fool of a fairy Lucinda did not intend to lay a curse on me. She meant to bestow a gift. When I cried inconsolably through my first hour of life, my tears were her inspiration. Shaking her head sympathetically at Mother, the fairy touched my nose. "My gift is obedience. Ella will always be obedient. Now stop crying, child.""

And she did. One day old, and doomed to abdicate her will. I consider this story speculative fiction. It asks us to examine those times when we follow the will of others. To ask "Is this my own path?"

Time is another factor at play as we travel pathways in life. The clock really is ticking. The late Randy Pausch, a Carnegie Mellon professor, famously gave his penultimate Last Lecture while literally fighting for his limited time with pancreatic cancer. You may not have heard of his second most famous lecture. This one is on time management, and Randy has said he's more proud of it than of his Last Lecture. I encourage everyone to go find it on-line and soak up its temporal goodness. Search for Randy Pausch and Time Management, it's one hour long and full of practical tools.

Randy's thesis is: since time is finite, it's our most valuable commodity. It's the only thing we can't make more of. Randy asks us to think about all the things that are filling up our time. In part of the lecture he says: "Ask, why am I doing this? What is the goal? Why will I succeed at doing it? And here's my favorite: What will happen if I don't do it?" Feel like time is passing you by? Why not get some back by figuring out what isn't important and removing it from your to do list?

I'll add one last story about personal indifference. Before the 2016 Presidential election I spoke to a visitor who came to Sunday service just before Election Day. We sat on steel folding chairs in the Recreation Center while our church building was undergoing renovation. After I introduced myself, our conversation quickly went to the Election. He felt that both candidates were equally bad choices and admitted he was not planning to vote. I wanted to put my hand on his shoulder and give him the Line Talk. I encouraged him to vote and choose positivity and told him that no 2 choices are ever exactly the same. I didn't see him after the election, so I don't know what choice he made.

There are political forces hoping we will remain personally indifferent and give our decisions away. Is there an obligation of choice in our lives? I think there is. We owe it to ourselves, to our futures, to reject personal indifference. We need a way to notice when we are abdicating our will to time, nature, or other people. We need a way to listen to our personal paths. There is

a line by Lao Tzu from the Tao Te Ching I think sums up how to listen to our path. “If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading.”

I love this axiom. It reminds me of small sailboats in Florida. There will always be winds blowing at us and currents pulling us. Should we go where the winds take us? Should we follow the current wherever it goes? The world is noisy and we need time and space to set our compass. If we listen, we can better realize when time, nature, and people wish to determine our direction. We can tack into the wind, we can chart our own course.

I feel like I don’t listen to which direction I’m heading nearly enough. Ours is a busy family with work and kids and church pulling us in so many directions all the time. When I make time to listen to my own needs a voice is usually clear. It says: “You really enjoy writing. Why aren’t you doing it more?” I guess I listened finally since this sermon is a product of Jim’s sermon writing class.

How can we listen? How can we avoid personal indifference? I know that when you don’t choose, others make the choice for you. Find some quiet space, whatever that is for you. Spend some time thinking about what you’ve stopped caring about. You can meditate on it. You can write about it. Talk to your family and friends about it. Reevaluate your time. Be deliberate. Vote.



14. Service for July 28, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Krista Baselj, Worship Associate

Opening Words: “Come Down off the Ladder” [David S. Blanchard]

Lighting the Chalice: “In Remembrance and in Hope” [Dale Hudson]

This is a house of reflection and contemplation,
of joy and sorrow, friendship, sharing and laughter.
We light this chalice in remembrance of what we have been
and in the hope of what we may become.

Hymn: “Morning Has Broken”

Story for All Ages: “A Lamp in Every Corner” [Janeen Grohsmeyer]

Children's Recessional: “This Little Light of Mine”

Musical Meditation: “Voice Still and Small”

Sermon: “The Flaming Chalice”

Hymn: “One More Step”

Closing Words: “Keepers of the Flame” [Tom Owen-Towle]

Sermon: “The Flaming Chalice,” Rev. Jim Magaw

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For the last 60 or 70 years, the flaming chalice has been the primary symbol of Unitarianism, and after 1961, the symbol of Unitarian Universalism. Each week, we light our chalice at the beginning of the service, as do others at UU congregations everywhere.

This morning, I’d like to focus on the history of the flaming chalice, what it symbolizes, and what it might mean for us going forward. This history begins with World War II.

In 1938, Hitler threatened to launch an all-out war on Europe unless Germany was allowed to annex the Sudetenland, a territory near the borderland in Czechoslovakia which was home to many ethnically German people. Representatives of a number of European nations capitulated to Hitler’s demands in what was known as the Munich Agreement of 1939. In what became known as a doctrine of appeasement, the hope was that a world war could be avoided and peace maintained.

A great many people around the world were shocked by the Munich Agreement, thinking—as it turns, out rightfully so—that Hitler had no intention of stopping in the Sudetenland and that this agreement only lent credibility to the Nazis and aided them in their pursuit of world conquest.

Among those who were shocked and outraged were a great many Unitarians in the United States. The Unitarian church, as you may recall, had a number of close ties with Eastern Europe and with Czechoslovakia in particular. In the past, I’ve spoken of the work of Norbert and Maja Capek, Czech immigrants to the United States who returned to Czechoslovakia and founded a Unitarian Church in Prague in 1921.

So there was a great deal of familiarity among Unitarians with the plight of the Czech people and a great deal of concern about what was to happen to the Jews and the religious and political dissidents of that country once the Germans came rolling in. They knew that there would be a great deal of suffering among these people, and they wanted to do something to help.

And so it was that the American Unitarian Association formed the Commission for Service in Czechoslovakia and chose to send the Rev. Waitstill Sharp, a young minister serving the Unitarian congregation in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and his wife Martha, a social worker, to Europe to assist refugees fleeing Nazi persecution.

Ken Burns produced a documentary film, "Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War," which aired several years ago on PBS. We held our own screening of the film right after it came out.

The Sharps arrived in Europe in early 1939 and set to work immediately establishing a network of volunteers across the continent who would help refugees, and later the Sharps themselves, escape into unoccupied Europe and the U.S. Facing immense bureaucratic obstacles at every juncture, they did the work of "registering refugees, bringing applicants to the attention of embassies, finding the scholarships or employment necessary for emigration, securing releases from prisons, and arranging travel to safer destinations." They saved the lives of thousands of people.

Although the Sharps were eventually driven out of Czechoslovakia, the work they started continued, and a number of other Unitarians became involved, including Robert and Elisabeth Dexter and Charles Joy. The work of these five individuals, the Sharps, the Dexters and Joy, led to the establishment of the Unitarian Service Committee, which continues its work today.

So much of their work with refugees had to do with having the right papers to give people to ensure their safe passage. There was a certain arbitrariness with which refugees' papers were scrutinized by border guards and other authorities and deemed acceptable or not. Lives depended on such things.

The service committee found that they were in need of a symbol to put on their paperwork to give it an air of authority. In the words of the Rev. Charles Joy, who was the head of the service committee in those years, they needed something to put on their documents "to make them look official, to give dignity and importance to them, and at the same time to symbolize the spirit of our work . . . When a document may keep a man out of jail, give him standing with governments and police, it is important that it look important."

Rev. Joy spoke with Austrian refugee Hans Deutsch about the need for such a symbol, and Deutsch, who had been very much impressed with the work of the Unitarian Service Committee in Europe, drew a chalice with a flame rising from it.

Joy described it this way: "a chalice with a flame, the kind of chalice which the Greeks and Romans put on their altars. The holy oil burning in it is a symbol of helpfulness and sacrifice.... This was in the mind of the artist. The fact, however, that it remotely suggests a cross was not in his mind, but to me this also has its merit. We do not limit our work to Christians. Indeed, at the present moment, our work is nine-tenths for the Jews, yet we do stem from the Christian tradition, and the cross does symbolize Christianity and its central theme of sacrificial love."

Hans Deutsch himself was neither a Unitarian nor a Christian but he expressed his admiration for the work of the Unitarians in the following words:

"There is something that urges me to tell you... how much I admire your utter self-denial [and] readiness to serve, to sacrifice all, your time, your health, your well-being, to help, help, help. I am not," Deutsch continued, "what you may actually call a believer. But if your kind of life is the profession of your faith—as it is, I feel sure—then religion, ceasing to be magic . . . becomes confession to practical philosophy and—what is more—to active, really useful social

work. And this religion—with or without a heading—is one to which even a 'godless' fellow like myself can say wholeheartedly, Yes!”

The flaming chalice quickly became the official symbol of the service committee and, eventually, the symbol of Unitarian Universalism itself. Gradually, congregations began buying or making their own chalices (like ours) to light and extinguish each Sunday, marking the beginning and ending of worship services, as we do here. By sometime in the 1980s this practice had become widespread and added as a liturgical element common today among practically all UU congregations.

So, that’s the history of the flaming chalice in a nutshell. A symbol that was born of the dedication of Unitarians in World War II who were doing what they could to fight fascism and to help those who had been persecuted escape to freedom and start new lives.

That’s the history of the symbol. But the question that we must answer—that each new generation of Unitarian Universalists must answer for themselves—is what do we do with this symbol and this legacy now? How do we stay true to this ideal of sacrifice and service in our own day and age?

There are any number of ways of going about serving the larger world, and it’s up to us to choose which we will pursue. To that end, as we mentioned earlier, our congregation just launched a listening campaign which will help us discern the social justice issues that we want to address in the coming year, and will also help us build relationships and engage in conversations about the things that matter most to us as individuals and as a congregation.

Once we’ve identified the congregation’s most pressing social justice issues and passions, we’ll develop a plan for working on them together and with our justice partners in the larger community.

But a question remains, which is: “How will we go about this work? How will we as a congregation address the current problems of our world, including economic injustice and racism and global warming and the other great issues of our time?”

Because there are some ways of going about this work that are better than others.

There’s a story about a land long ago in which there was great poverty: only the rich could manage without great problems. Three of those rich men, and their servants, were traveling on the same road, when they came, one after another, just a few days apart, to a very poor village. Seeing this poverty provoked different reactions in all three rich men.

The first couldn't stand to see it, so he took all the gold and jewels from his wagons and shared them out among the villagers. He wished them all the best of luck, and he left. The people of this village really had nothing they could do with this bounty of gold and jewels as they were so far from any city and had no way to turn these riches into something that would help them.

The second rich man, seeing the desperate situation, stopped for a short time, and gave the villagers all his food and drink, since he could see that gold and money would be of little use to them. He made sure that each villager received their fair share and would have enough food to last for some time. Then, he left.

The third rich man, on seeing such poverty, sped up and traveled straight through the village without stopping. The two other rich men saw this from a distance, and commented with each other how the third rich man lacked decency and compassion. It was good that they had been there, they said, to help the poor villagers.

However, three days later, they met the third rich man who was traveling in the opposite direction, back to the village. He was still traveling quickly, but his wagons, instead of the gold and valuables they had been carrying, were now full of farming implements, tools, and sacks of seeds and grain. He was heading to the poor village to work with them and live with them.

The third rich man stayed and he helped. He stayed, and he listened, and he learned. And when he left, not only had he done some good for that small village, but he had also transformed himself. And it was after he left that village that his real service began.

Because from that point forward, he saw the world differently. He understood that for the world to change, he had to change, and he had a responsibility to help others undergo this same transformation. And so it was that he lived the rest of his life, lit up from the inside and spreading that light to others.

What I'm suggesting in telling this story is, of course, that we need to work more on being like that third rich man. While it's important to provide resources of various kinds, as the first two men in the story did, the work that will change us and ultimately change the world, is the work that we do person to person, not bestowing our wealth and largesse on others, (although providing resources is certainly important) but rather working with them, learning with them, keeping alive the light of love that illuminates all.

When the flaming chalice first became our symbol, back in the World War II era, things may have been a little more black-and-white than they are today. It was pretty clear by the late 1930s that, without direct armed intervention, fascism would spread throughout Europe and around the world. There were easily identified bad guys and good guys. But the work itself still demanded a great deal of courage and sacrifice.

Today, although there are certainly strong indications that fascism is once again on the rise, many of the issues we're grappling with are less easily diagnosed and addressed. You can't fight poverty and racism and environmental degradation quite the same way that we combated the Nazis. The lines are fuzzier, the causes and solutions perhaps a little less clear.

However, one thing that has not changed is meaningful service and advocacy—direct action that affects the lives of those being served but also, perhaps just as importantly, those doing the service.

The chalice is often thought to represent community, our own community and the community beyond our walls. We bring our own resources to the chalice of community in many different forms—money, skills, knowledge.

But what ignites the chalice—what causes it to be of use to our world—is our willingness to be the flame, our willingness to take a risk, not just once but time and time again, to light up so that our world might be better illuminated.

I'm suggesting that we need to be not just the fuel but also the flame.

My hope and my prayer, as we engage in this vitally important work, is not only that we will remember the historical meaning of the flaming chalice, but that we will embody it in our own time, in courage and in faithfulness in all that we do together.

May it be so. Amen!



15. Service for August 4, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Kelley Anderson, Worship Associate

Opening Words: “To Become Fully Human” [Barbara Brown Taylor]

Lighting the Chalice: “The Work of the Congregation” [Chrystal Hogan]

We light this chalice to honor our work,
to celebrate our community,
and to bring hope and determination
to our mission in the wider world.

Hymn: "Blowin' in the Wind" [Bob Dylan]

Story for All Ages: “Higgins, a Drop with a Dream” [Chris Buice], Jennifer McGlothin

Special Music: “Sixteen Tons” [Merle Travis], Sunnyhill Choir

Meditation: “The Hardest Spiritual Work” [Barbara Brown Taylor]

Sermon: “The Privilege of Serving,” John Graham

Hymn: “This Is My Song”

Offering /Offertory: “Cycle Song of Life” [Arr. Jim Scott], Sunnyhill Choir

Closing Music: “Take Me Home, Country Roads” [Danhoff/Denver]

Closing Words: from “The Double Comfort Safari Club” [Alexander McCall Smith]

Please note: This symbol (☐) marks where John displayed one of nine (9) photo slides in the sanctuary while presenting his sermon.

Sermon: “The Privilege of Serving,” John Graham

© 2020, by John Graham

This morning I want to share with you some of my thoughts about Privilege, Gratitude and Economic Justice. Profound Gratitude is one of the great gifts bestowed upon me since I became a Unitarian Universalist. I’m sure I was grateful for many things before that, but not nearly so conscious of how much I’ve been blessed. While we are by no means wealthy, Judy and I have more than enough “stuff” to be comfortable. Our true wealth lies in being part of a beloved community. A dear late friend, every time we were together, would enthusiastically pronounce, “Aren’t we lucky!”

But while I'm grateful, I'm increasingly aware that much of what I'm grateful for is the result of privilege, though until more recently I had never thought much about it. After all, my family was by no means "well off". Soon after the Second World War, when I was just five years old, our family moved from the city to a small community where we bought our first house. It was a great place to grow up: good school, excellent Boy Scout troop, a Garden and Civic Club, Rotary Club, and a civically active volunteer fire department that sponsored the annual Halloween Parade, raising funds by way of the annual Bingo Week and the annual Minstrel Show. It was many years later before I began to question the latter. As a boy growing up was I aware of racial prejudice? Did I know any poor people? What did the old man who did odd jobs, the one we kids called Shorty, the only black person in town, think of the black faced fireman on stage at the elementary school? And did we care enough to learn Shorty's real name or anything about him? I confess I enjoyed the minstrel immensely. I was quite impressed with the musical and comedic abilities of the firemen up on the stage. Did I comprehend that the come-

dy, especially the black face, the big white eyes, the red lips and the slow, drawling, "Mista Bones" was stereotyping and offensive to people of color. Probably not. After all, I didn't actually know any black people—other than Shorty—and I guess I didn't really KNOW him at all. Poor black people were more or less an abstraction, those people who lived in a far-off land known as the Hill District. Again, there were no students of color in my high school, and only one token African at the small



Slide 1—Haiti

college I attended. My junior year was spent at the University of Glasgow where I became close friends with a brilliant but hilarious engineering student from Nigeria. Paul told me his father wanted to send him to school in the US, but he was afraid. I told my family that I was trying to convince him that he should come over—that it would be okay. Some of them laughed and wondered, "Where would he stay?" In my naïveté, I did NOT see that coming.

Let me tell you about Haiti (□1 Before Judy and I traveled to Haiti with the College of Social Justice, we took for granted hot showers, plenty of drinkable water, 24/7 electricity and paved roads. Our preparation by the College was long, intense and impressive. They wanted us to offer ourselves to the Haitians with humility, rather than claim to know how to fix their problems. No matter how well meaning, it humiliates the recipient, suggests to them that

unlike us, they are broken. Like the third rich man in Rev Jim's sermon last week, we were there to listen and learn about their needs.

Judy had been to Haiti three years earlier in 2011 on a medical project, working mainly with mothers and their children...and was anxious to return. I confess that when she first talked with me about joining a College of Social Justice trip to an eco-village construction project in



Slide 2—Hand Tools

Haiti, my immediate thought was that I could use my knowledge and experience to help build homes for poor Haitians. The truth is that Haitian workers are highly skilled in *the construction of homes that are suitable for THEIR environment*. And because there was no electricity at the site, and at that time little likelihood of any in the foreseeable future in this very rural environment, they did it all with non-powered hand tools! (□2 I was really impressed! I watched a man rip a fifteen-foot board with nothing but a hand rip saw. My grandfather had that kind of skill...and patience, but I've come to depend on power tools. (□3 It turned out that my job was to mix mortar on a flat board, shovel it into a bucket and hoist it up to the scaffold where skilled Haitian workers were applying a smooth finish to the concrete block buildings they had already constructed. (□4 Women walked about a mile, down a steep trail to a stream to fill five-gallon drywall buckets with water which they carried—in withering heat and humidity--on their heads back to the site for making the mortar. Well, I'm certain I could NOT have done that!



Slide 3—Skilled Haitian workers

Because the island was already about 95% deforested, the only wood used was for rafters to support the corrugated steel roofs. What they needed from us was not our well-meant sense of expertise, but our understanding of their dire situation and our financial support. Because the government of Haiti is at best, disorganized, but mostly just corrupt, these would-be farmers depended largely on donations from the UU and other churches—notably the Presbyterians, collaborating with grass-roots organizations like (if you'll pardon my poor French Creole) Mouvman Peyizan Pa-

pay, or the Papaye Peasant Movement, or simply MPP--to bring agriculture, forests, and a financially more secure life to Haitians.

Typical of many tropical islands, Haiti has a wet season and a dry season. For years, during the dry season when they could not grow crops, poor farmers harvested trees to burn into charcoal which they sold to survive until the next growing season. Jared Diamond in his book, *Collapse*, argues that deforestation, which causes a cascading string of catastrophes from erosion to fish kills, is a common cause of all failed civilizations. (□5 So, part of our work in Haiti was to assist in the preparation of tree seedlings to be distributed widely throughout the island. We were *privileged* stand or squat under a tarp in the woods and beat a large pile of cow dung fine enough to be mixed in proper proportions with soil and sand to fill small cylindrical bags in which we placed a tree seed. We made hundreds of these, all neatly lined up in rows, ready for transport. (□6 A humbling but gratifying experience!



Slide 4—Women carry buckets to help with mortar

So, how much HELP did we REALLY provide? In reality, NOT MUCH. Our task, it turned out, was to listen and learn, to bear witness to the plight of the Haitian poor. Each evening we would gather on our dormitory porch, light our little portable chalice, and share the experiences of the day with our hosts and each other.

Each village, mainly constructed by those who would be living and farming there, has ten houses in a circle, a detached kitchen between each, a solar powered well to provide water for their fields during the dry season, a community hall in the center of the village, and a shared eco-toilet at a discrete distance. Each home has a private plot of land for their own needs with the surrounding land worked in common, dividing any profits from sales in the towns. MPP had established a credit union which allowed farmers to save for their children's educations. This



Slide 5—Under tarp in the woods

is an effort by MPP to reverse the decades of flight from the interior to the cities, to re-train young people how to farm but in an ecologically sound way, and with the goal of reducing the need to import most of their food. (□8

Driving down the parkway after arriving back home, we appreciated the expanse of concrete roadway—even with construction, remembering the many broken, rutted and muddy roads in Haiti. By chance, on the radio there was mention of a contest to see which was “the longest red light” in the Pittsburgh area. The loser—at three minutes—was Illinois at West Liberty in near-by Dormont. We thought about how the residents of Port-au-Prince would celebrate just HAVING a traffic light to complain about. Since we were there, a total of six of these ten-home villages have been completed, they are now on the grid, and have built an accredited school for their children.



Slide 6—Bags with tree seed

masters, defeated Napoleon’s troops and declared independence. France quickly recognized the new country, but the price for that recognition was that Haiti pay France the value of the slaves they lost. Just think about it! Haitian slaves BOUGHT THEIR OWN FREEDOM. The huge cost left the new nation with terribly crushing debt. But they so valued their freedom that



Slide 7—UCSJ leaders and volunteers

But helping Haiti goes far beyond simple charity. In fact, Haitians have never asked for charity. After the indigenous Taino were eradicated by European disease and abuse, African slaves were brought to Haiti first by the Spanish and then the French, in order to supply the home country with sugar and other products on the cheap. Indeed, it was generally considered the richest colony. After 200 years of exploitation, Haitian peasants rose up in 1791 and by 1804 overthrew their French

they did without many things that might have helped this fledgling country prosper and grow just to keep up with their debt payments. Eventually, New York banks took over the debt from France, and even though Haiti had never defaulted on their debt payments, those banks called in the debt. In support of the banks, the US government sent Marines to empty the na-

tional bank in Port-au-Prince at gun point. They simply anchored at Port-au-Prince harbor, disembarked and marched up the main street to the bank, emptied it, and took the booty back to the American banks. This was just one of many strongarm tactics we employed to take advantage of Haiti. And because we were a slave owning country, we were the last government to recognize their independence.



Slide 8—Reducing the need to import food

from corrupt governments so companies like United Fruit could establish plantations... (and we could enjoy cheap bananas.) In the words of Rev. Kathleen McTigue, UU Service Committee Director of Activism and Justice Education, “The United States has over 120 years of history in Central America, nearly all of it devoted to securing land and resources for corporations and profit over the well-being of the people living there.”



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
COLLEGE of SOCIAL JUSTICE

West Virginia: Appalachia in Transition

uucs.org/west-virginia

Land in Haiti was traditionally held in common, so it was easy for a corrupt government to push farmers off the land and sell it to American agricultural entrepreneurs. Their promised hiring of displaced farmers at good wages turned out to be a lie. And every time Haitian people rose up to threaten their corrupt government,

we sent in the Marines to put it down because it threatened Ameri-

Slide 9—Take the journey of not. Have a conversation.

can investment. Marines occupied Haiti from 1914 until 1934. So, over the course of Haiti’s history, not only did we not help them, we continuously exploited them. Much of our prosperity and privilege over the centuries was built on the backs of Haitians and other poor peoples.

So, while I am grateful for the things that privilege makes possible and understand that my way through life has been eased by privilege, I am saddened and angered that my comfortable life may depend on taking advantage of others less privileged.

So, what might we as a people of conscience do to right some of these wrongs? First, we need to recognize that people aren’t always poor because they are lazy. Haitians, like so many other people remain poor in spite of their best efforts. Though Haiti remains in dire straits, with the

exception of medical assistance, the College of Social Justice is not currently sponsoring a trip there. But they continue to sponsor relationships around the world and here at home. As already mentioned by Jennifer McGlothin, preliminary planning has begun here at Sunnyhill about organizing such an experience in the back country of nearby Appalachia. Wouldn't it be exciting if Sunnyhill could put together a group to commit to such a social justice project?

Big coal for years exploited labor in the region by keeping wages low, keeping families in debt to the company store, while putting profit ahead of safety. The legacy of coal is one of poverty. With the decline in mining, unemployment and drug addiction has risen alarmingly. Many good people, including the UU church in Charleston, West Virginia are working hard to turn things around. The reason I began this morning talking about our life-changing experience in Haiti is because that's what I know. The College of Social Justice put us through rigorous training and then we were given the privilege of actually meeting with Haitians in their own land to hear of their problems, hopes and aspirations for a better life firsthand. I confess to not knowing a lot about what it is like in the Appalachian coal fields. If you grew up around here and are as ancient as me, you might remember houses heated by coal furnaces, and the sharp, acrid taste in your mouth as you walked home from school. If you're not that old but have watched the perennial reruns of the "Christmas Story" featuring Ralphie, you might have some idea of what life with a coal furnace was like. But I remember how exciting it was to get our first gas furnace. My mom cleaned and painted the basement so we could have Cub Scout den meetings there. And my grandfather and I converted the "coal Room" into my model train room. Even though there were plenty of coal miners in my Grandmother Burton's side of the family, when she left Maryland as a young woman to work in old Allegheny City, that chapter seemed closed. For me growing up, coal mining and Appalachia were as remote and exotic as the Hill District. I bought into the meme that West Virginia was a place where every yard had an abandoned vehicle up on concrete blocks.

A few minutes ago, you heard our men's choir perform a rousing version of Sixteen Tons. Written and originally performed by Merle Travis but made famous by Tennessee Ernie Ford in 1955 when it quickly went to number one on the charts. At this point I need to confess that as a sixteen-year old I thought Sixteen Tons and Tennessee Ernie Ford were total "cornball". Sadly, the real-life exploitation behind the lyrics did not register with me. My grandmother never talked about coal mining—or perhaps I just wasn't paying attention, and it was years later that I made the connection that she was born, raised and married in a small hillside company town called Borden Mine. It was later still during my family research that I realized that most of the Burton men, as well as the Sloan men from her mother's side, were in fact coal miners. Why wasn't I curious enough as a kid to ask the right questions?

So for me, learning about the hopes and dreams of the people of the Appalachian coal fields will be a steep learning curve. I've already begun watching the videos on the College of So-

cial Justice web site, and recently became a member of the Center for Coalfield Justice and begun attending their meetings along with other Sunnyhillers.

The relationship of West Virginians to coal is complex. Looking at it from the perspective of privilege, we see only the exploitation of mining families by big corporations, the tragedy of mine explosions and fires, and the devastation of black lung disease. But many former miners had immense pride in their ability to provide for their families. They believe in hard work and are embarrassed when they have to depend on public assistance to put food on the table. It is not surprising then that opioids have found a chink in their armor.

Truth is...they could use our help. (□9

I encourage anyone who wants to help, to consider becoming involved with next summer's Appalachian immersion project. If you want more information about poverty in Appalachia, I invite you to go to the College of Social Justice website where you will find several YouTube videos which graphically depict the problems. But involvement in such a project is not limited, by any means, to those who might be willing and able to travel there. In fact, there could—and should—be a support group willing to undergo the extensive pre-trip study and planning, and to help plan the manner in which the experience is shared with the greater community at Sunnyhill and beyond. Perhaps think of it as a Social Justice Chalice Circle or a class dedicated to the project. In this way, perhaps we could recognize our privilege, showing gratitude for what we have, by helping our less privileged neighbors. It would be one way to show Gratitude for our Privilege while striking a blow for economic justice. Perhaps, like the third rich man in Rev. Jim's story, we would ourselves be transformed and then take on the responsibility to help others to be thus transformed, thus keeping alive that internal light that illuminates us all, confirming the true meaning of the Flaming Chalice.

May it be so. Blessed Be. Namaste. And Amen.



16. Service for August 11, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Mary-Jo Hennessy, Worship Associate

Opening Words: “We Are the Change” [Barack Obama]

Lighting the Chalice: “From Untruth to Truth” [Upanishads, adapted]

We light this chalice to help us move
From untruth to truth, from ignorance to wisdom,
From animosity to love, from bondage to freedom.
We rededicate ourselves to affirm and practice
Truth, wisdom, love and freedom.

Hymn: “Wake Now My Senses”

Meditation: “Everything Else Is Secondary” [Steve Jobs]

Sermon: “Change Sustains Us,” John Luff

Hymn: “When the Spirit Says Do” “When the Spirit Says Do”

Closing Words: “Peace and Tranquility Will Return” [Ann Frank]

Sermon: “Change Sustains Us,” John Luff

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As a teenager I fixed my sights on working on the most exciting public project of my generation. You couldn't say ‘space’ without adding ‘race’, and I was all in. I headed off to college as the Apollo program was rolling at high speed, and the first Saturn V was still being assembled. But it is no surprise that my first experience with at least partially independent living spurred unanticipated change, that brought me here today, for without that change, and the cascading decisions of a lifetime, I would not have been in Pittsburgh, nor likely a UU.

One of the threads that move through my life is change. In 1968 I changed from pursuing rockets and physics to technology and television, and the sequence of options, and changes, that followed leave me wondering just exactly how my life actually evolved. That one choice ended up introducing me to Johnny Cash (at his house), encouraged me to smuggle news footage out of China during martial law, put me on the phone with the King of Jordan, invited me to a home in Soweto, a beach in Halifax, an elevator with John Major in Budapest, and a UU congregation of FIVE in Johannesburg, but those stories are for another time.

I first spent time thinking about change in an intentional way about 25 years ago. A trade magazine that catered to geeks in television asked if I would do some writing for them. It became a regular column that I wrote about 150 times. The topic I chose was ‘Technology in Transition’, and it gave me a reason to think about what has changed and why, and how I might anticipate future change based on the past. It also spurred me to consider change in a more global sense, and how it has affected my personal choices and options, indeed how I have been receptive to change, and when I had fought it, and why.

I have come to believe that change is in fact inevitable, but more importantly provides the opportunity to live an invigorating life. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, 2500 years ago, that “Change is the only constant in life”. Everyone can identify with the profound nature of change in their own lives. We begin life with a sphere of influence that is contained in the womb, utterly dependent on someone we’ve never seen. Throughout our lives that sphere ex-

pands first to family, then an external world of friends, and peaks during our most productive years as a tent holding many options from which we may select. We choose mates, stride through a career, and eventually, as we age, our sphere contracts again, ending in a circle that contains only ourselves as life ends. With this cycle we see the likelihood of meaningful change peak in mid life and decline as our ability to embark on new paths is diminished as we approach one truly FINAL change.

Attempting to avoid change is about as productive as looking for snowballs in Honolulu. Heraclitus recognized that change has an ethereal aspect when he said, “No man ever steps into the same river twice.”

Nonetheless we have built parts of society to resist change, to discourage innovation, to attempt to keep the status quo. Institutions, like religion and politics, suggest we limit our options by embracing precepts that have the effect of maintaining a hierarchy of rigid, largely unchanging moral, cultural, and philosophical rules, that incidentally allow the institutions themselves to survive for exceedingly long periods of time, with remarkably little institutional change. But since life itself is impermanent, I don’t see how we can ever avoid change driven by facts that have themselves changed. For instance, the pace of technological change is dizzying, indeed sometimes disconcerting, and leads some of us to long for times before we were so deeply interconnected with the rest of the world. Those who believed in technological change, and the cascading changes innovation can bring, created the changes they believed in. Some changes in society today have been created for altruistic, and sometimes economic motives to help avoid inevitable disruption in the global climate that could make our pale blue dot uninhabitable in a cosmic blink. Solving that problem will require systemic change on a scale none of us can fully anticipate, and narrow the options everyone can choose among.

I should be clear that I see a connection between personal change, or options presented to us at least, and what some would call ‘luck’. After 50 years of watching changes in my own tiny world, I see luck not as some probabilistic equation acting through a myriad of factors we cannot easily define. Rather, I see luck as something over which we have considerable control. The changes we make, or simply accept sometimes, may look like luck but I believe we put ourselves in the position to embrace change that may look and feel like simply a random event over which we have no control. We have more control than we often acknowledge, and we sometimes chalk up bad choices to bad luck, absolving ourselves of responsibility for change we may in fact control.

Recognizing when change is needed, and then embracing that change is sometimes complicated by our natural resistance to change. In 2018 Betty and I temporarily relocated to Bainbridge Island in Puget Sound to help her sister who was dying from pancreatic cancer. I felt good about embracing that temporary change in my life, knowing intellectually it was an act of love and kindness, one for which we were uniquely positioned by our retired status and privilege. But I didn’t fully embrace that change in my life until confronted one evening with my own resistance to unconditionally helping Maggie as I had promised. Maggie asked for dinner, which her nursing assistant was preparing, but when Betty mentioned in passing some really good soup she got at a local market that day (Irish Stew I think), Maggie decided instantly she wanted that too. We laughingly called her Queen Maggie, and not without cause. I mildly protested that her dinner was already being prepared, but she insisted that she could “have two things”. Instantly in a grumpy mood I left for the market in her old Toyota pickup, but as I drove down the hill I suddenly was struck that I was grumpy about fulfilling the promise I made to accept change and to do what Maggie needed at a time of great stress, and her dimin-

ishing possibilities, indeed her cascading changes. I had chosen change, but had to remind myself of the corollaries that followed from that choice. I returned with the soup more introspective, and no longer annoyed. The next day, when I was alone with Maggie, she apologized for 'pissing me off'. I admitted I was indeed upset until I reckoned with the meaning of commitment and the changes I had willingly accepted in my life on her behalf. We cried together a little that morning, but my confidence in my choice and the changes it brought was strengthened. It's a lesson I will hopefully never forget. Her need and our lives intersected, creating profound differences, and opportunities, for all of us, and indeed change for all around her.

Then there is the change we might not anticipate, and may not pursue voluntarily. I am reminded of a co-worker, and at a later time a client of mine, Paul, who was a very successful television director, driving expensive cars and flying his own expensive airplane. But something happened, and Paul's life ended destitute and homeless on Liberty Avenue in Pittsburgh. Was it change he resisted that brought him low, or perhaps a change he made that turned wrongly for him? It would be judgmental to say he would probably have chosen differently if given the opportunity. Maybe he was truly happy without the material possessions he once found so captivating. Paul's example of disorienting change still leaves me wondering just how far we all are from a quantum change in our circumstance brought on by events we may, or may not, initiate knowingly, or change we might not even recognize contemporaneously.

The effect of such change that brought my friend Paul low affects too many in our world. I have made a practice of paying it forward when I can, altruistically hoping to change the world in small ways, buying a meal for a beggar at a KFC in Beijing, and a burger and coffee for hungry man on a cold morning in Manhattan. In 1994, as I was leaving Johannesburg after two months away from home, I gave the last of my South African folding money to a black man whose sign simply said he needed food, or money to feed his family. As I fumbled at a stop light for a map in the passengers' seat of my rented car, I stuffed the cash into his hand through the right-hand window, not calculatingly, but absentmindedly. He returned to my car window moments later with a newspaper, saying through his tears that this was all he could do for me in return. It was then that I realized that the 25 or so Rand I had disposed of was a month's salary for him, though it was only a few US dollars. My random act changed his life that day, and his generosity changed mine as well. I look at his circumstance and my responsibilities for his welfare differently than I had only moments before that unlikely event, for my action, that made no difference in my material life, changed his profoundly, if only for a time. I have become convinced that you put yourself in positions where being receptive to change brings new options and wisdom, and has ripple effects you cannot know.

UU minister Rev Gary Smith, now retired, spoke at our regional Summer Institute in the summer of 1991 about 're-membering'. The thrust of his advice was that taking apart what you think is true and certain, and then putting it back together again with new wisdom, and thoughtful consideration, might create useful change. Such a re-assembly of your life might reinforce deep meaning and allow you to move forward from a point of stasis, allowing you to see change more clearly and understand it's Impact.

This act of 're-membering' is part of how I think 'luck' has sometimes come into my life. In October 2000 during joys and concerns in this church, I acknowledged a life altering event. I had sold the company I had started a couple decades earlier, a choice to accept change that I was convinced would allow me to 're-member' my life in positive ways. I can't deny that in some ways that choice, brought on by the 'luck' of having others choose change that would fold my business in with theirs, has brought many positive things to my life, like allowing me

to eventually retire, THANK GOD! But it also brought deeply distressing change, and began a six year odyssey for me professionally that was the most difficult period of my career. I CHOSE change, but it created chaos and sometimes disabling stress. Was that luck? Or was it my desire to see positive change when perhaps it wasn't there. Was I not putting myself in the right position in life at one pivotal moment? Did I create change for myself and 35 other families that unleashed forces we didn't understand? Was it greed, or a sincere belief that 'remembering' would create positive change? For me, this is still unresolved.

Sufi mystic and poet, Rumi wrote, "Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the World. Today I am wise, so I wanted to change myself." This is truly re-membering. Roy Eichley, long a member of this church, once told a group of us helping to clear some unwanted trees from his property about his ancient refrigerator on his back porch, you know the kind, with coils on the top? We asked him how old it was. Roy's response was that during the time he had the fridge he had several Fords, a couple of Farmall tractors, and a couple of wives, but only one fridge. Now that is embracing the changes that are important, and retaining what really matters!

There is something to be said for honoring the bedrock on which we build our lives, admitting when change is not positive. A cab driver I rode with in Las Vegas many years ago, who was Irish by birth, made it clear how he felt about the value of a solid footing for life. I asked him how he liked Las Vegas having come from Dublin. His answer, with the lovely Irish lilt in his voice, was that he preferred Dublin. Then he added his opinion of Las Vegas, "there's nothin' PERRRMANANT here!"

Which brings me to what began this musing some months ago.

For me a central question in life has become what things are immutable, unchangeable, indeed unchanging, and on the other side of the coin, not permanent, always changing and temporary? It is easy to say that the universe itself is unchanging, but that depends entirely on the scale at which you examine it, and the time period over which you expect it to be unchanging. My college study in Physics tells me there is NOTHING in the universe that is in any sense unchanging. That is a bit unnerving! It is at the same time, in this context satisfying. The universe is built for change, so I sometimes think the message to those resisting change should simply be "get over it...it's cosmic after all!"

But when I think most intently on what matters for me it is family, health, integrity, honesty, and an abiding willingness to accept the changes that come from all directions, managing my choices in the face of change with an imperfect eye to what matters most. With that comes a vision of what changes need to be resisted. Our recent national history is full of change that begs for resistance, for there must be the bedrock my cab driver pointed out that we can count on, things that **SHOULD NOT** change. I think of respect for others, humility and caring for our fellow planetary passengers, willingness to hear other's stories without judgments that spring from prejudice or questionable assumptions, these feel to me like the bedrock that should cause us to speak up for stasis over acceptance of change that will hurt others.

Recognizing the opportunity for change is not always simple, nor obvious. We often motor through life like a steamroller, flattening opportunities before us, and leaving a predictable wake behind us, focused on the distant horizon, and ignoring the nearby. A photographer from whom I have taken a couple of wonderful seminars preaches, "Wait for the light, but don't fail to recognize when it is right". I open my eyes like a camera lens sometimes, gathering in a sce-

ne to be developed after some hard work understanding what is before me. Looking for opportunities to change myself, and support change I believe in.

Which brings me full circle to what brings me here, to be with you today. Without my willingness to take a fork in the road, sometimes the ‘road less traveled on’, I would likely have worked in a different field, perhaps found a different mate, and likely never have found the faith that has given me a bedrock on which to build a life that has given me a sense of purpose and fulfillment. My hope is that enough fellow passengers on the ‘Pale Blue Dot’ that Carl Sagan described will find the courage to make the changes in their lives that will spur systemic changes that will allow our rocky planet to survive the Anthropocene.

As for myself, change truly brought me here, like the wind that brought Mary Poppins, and upon which she, like myself, left.

Closing Words

“I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness; I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too. I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more.”

Anne Frank

Meditation:

“For the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: ‘If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?’ And whenever the answer has been ‘No’ for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.

Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure — these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart. ... Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.”

Steve Job, Stanford University Commencement Address 2005



17. Service for August 18, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Rebecca Senneway, Worship Associate

Gathering Music: “Come Away to the Skies” [arr. George Shearing]

Opening Words: “In Faith” [Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe]

Lighting the Chalice: “May the Flame Burn True” [Bernice Hitchcock]

The flaming chalice is the symbol of Unitarian Universalism.
It offers its warmth to those who are cold;
It provides light to those who would see;
It transforms this sanctuary into sacred space.
May its flame burn true and high and strong.

Hymn: “Come, Come, Whoever You Are”

Story for All Ages: “Turtles” [adapted from Stephen Hawking and others]

Special Music: “What Is This Church?” [Eugene Sanders/Sibelius], Sunnyhill Choir

Musical Meditation: “Spirit of Life”

Sermon: “What Is Unitarian Universalism?”

Hymn: “My Life Flows On in Endless Song”

Closing Words: “Because of Those Who Came Before” [Barbara J. Pescan]

Sermon: “What is Unitarian Universalism?” Rev. Jim Magaw

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If you attend a Unitarian Universalist Church and you share that fact with friends and family who are **not** UUs, chances are, at some point, you have been asked, “So what **is** Unitarian Universalism?”

If you have been asked such a question, you may have found yourself at a somewhat embarrassing loss for words. It seems like a reasonable enough question, doesn’t it? —What is Unitarian Universalism—but at the same time it’s challenging to describe our faith in just a few words or even just a few sentences.

Because ours is a non-creedal faith—meaning that there are no creeds or belief statements to which all of us assent—there is no **one** correct way to answer the question. There is no single formulaic articulation of what Unitarian Universalism **is**. In fact, this is my third annual sermon titled “What Is Unitarian Universalism,” and each time I’ve answered that question in a different way.

Several years ago, Stephen Colbert, in a segment of “The Colbert Report,” talked about the “De-Deification of the American Faithscape.” He began by talking about his own faith, which happens to be Roman Catholicism, and he recited the Nicene Creed, in its entirety:

“I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made . . .” and so on. I’m sure many of you recognize that particular creed, and there may even be a few of you who can recite it.

After reciting the Nicene Creed, Colbert turns to a member of his crew, Bobby, who happens to be a UU. We'll watch part of that segment now:

[Show clip: <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/a6q20s/the-colbert-report-the-de-deification-of-the-american-faithscape>]

I think we can all feel Bobby's pain, can't we? It's really difficult, especially when you're put on the spot, to describe Unitarian Universalism to someone who has had no experience of our tradition. But, at the same time, I think we can do a little better than Bobby did in describing UUism—at least I **hope** we can.

About 10 or 15 years ago, the UUA (the Unitarian Universalist Association) began urging every member to develop their UU elevator speech—that is, a personal articulation of your UU faith that can be spoken in about the time it would take for an average elevator ride—say a minute or less. And some of you may have already developed your own UU elevator speeches.

But, if you haven't, I'd like to give you a few tools this morning so that, when you are asked, "What is Unitarian Universalism," you'll be able to offer a response—one that will, I hope, be a little more satisfying than the answer given by the crew member Bobby from the Colbert Report.

We'll start with a little history.

200 years ago, in 1819, William Ellery Channing, considered the founder of American Unitarianism by many, delivered a sermon titled "Unitarian Christianity." In this sermon, Channing articulated a new vision of Unitarian faith that differed from the Puritan tradition—the so-called "Standing Order" of New England churches—from which Unitarianism and Congregationalism descended.

Now, most sermons that I deliver are around 2,000 words in length and take me about 20 minutes to deliver. Channing's sermon, "Unitarian Christianity," however, was about 14,000 words in length, and took more than an hour and a half for him to deliver, so what I'm going to give you today is just a short excerpt. Among other things, Channing said:

"... the Bible is a book written for [humans], in the language of [humans], [whose] meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books."

He was, in other words, saying that it is up to **us** to discern the meaning of the scriptures for ourselves, that there is no **one** correct interpretation or understanding of the Bible. In this same sermon, Channing also pushed back against the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus, against the doctrine of the Trinity, and against the idea of predestination.

Channing was a Christian. He believed that Jesus fully expressed a God of compassion and selfless love, which is at the heart of the gospels. But he did not believe that Jesus was fully divine. And if Jesus is not fully divine, then that means that God is one (which is where the term "Unitarian" comes from) —not the Trinitarian formulation of God in three persons. In Channing's view, Jesus was an expression of God but not himself divine.

And, by the way, Channing's sermon, "Unitarian Christianity," was turned into a pamphlet that was distributed and read by tens of thousands of people. Only Thomas Paine's pamphlet, "Common Sense," (from a few decades earlier) was more widely read in America than Channing's "Unitarian Christianity."

On the Universalist side of our family tree, in 1805, Hosea Ballou, a Universalist minister, published his "Treatise on Atonement," which rejected the beliefs that "human nature is fallen

(doctrine of original sin) and that human beings are subject to eternal damnation (doctrine of the elect and the damned).”

Ballou believed that God is love, full stop, and that no loving God would ever damn anyone to eternal hell. Furthermore, he pushed back against the idea of substitutionary atonement (the idea that Jesus died for our sins). He wrote that "if people imagine a divisive and punishing God whose desire for justice is satisfied by the crucifixion of his own son, they will model themselves after this God and feel justified in being cruel themselves." Ballou's articulation of universal salvation is where the word Universalist comes from.

Something that is important to understand about both Channing and Ballou is that they were devout Christians. They had a deep and abiding faith in the wisdom of Jesus and in the life of Jesus. But they had problems with some of the doctrines of the Christian church which had developed over the course of centuries.

They weren't rejecting Christianity; they were rejecting certain traditional Christian teachings which they believed had nothing to do with the Bible. They were especially critical of many of the particular aspects of Calvinism, which was the prevalent Christian theological doctrine of their era.

Now, how does this sliver of Unitarian and Universalist history help you come up with a succinct answer to the question “What Is Unitarian Universalism?” It helps, I think, in this way:

All religious traditions tend to have four sources of authority, or four ways of discerning what is true. They are described in something called the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” which looks like this :

The four ways of discerning truth are: reason (meaning rational thought), experience (meaning our individual and collective actual, lived experiences), scripture (meaning the Bible and other holy books), and tradition (meaning the rites and rituals and teachings that are handed down from previous generations).

Both Channing and Ballou emphasized reason and experience over scripture and tradition. That particular emphasis is what separates a liberal religious tradition from a conservative religious tradition. Liberal religious traditions tend to emphasize reason and experience , while conservative religious traditions tend to emphasize scripture and tradition .

All four sources of truth discernment are important in **all** religious traditions. But one unique aspect of our religious tradition is its emphasis on reason and experience. So, I would suggest that, somewhere in your elevator speech, you need to mention this particular emphasis. That's point number one: an emphasis on reason and experience over scripture and tradition.

One implication of this emphasis is that revelation is not sealed. In other words, it is **not** the case that the truth was revealed and articulated only once and only long ago. The truth, from a UU perspective, is revealed again and again in many different ways, and it is up to us, using reason and experience, to discern it.

Both Channing and Ballou were putting forth their ideas under this assumption that Truth (with a capital “T”) is not simply a matter that was settled once and for all centuries ago, but rather that it is something that we must discern in our time and in our own way.

Another point of emphasis that can be inferred from Channing and Ballou and others is that it is what happens in this lifetime that is of most concern to us rather than what happens in the afterlife—that it is our actions and behaviors in the here and now that matter more than our beliefs, or lack thereof, in the hereafter.

Another way of articulating this tenet of Unitarian Universalism is that right relationship is more important than right belief. In other words, how we are in relationship with one another and with the rest of the world is more important than any particular beliefs. Beliefs *are* important, but it is how we live our lives that is of utmost importance.

And a final inference I would make from our Unitarian and Universalist forbears is that our deepest and most abiding human values are love and justice. If, in either a metaphorical or literal sense, God is love, then love must be our most important foundational value. And, if, as Cornel West puts it, “Justice is what love looks like in public,” then justice must stand alongside love as being of ultimate importance.

Every generation faces existential threats: injustices that are caused and fueled by fear and hatred. And every generation of Unitarian Universalists has tried to overcome injustice generated by fear and hatred with justice created through love and compassion. There has never been, and probably never will be, complete agreement on exactly what it means to live lovingly and justly, but there is very little doubt in my mind that there is a consensus that love and justice are our most important individual *and* collective values.

Another way of looking at UU theology is through several of our principles. As you probably know, there are seven UU principles that have been part of our tradition since the 1980s. All seven important, but there are three in particular that provide a framework for understanding Unitarian Universalism.

The first principle that we covenant to affirm and promote is “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” The emphasis here is placed on the individual, and the point is that each and every individual simply by virtue of their being is deserving of love and justice.

In the seventh principle, the emphasis is placed on what is larger than the individual. It affirms and promotes “respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.” So we don’t just exist as individuals in a vacuum. We’re a part of something bigger than ourselves alone.

And that’s a fundamental tension that exists in Unitarian Universalism—between the individual and the larger group. And the way that tension is mediated is through our fourth principle: “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

So, it's not all about me. There's also a larger "us" that is made up of an interdependent web. And our task is to discern as individuals and collectively what is true and what is meaningful through a free *and* responsible search.

It is not true that Unitarian Universalists can believe whatever they want to believe. We are not merely an association of free thinkers. We are committed to a free and *responsible* search for truth and meaning which brings together each individual's inherent worth with a recognition of the fact that everyone is deeply connected to everyone else and everything else in the world. Our responsibilities are not to ourselves alone but to a larger interconnected, interdependent web.

Now, let's return to our elevator speech. How would I summarize everything that I've been talking about in one succinct statement? I would say something like this:

"Unitarian Universalism is a religious tradition that puts forth love and justice as primary values, emphasizes reason and experience more than scripture and tradition, and focuses on our actions and behaviors in the here and now rather than our beliefs in the hereafter. Unitarian Universalism recognizes each individual's worth and dignity while also recognizing that we are deeply interconnected with one another and with our world."

Of course, even if you hone your elevator statement until you have it as close to perfect as you can imagine, you'll still get blank stares from people sometimes. But that's OK—at least you'll have a starting point for a conversation.

I urge each of you to spend at least a little bit of time coming up with your own version of an elevator speech and to practice it from time to time. Because one-on-one conversations are the way that our faith spreads and takes roots in people's lives. My larger hope and prayer is that we will *live* our values in the world—for it is through our actions that our faith is truly defined and understood.

May it be so. Amen!



18. Service for September 15, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Brad Convis, Worship Associate

Gathering Music: Lucinda Mortimer

Opening Words: “We Summon Ourselves” [Gordon B. McKeeman]

Lighting the Chalice: “The Struggle for Freedom” [Paul Sprecher]

We light this chalice in memory of
the courage of those who have struggled for freedom,
the persistence of those who've struggled for justice,
and the love of those who've built beloved communities
to carry on the light of hope.

Hymn: “Come and Go with Me”

Story for All Ages: “Jericho” [Chris Buice]

Children's Recessional: “This Little Light”

Musical Meditation: “We Would Be One”

Sermon: “The Prophetic Imperative,” Rev. Jim Magaw

Hymn: “I’m On My Way”

Closing Words: “Go in Peace, Seeking Justice”

Sermon: “Prophetic Imperative,” Rev. Jim Magaw

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Years ago, in seminaries and theological schools, ministers-in-training were taught about the “three p’s of ministry”: the pastoral, the priestly, and the prophetic. All three of these aspects of ministry are shared both by the minister and by members of the congregation.

The pastoral has to do with providing care for the people of the congregation and giving them the opportunities and tools that they need to care for one another. The priestly has to do with leading worship services and officiating at rites of passage, such as child dedications, weddings, and memorial services. The prophetic has to do with working to bring more justice into the world, both within and beyond the walls of the church.

Most congregations do well in one or two of these areas, but rarely do they excel at all three. And, most often, it is the prophetic aspect of ministry that is given short shrift. The tendency for established religious communities is to become inwardly focused, so one of our most important tasks is to work against that tendency and to find ways to do meaningful prophetic work that takes us out of our comfort zones into the wounded, hurting places of the world.

However, when we think of prophets, we have some unhelpful preconceived notions. One image that comes to mind is that of a wild-eyed maniac screaming from a street corner for people to repent. Another image is that of the prognosticator who, by means of numerology or other questionable interpretive means, predicts that the world will come to an end on a particular day at a particular time and gathers followers on a mountaintop somewhere to await that end. A third unhelpful image of a prophet is that of someone who lived long, long ago whose dusty, old story is recorded in the Bible but who doesn’t have much to do with us here and now.

But truly prophetic work and the authentic prophetic voice is something that transcends these limited and flawed views of what constitutes a prophet. In the words of the Rev. William Barber, one of our contemporary prophets:

“The prophetic voice rises when government systems and sometimes even religious systems abdicate their responsibility to those whom scripture calls ‘the least of these.’ When the forces of extremism become so overwhelming that they depress the hope of the people, the prophetic voice and mission,” according to Barber, “is to connect words and actions in ways that build restorative hope, so a movement for restorative justice can arise.”

We are living in an era in which government systems and most religious systems have clearly abdicated their responsibility to those who are most vulnerable and at-risk in our society. People who are marginalized and oppressed are routinely blamed for their own marginalization. Many politicians and religious leaders accuse their critics of “playing the race card” or the gender card or the poverty card when those critics dare to mention cold, hard facts about the ways in which certain groups of people continue to be oppressed by our political and economic systems.

When our leaders abandon their responsibility toward those who are most vulnerable, or declare that they never had such responsibility in the first place, it becomes critically important to speak out and act in such a way as to call those leaders to task and to demand real and meaningful action rather than the hypocrisy, obfuscation and victim-blaming that have become the norm.

Over the past three years or so, I’ve been drawing from the work of theologian Walter Brueggemann, who writes that there are three parts to the prophetic task. They are: reality (facing reality squarely and without flinching and naming it for what it is); grief (recognizing and feeling the deep sadness we experience when we see the reality of our situation); and hope (finding ways, as we can, to live into the world that we want to bring into being).

A prophet is one who calls us to face the reality of our situation as individuals and as a nation and world community, makes space for grieving the disconnect that exists between our aspirations and our current despair, and leads the charge for action that will result in hope.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan author and activist, writes that “prophetic thinking is the capacity for healthy self-criticism, the ability to recognize your own dark side” which “helps you realize you are not that good and neither is your group.” Prophetic thinking is what helps us understand that we ourselves—and the groups and communities to which we belong—are themselves implicated in larger systems of oppression. Without facing that reality, our righteousness turns into an absurd *self*-righteousness and we lose all credibility.

So the task of the prophet is not an easy one. You must not only speak truth to power, but you must also speak truth to yourself and to your people. It’s little wonder that Jesus said in the Gospel of Luke, “No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” Prophets, at least in their own time, are unlikely to win popularity contests.

In fact, what happens to prophets, to those who are perceived as real threats to corrupt systems, is that they are silenced or they are co-opted to serve the purposes of those groups who occupy positions of power.

A story is told about a man in ancient times who was able to make fire. The people of his village were amazed at this wondrous gift. The first time he ever made fire, they didn’t know

what to think of it, or what to do with it. In fact, if the truth were told, they were perhaps a little bit afraid of it.

But then the fire-maker taught them how they could use this gift to keep warm through the cold of winter. They could use it, he showed them, to cook their food, and even to fire their pottery, from which to eat their food. If ever they were alone and lost in the wilderness, they could use this gift to send up a cry for help, and their signal would be seen far away, and rescue would come.

Fire could be dangerous, however, and it could cause destruction. So, the fire-maker also taught them how to handle the fire reverently and with care, so that it should not cause hurt to themselves or to any part of creation.

Very quickly, the news of the fire-maker's gift spread from one village to the next, until everyone in the region had heard about this mysterious and powerful gift of fire. The fire-maker was in great demand. He travelled through the villages, teaching his skills to everyone who wanted to learn. And the people learned eagerly, and they began to revere the fire-maker. Surely this man was special, and the gods must be very close to him.

In time, the popularity of the fire-maker came to the attention of the village elders and rulers, and to the ruler of that region. They didn't entirely like what they were hearing. Here was a man who appeared to be giving the people what they deeply needed and desired, and what would give them fuller and happier lives. The people were turning away from their rulers and leaders to follow this upstart fire-maker. The leaders and rulers were losing control!

The fire-maker's activities had to be curbed, the leaders all agreed. And when that didn't seem to be possible, they had to resort to sterner measures. The fire-maker must go, they resolved. And so, one night, they trapped the fire-maker in a dark corner and they killed him. They told the people that from then on, it would be illegal to make fires.

The people were dismayed, but most of them were too afraid to challenge the rulers. Instead, they grieved for the fire-maker, whom they had all loved. They forgot most of what he had taught them, because they never practiced their skills again, but they never forgot him.

The rulers and leaders conferred as to how to placate the people and take their minds off this dangerous man. They hit upon the idea of encouraging the people to build shrines to the memory of the fire-maker. And so, in every village, a monument was erected. The people decorated these shrines with flowers, beautiful paintings and statues.

They gathered together regularly there to remember the fire-maker and all he had meant to them. They wrote down in books the instructions he had once given them about the fire, and they read extracts from these books every time they met together. The rulers were pleased, because they had brought the fire under control. But the people got used to chilly, dark nights again, and they ate cold food, and they forgot how to dance and sing in the firelight.

They remained faithful, for as long as history lasted, in paying homage at the shrines of the fire-maker. But there was no fire.

I find myself sometimes seething with anger when self-serving politicians and religious leaders praise dead prophets and genuflect before their shrines but do nothing to keep their legacy alive. For example, every year around Martin Luther King Day, you will find plenty of elected officials attending events honoring MLK but you will see very few of these officials actually continuing the radical liberational work of King.

Likewise, all around the world, there are shrines and cathedrals supposedly built to honor Jesus, but the fire that he brought into the world is strangely absent from many of these places. The edifices are in place but missing is the call to action from Jesus who was a radical social activist who died fighting for the common good and for justice for those who are oppressed.

And, as a contemporary example of how our current prophets are treated, take a look at Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old Swedish climate activist who is a leader in the student climate strike movement. She's been telling her truth and that of her generation, saying: "“Why should we be studying for a future that soon will be no more when no one is doing anything whatsoever to save that future?” Greta has been met with scorn, derision, ridicule and claims that she is merely a pawn of leftists.

It's not easy to be a prophetic voice. The powers that be will try to silence you or shoot you down in any way they can.

Vital, thriving, authentic religious communities do not merely build shrines to the memory of their prophets from long ago. Rather, they take on the work of the prophet themselves in their own time and place. Otherwise, they are irrelevant props that can be manipulated by greedy and power-hungry individuals who will stop at nothing to consolidate and hold onto their power.

James Luther Adams, the most influential Unitarian theologian of the twentieth century wrote: “The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share the common responsibility to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of being merely pushed around by it.”

Let me say that again: “The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share the common responsibility to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of being merely pushed around by it.”

I have decided that I'd rather be part of a movement **making** history instead being pushed around by it. To that end, I am going to be more involved prophetic work in the coming months and years.

I will speak out in whatever way I can to point out the ways in which our leaders and our social, political and economic systems are continuing to cause great harm to people who are marginalized and oppressed and great harm to our planet, which is at risk of becoming uninhabitable in just a few generations because of our own human irresponsibility and recklessness.

I will mourn the lack of will and the lack of resolve on the part of our leaders and their failure to take meaningful action to address the problems that our world is facing.

And I will act in such a way as to turn away from despair and turn toward hope. I know that every one of us in this room has been experiencing despair in one way or another. Despair is rampant in our world.

And I know that the only antidote for despair is action; the only way to turn toward hope is to act. In the words of Greta Thunberg, “Once we start to act, hope is everywhere. So instead of looking for hope, look for action. Then, and only then, hope will come.”

I hope and pray that we as a congregation will continue to find our prophetic voice, that we will speak up against injustice, that we will counter fear and hatred with the purifying fire of love, and that, as we act, we will find hope.

May it be so. Amen!

19. Service for October 13, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Jon Porobil, Worship Associate

Opening Words: “A Wider Circle” [Gretchen Haley]

Lighting the Chalice: “For Our Collective Liberation” [Deanna Vandiver]

We light this chalice—symbol of our faith alive in this world—
naming our vision of collective liberation,
and daring to re-member each other into beloved community.

Hymn: “I’ve Got Peace Like a River”

Story for All Ages: “Rivers” [Chris Buice]

Special Music: “Oh, River” [Holly Near]

Musical Meditation: “We Would Be One”

Sermon: “The Power of Belonging,” Rev. Jim Magaw

Hymn: “There’s a River”

Closing Words: “Bonds That Bind Each to All” [Mark Morrison-Reed]

Sermon: “Power of Belonging,” Rev. Jim Magaw

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Every time we have a new member ceremony here at Sunnyhill, I am aware that what these new members are doing is brave and, in some ways, counter-cultural. Standing up in public and stating that you want to belong to a church takes some real courage—especially in an era in which trust in all institutions and organizations is at an all-time low.

Forty years ago, 65 percent of all Americans said that they trusted the church or organized religion a great deal or quite a lot. Today that number is 38 percent and dropping. There are similar decreases in levels of trust in other organizations and institutions of all kinds. And much of that distrust is justified. Time and again, institutions, from the church to corporations to the government, have disappointed or betrayed the trust of the people.

So, in the midst of an unprecedented era of distrust in organizations, it is a truly courageous and counter-cultural act to say I want to belong to this, or any, organization. Since it is no longer the case that everyone is expected to be a member of a congregation, becoming a member sends a strong message, now more than ever before, about the power of belonging.

Many of us start coming to church because we sense something missing from our lives—something that might be hard to articulate but important enough to make us take a risk and cross the threshold of a church, entering into something unknown and a little bit scary.

As I've shared with some of you before, my first experience of becoming a member of a church as an adult occurred when I was in my late thirties and had just gone through some major life changes. My head was just starting to become clear after some 20 years of struggling with depression and substance abuse. My first marriage had just ended. And I was feeling terribly alone.

The truth was that I'd been emotionally isolated for quite some time, but I was just then allowing myself to really recognize it and feel it. And it was out of the depths of those feelings of aloneness that I started to experience a longing to belong to something larger than just myself.

But I had not been a joiner for my entire adult life, so I had to ease into belonging. I started going to my local UU church, but I did not dive in head-first. It was more of a gradual toe-dipping and eventually slowly wading into the life of the church.

For the first few months after I began attending church services, I would arrive shortly after the service had begun and sneak into the back row. And then I'd duck out as the congregation was singing the closing hymn so I wouldn't have to talk with anybody.

But somehow the minister noticed me, and one day when I lingered a tiny bit longer than usual, he engaged me in a very gentle conversation. And after that I started showing up a little earlier and staying a little later.

Eventually, I joined the choir and started doing special music. And, after members of the church's stewardship team found out that I was a professional fundraiser, I was recruited to help with the annual pledge drive.

And the more I showed up, the more I felt like I belonged, and it was a powerful sensation, something that made me feel more fulfilled and whole as a human being.

Poet and author John O'Donohue wrote:

"In post-modern culture there is a deep hunger to belong. An increasing majority of people feel isolated and marginalized. Experience is haunted by fragmentation. Many of the traditional shelters are in ruins. Society is losing the art of fostering community. Consumerism is now propelling life towards the lonely isolation of individualism. Technology pretends to unite us, yet more often than not all it delivers are simulated images. The 'global village' has no roads or neighbors; it is a faceless limbo from which all individuality has been abstracted . . ."

O'Donohue goes on: "From this perspective, it seems we are in the midst of a huge crisis of belonging. When the outer cultural shelters are in ruins, we need to explore and reawaken the depths of belonging in the human mind and soul; perhaps, the recognition of the depth of our hunger to belong may gradually assist us in awakening new and unexpected possibilities of community and friendship."

My observation is that at least part of this crisis of belonging can be attributed to a kind of hyper-individualism that is rampant in our society. There is so much emphasis on individual freedom of thought and expression that we hesitate to risk losing some of that autonomy by belonging to a larger group.

But human nature is such that life without relationships is really no life at all. So the choice is actually one between having a life that is completely free of the encumbrances of relationships with others or having a life in which we do give up some of our autonomy but discover a sense of meaning that can only come about through belonging to a larger group.

There are, however, different kinds of belonging. Emily Esfahani Smith, author of the book “The Power of Meaning,” said:

“... some groups and relationships deliver a cheap form of belonging; you're valued for what you believe, for who you hate, not for who you are. True belonging springs from love. It lives in moments among individuals, and it's a choice—you can choose to cultivate belonging with others.”

What we're seeing around the world right now are many examples of the cheap form of belonging. It is the dark side of belonging—a kind of belonging that springs from fear rather than from love. In these groups, individual fears and hatreds are not only encouraged but required for belonging.

These groups are highly dangerous because, rather than tempering individuals' fear, hatred and distrust of “the other” in whatever form it takes, they actually escalate this fear, hatred and distrust.

In a number of the mass shootings that have taken place recently in country, including last year's shootings at the Tree of Life synagogue, the shooters have belonged to online hate communities, groups that mutually reinforce each other's darkest fears and hatreds and turn some of their members into instruments of violence and death.

In these groups, individuals are encouraged to sink deeper into a kind of hard-shelled isolation that is impermeable to a truer, more profound sense of belonging that requires vulnerability, that requires compassion and a willingness to change and grow.

In the end, rather than fulfilling the deep human need for belonging, these fear- and hate-based groups thwart and prevent a deeper sense of belonging from taking root. These groups are successful at ratcheting up fear, anxiety, and hatred among individual members of their groups, but they are not so good at addressing the need for belonging.

But, even among groups that aspire to be built upon a foundation of love and compassion, there is a shadow side to belonging—because belonging to one group often means not belonging to another group. There's an exclusivity that is inherent in a sense of belonging in that someone is always left out. And, as a religious community, we need to be extremely mindful about who is being excluded and why.

I do not believe that our congregation, for example, is purposely excluding people of color or people who are working class, but the fact is that those groups are under-represented here. Those of us who are members of the dominant groups need to be open to exploring the challenges that are faced by historically marginalized people who come through our doors looking for a place where they can belong.

It's not easy for **anybody** to cross the threshold of this church, but for some the risk is higher than it is for others. This congregation has done some great work in becoming more welcoming and inclusive for LGBTQ people, though we still have some work to do in that area.

But there's even more we can do to become more welcoming and inclusive for people of non-dominant racial, ethnic, and class identities. And, over the next few years, we'll start doing some of that important work so that we might become a place where more and more people feel like they can belong.

While it is a basic human need, belonging is also something of a complex issue and it requires us to become better able to hold tensions without ignoring, denying, or running away from

them. A healthy sense of belonging can take root only when we are able to deal with differences in a healthy way.

So each time we welcome new members into our congregation as we did this morning, the question we need to address is **not** how do we assimilate these people into our church, how do we make them just like **us**. Rather, the question needs to be how do **we** change as a congregation, how do we transform ourselves so that these newer members, and others who have not yet come through our doors, can find a sense of belonging here.

If we are doing our work in a healthy and sustainable way, each time we welcome a new member, our congregation and our congregational culture will change—at least a little bit—so that we **all** can experience a deeper sense of belonging.

Joan Halifax is an American Zen Buddhist teacher who has written about what's needed to live in a way that is based not in fear but in real compassion. She says:

“All too often our so-called strength comes from fear not love; instead of having a strong back, many of us have a defended front shielding a weak spine. In other words, we walk around brittle and defensive, trying to conceal our lack of confidence. If we strengthen our backs, metaphorically speaking, and develop a spine that's flexible but sturdy, then we can risk having a front that's soft and open, representing choiceless compassion.”

Halifax goes on to say: “The place in your body where these two meet — strong back and soft front — is the brave, tender ground in which to root our caring deeply . . . How can we give and accept care with strong-back, soft front compassion, moving past fear into a place of genuine tenderness? I believe it comes about when we can be truly transparent, seeing the world clearly — and letting the world see into us.”

There's a lot of wisdom in those words “strong back, soft front.” We need to have a strong back—we need to be clear about our values and our purpose and to remind one another about these things again and again. But we also need to have a soft front—we need to learn how to be vulnerable with one another, how to lead with the warm softness of compassion rather than the cold rigidity of fear.

Our current societal crisis of belonging will start to dissolve only when we begin living into the wisdom of strong back, soft front.

As I said, belonging is risky, it's complex, and it's not without a shadow side—even in the most well-intentioned communities and organizations. At the same time, we are not fully human if we have not learned how to belong and where to belong.

I hope and pray that we will continue to grow as a place of belonging, a place of risk-taking, a place of welcoming and transforming, a place of strong back and soft front.

May it be so. Amen!



20. Service for October 27, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Joe Shaughnessy, Worship Associate

Opening Words: “We Meet on Holy Ground” [Richard S. Gilbert]

Lighting the Chalice: “Divine Spark” [Kathy A. Huff]

Hymn: “Hava Nashirah”

Story for All Ages: “David and Goliath”

Special Music: “Little David, Play on Your Harp” [arr. Morgan Ames]

Tree of Life Remembrance

Musical Meditation: “There Is More Love Somewhere”

Sermon: “David and Goliath,” Rev. Jim Magaw

Hymn: “Now Let Us Sing”

Closing Words: “Only One Thing Required of Us” [Kendyl R. Gibbons]

Sermon: “David and Goliath,” Rev. Jim Magaw

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During the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, I remember thinking, “This is as bad as things can possibly get.” It’s hard to imagine more rancor, more fear- and hate-mongering, more outright political ugliness than we witnessed during that election cycle. But, as we prepare for the 2020 election, it appears that things might be even worse this time around.

It’s been difficult to find much about which to be excited or hopeful so far in the pre-election shouting matches that have been taking place. But, occasionally, I have found an unexpected breath of fresh air from an unlikely source: the comments of Marianne Williamson.

Please understand that I am in no way endorsing Williamson or any other presidential candidate. And there are all kinds of problems with Williamson as a candidate—she has zero governance or policy experience, she’s not versed in the language or the business of politics, and some of the statements she makes are so strange and “out there” that people have been compiling lists of “Williamson’s Weirdest Debate Moments” and “Oddball Debate Answers.”

But every now and then she says something that cuts to the absolute heart of the matter. In one of the debates, she addressed Trump directly, saying: “If you’re listening, I want you to hear me, please: You have harnessed fear for political purposes, and only love can cast that out . . . I’m going to harness love for political purposes. I will meet you on that field, and, sir, love will win.”

As rhetorical studies and women’s studies professor Audrey Thompson said: “Harnessing fear for political purposes is what rhetoricians call ‘demagoguery,’ and Williamson is right to recognize it as a real threat. The question is whether she is right to think that love can beat it.”

Most political analysts and journalists have traced Williamson’s statements and ideals to her connection to the New Age movement and what many people see as overly simplistic and somewhat shallow or naïve views on the human condition and religion and spirituality. So, when they hear Williamson talking about love casting out fear, Williamson’s critics are thinking about love as some gooey, saccharine emotion that conjures up rainbows and unicorns.

But what I hear Williamson invoking through her rhetoric echoes Martin Luther King's statement: "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."

And both Williamson's and King's ideas have their foundations in the Hebrew prophets more than they do in New Age philosophy or mere wishful thinking. Rather than looking at Williamson's spacey, new-age roots, it might be more useful to look at her deeper roots as a person of Jewish ancestry.

Specifically, when Marianne Williamson makes statements about love defeating fear on the field of battle, she is invoking the story of David and Goliath from First Samuel in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. This story has, for centuries, been cited anytime an underdog—whether it's an individual or a group of people—is facing a much more powerful opponent.

And, in the case of Trump, one can certainly make the case that he is a rhetorical giant. Not an intellectual or ethical giant. He has absolutely no sense of morality, no evident concern for right or wrong, no native intelligence or even the most rudimentary idea about how government works, but those "Make America Great Again" hats sell like hotcakes. Only a few times in American history have we seen such a blatant example of fear-mongering demagoguery. It would be fascinating if it weren't so absolutely terrifying.

And policy papers cannot defeat demagoguery. Policies, of course, are, or ought to be, critically important in governing a nation. But no number of progressive think tanks or well-reasoned intellectual analyses will conquer the fear summoned up by the hate-filled invective that we've heard from the current administration and from fear-mongers elsewhere.

As Williamson has said: "If you think we're gonna beat Donald Trump by just having all of these plans [referring to proposed policy initiatives], you've got another thing coming . . . because he didn't win by saying he had a plan; he won by simply saying 'Make America Great Again.'"

Combatting demagoguery, engaging on the field of battle with the giant of fear and hatred that has been unleashed in our world, requires a strategy that is less like a policy statement and more like David's strategy facing Goliath.

In his recent book, "David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants," Malcolm Gladwell takes a closer look at the David and Goliath story, digging up some details that are often missed.

In our usual reading of the story, David is thought of as this skinny, little shepherd boy who is weak and essentially powerless, while Goliath is seen as a mighty warrior who is unassailable. It's the ultimate underdog story. But, in his research, Gladwell unearthed several key facts.

The first is that, when David picks up those five smooth stones and heads off to battle armed only with those stones and a sling, he is **not** powerless. The slings that were used in David's time were not children's slingshots, they were weapons which, in the right hands, could propel rocks with approximately the same stopping power as a .45 caliber hand gun. Skilled sling users could bring down predators and enemies from as far as 200 yards away.

As a shepherd, David would have had ample opportunity to practice using his sling as he protected his flock from wolves as mountain lions. Although he wasn't large and he had no experience in hand-to-hand combat, he was likely a force to be reckoned with.

And Goliath, far from being invulnerable, likely had a number of literal and metaphorical chinks in his armor. According to Biblical records, Goliath stood at about six feet, nine inches—which, at a time when the average adult height was just over five feet tall, meant that he really did tower above most people. But there are suggestions from the Biblical text that Goliath suffered from acromegaly, caused by a benign tumor pressing against the pituitary gland, which made him tall but also likely made him nearsighted and limited his mobility.

As a result, rather than being invincible as a foe, Goliath was probably only well-suited for close-in, hand-to-hand combat. In battling from a distance, he was likely at a distinct disadvantage.

Again, in the words of Audrey Thompson speaking of David:

“Choosing to fight with his sling—though a seemingly odd choice for warfare—was the only way to beat the giant. So, when Williamson says Trump will not be defeated by simply having a plan and that his bark is as important as his bite, she may be zeroing in on a crucial aspect of this situation, one that ‘politics-as-usual’ is ill-equipped to handle.”

So, if demagogically-inspired fear and hatred are the giant that we are currently facing, then what is the David-like strategy that we can employ in the service of the love that drives out fear?

The answer to that question is suggested by one of our most famous and influential Unitarian Universalist theologians, James Luther Adams.

As some of you may know, Adams was studying theology in Germany when the Nazis came into power during the 1920s and 1930s. Like most religious liberals of his era, Adams was well-versed in current events and espoused support from the pulpit for a number of progressive causes. But James Luther Adams was dumbfounded when he was faced with the question of how his religious liberalism would counter fascism.

In Adams’ own words: “I recall a conversation with [the German psychiatrist and philosopher] Karl Jaspers at his home one day in Heidelberg in 1936. I asked him what he deemed to be the contemporary significance of liberal [religion in the face of fascism]. He replied with unwonted vehemence, “Religious liberalism has no significance. It has Zwang—no costing commitment.” [Zwang means “force” in this context.]

Adams continues: “I pressed upon myself the question, ‘If Fascism should arise in the States, what in your past performance would constitute a pattern or framework of resistance?’ I could give only a feeble answer to the question. My principal political activities had been the reading of the newspaper and voting. I had preached sermons on the depression or in defense of strikers. Occasionally, I uttered protest against censorship in Boston, but I had no adequate conception of citizenship participation.”

Adams goes on to say: “Repeatedly I heard anti-Nazis say, ‘If only 1,000 of us in the late twenties had combined in heroic resistance, we could have stopped Hitler.’ Gradually I came to the conviction,” Adams says, “that a decisive institution of the viable democratic society is the voluntary association as a medium for the assumption of civic responsibility.”

When Adams speaks of “voluntary associations” what he’s talking about is grass-roots, community activism. And, when Adams returned to the U.S. from Germany he immersed himself in emerging activist groups. Again, in his own words:

“I plunged into voluntary associational activity, concerning myself with race relations, civil liberties, housing problems . . . I traveled to Washington fairly often to consult with [elected officials]. At the same time, I participated in precinct organization, becoming a doorbell ringer and also consulting with party leaders in the back rooms. There is nothing intrinsically unusual about all of this. It was only unusual for the Protestant churchman or clergyman.”

And Adams also invoked the story of David and Goliath in articulating his ideas about what the response of liberal religion should be to the rise of authoritarian regimes. He described the “five smooth stones” of religious liberalism that could be used to defeat anti-democratic movements. Those five smooth stones are as follows:

1. “Religious liberalism depends on the principle that 'revelation' is continuous." In other words, we must be open to learning new truths, even when those new truths lead us into situations that are uncomfortable and inconvenient.
2. "All relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not on coercion." Meaning, if the church is to have any power or influence in the larger world, the members of the church have to be there because they want to effect change in the world, not just because they feel like they have a social obligation to be there.
3. "Religious liberalism affirms the moral obligation to direct one's effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community"--which means progressive *ideas* are not enough. Our faith must be centered upon actually getting our hands dirty and building just and loving community ourselves.
4. " . . . [W]e deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation." In other words, good things don't just happen by themselves, people make them happen. We have agency in the world, and we need to take that agency seriously. And
5. "[L]iberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism." Meaning, if we do all of the above, then there is *hope* in the world. In fact, we create that hope through our actions.

In summary, when facing the giant challenges of our era—the rise of authoritarian governments, increased fear- and hate-based violence, a backlash of hostility toward oppressed and marginalized people—when facing these and other truly gigantic challenges, it is important to remember that we are not powerless, that we are in fact powerful and armed with the ammunition we need to help love drive out fear.

Following in the footsteps of James Luther Adams, as long as we choose our smooth stones wisely—as long as we are open to new ways of being in the world, as long as we participate in action-based covenanted communities, as long as we center our work around the establishment of the beloved community, as long as we remember our own power, as long as we find hope through action—we *will* be able to slay the giant.

I hope and pray that we will be mindful of the importance and urgency of the task before us, that we will be true to our most important and enduring values of love and justice, and that, through us, the light of compassion might drive out the darkness of fear.

May it be so. Amen!



21. Service for November 10, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Lexy Lott, Worship Associate

Opening Words: “Do Not Be Alone Right Now” [Karen Johnston]

Lighting the Chalice: “Fan the Flames” [Laurel Sheridan]

Take from life its coals, not its ashes.
Fan the flames of love and justice;
join hands and hearts in common endeavor;
and there will be no limit to what we can achieve together.

Hymn: “This Is My Song”

Story for All Ages: “The Bell of Atri” [James Baldwin]

Special Music: “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” [Robinson/Navias], Noah Potvin

Musical Meditation: “Bridge Over Troubled Water” [Paul Simon], Noah Potvin

Sermon: “Won’t Get Fooled Again,” Rev. Jim Magaw

Hymn: “We Are Building a New Way”

Offering/Offertory: “Won’t Get Fooled Again” [Pete Townsend], Michele Griger et al

Closing Words: “As We Part Now” [Eileen Karpeles]

Sermon: “We Won’t Get Fooled Again!” Rev. Jim Magaw

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Three years ago today, on November 10, 2016, we held a special evening vesper service that some of you might recall. It was two days after the 2016 election, and many of us were feeling stunned by the results of that election and profoundly concerned about the future of our country.

At that time, our construction project was underway and we couldn’t meet in our own building, so we met instead at the Bower Hill Community Church, whose minister and members were kind enough to let us use their auditorium for the evening.

I thought that maybe 20 or 30 people would show up for that Thursday evening service, but more than 100 were in attendance as we came together to try to come to terms with what had

just happened and to begin to move forward. I'd like to revisit some of my reflections from that night three years ago to see what might have changed and what's still the same.

At the time, I said:

I reject any notion that, now that this election cycle is over, we'll simply return to business as usual. I reject the idea that it was "only an election" and that we need to get over it. I reject the suggestion that it's not really as bad as we might think.

The truth is that it is much worse than many of us thought . . . It was, in the words of one columnist: 'a triumph for the forces, at home and abroad, of nativism, authoritarianism, misogyny, and racism.'

The election of this man—a bully, a predator, a crass money grubber and ridiculously vain poser—legitimizes and normalizes rape culture, overt and covert racism, rank misogyny, xenophobia and hatred of "the other."

I then continued:

While I have no doubt that the people who have put this man in office have real anxieties, fears and concerns of their own—fears and anxieties that have not been adequately heard or addressed—these concerns do not in any way justify the results of the election or mitigate its consequences.

Those who are most at risk in our country—people of color, immigrants, religious minorities, LGBTQ people, women, and others—are now threatened with even more persecution and violence.

And I want to say to all people who are now more vulnerable and risk, I pledge to support you and fight for you, *we* pledge to support you and fight for you. You are whole just as you are, you are loved, and you are needed. While it may seem that the country as a whole has just rejected you, there are many of us who love you and need you.

I went on to say:

I ask you *not* to turn away from reality—as sad and scary as it may be—but to face it as squarely as you can. I ask you *not* to short-change your grief but to embrace it for now. I ask you *not* to remain forever mired in despair, but to be open to the possibility of hope when it comes your way.

So, three years later, what has changed? And, more importantly, what, if anything, have we done to prevent something similar from happening again? Have we continued to face reality squarely, to work through our grief, and to begin to turn toward hope?

The answers to these questions are not necessarily simple or easy. But I do believe that we, as a church, have become a more activist congregation, that we have become more engaged in dealing with the reality of our situation, that we have grown more concerned with the impact of unjust laws and policies on the most vulnerable and marginalized people in our society, and that we have begun to find hope through action.

We chartered buses to Washington, D.C., to participate in the Women's March and the March for Our Lives, we've taken part in climate justice events, we've written letters and made phone calls to our elected representatives, demanding action on issues related to our values. We have started reaching out to other organizations and congregations that share many of our core val-

ues in order to build partnerships for change. We have begun getting out of our comfort zones, at least a little bit, in order to walk the talk of our faith in more meaningful ways.

But, as the specter of the 2020 election looms before us just 12 months away, I wonder if we are any better prepared now than we were in 2016. I wonder if we are ready for whatever might happen and how it will affect our nation. I wonder if we are basing our actions and our expectations on reality or on complacency and wishful thinking.

Part of what happened in the 30 years or so leading up to 2016 was a shift toward oligarchy in our country "in which a small group exercises control especially for corrupt and selfish purposes." While we continue to hold regular elections that may seem democratic, "policymaking is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans," which has resulted in a decidedly *un*-democratic system.

As just one example of how this un-democratic system works, a clear majority of Americans of all political persuasions now favor certain stricter gun laws, but the laws do not get changed because a small, powerful group of individuals who benefit from everyone having unrestricted access to guns do not want the laws to change. That's the way an oligarchy functions.

Our American political and economic system is fundamentally dysfunctional and corrupt. That's the underlying reality of our situation right now and it has been for years.

Many of us were caught off-guard and were fooled in 2016.

We were fooled by our own denial and complacency, by thinking or wishing that things weren't really all that bad, when, in fact, they were, as I mentioned, much worse than we could have known.

We were fooled by the largely symbolic steps forward that had been made in recent years, including the election of our first Black president and our first viable female presidential candidate.

We were fooled by the idea that our political and economic systems were basically sound and functional and just needed a few tweaks around the edges to make them better.

We were fooled by the idea that we live in a country where the majority rules when, in reality, the majority are disempowered and many are disenfranchised through various means of voter suppression.

We were fooled by our own ignorance about the insidious nature of white supremacy, authoritarianism, and religious nationalism, which have been the driving forces behind much of the hatred and violence that continues to bubble up in tragic and terrible ways in the U.S. and around the world.

We were fooled in so many ways. But I pray from the depths of my soul that we won't get fooled again. The 2020 election will be critically important to our nation—there can be no doubt about it. But the deeper work that needs to be done will not be accomplished as the result of single election, no matter what the result.

It took decades for us to arrive at our current situation, and it will take decades to work our way toward something new and better. Please do not be tricked into thinking that winning one election will make all the difference. It might make a significant difference, but the kind of systemic changes that are needed will require a lot of time and energy on *all* of our parts.

In recent years, I've been thinking about parallels in the Bible with our current era, Biblical analogues for our own times.

There are many on the religious right who have hailed Trump as the new Cyrus. "Cyrus the Great [was] the Persian Emperor who allowed Israelite priestly elites to settle back in the Promised Land and financed the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem." The idea is that "only a [godless] ruler who knows nothing of the God of Israel . . . [could] restore the righteous remnant to the Promised Land." In other words, there are those on the religious right who excuse the president's obvious immorality by claiming that, in the end, his work will have righteous results. It's an absurd and scary argument, but that's what some people are claiming.

I, on the other hand, see a number of parallels between our current president and Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, who ascended to the throne of Israel some 3,000 years ago. Rehoboam became king at a time when there was a lot of tension between the various tribes of Israel, and there were hopes among some that he might become a great unifier. But Rehoboam, instead, chose to become a great divider. To those who had already been suffering hardship and oppression, Rehoboam said:

"My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions."

And for the next 200 years, Israel was a divided nation. Rehoboam's inflexibility and vindictiveness had absolutely calamitous consequences on a nation that was already suffering. The king's choice to pursue an agenda of further divisiveness led to disaster.

Similarly, over the past three years, we have seen how the political strategy of "divide and conquer" has turned into "divide and divide." The already-existing divisions in our country have only become more sharply defined and splintered. The conflicts that were already brewing have begun to overflow. And the already abysmally low gutter-level of political discourse has sunk even lower.

Any hope we might have to unite a divided nation has to grow from the bottom up and from the margins toward the center. It's not going to come from the top down and it's not going to come from the center outward. We have to begin with the voices from the bottom and from the margins because, otherwise, any changes that are generated will only serve to perpetuate a corrupt, dysfunctional system.

In the face of all of our current challenges and the very real uncertainty about our future, how do we make sure that we don't get fooled again the way we were three years ago? How do we make sure that we are working to effect real and meaningful change and not just spinning our wheels? I would suggest we keep in mind three things that I've mentioned before.

First of all, we need to stop being in denial about our circumstances and instead face things as they truly are. We are no longer in a situation that can be remedied by simply electing a different president or different senators or congress people—although such elections are certainly a critically important part of the answer. We need to acknowledge that the system itself is diseased and is no longer functioning as a democracy or a democratic republic.

Second, as I said just a moment ago, we need to recognize that any meaningful change will come from the bottom up and from the margins inward rather than from the top down or from the center outward. So listening to and centering voices from the margins is not just a nice thing to do—it's a necessary task if we are to move forward as a people.

Third and finally, we need to learn from our history. Ever since our nation was founded, we have seen, time and time again, how nationalist movements have resulted in oppression and corruption. Repeatedly, we have seen how seeds of divisiveness sown by power-hungry politicians have resulted in a bitter harvest of gross injustice.

All three of these ideas—getting real about where we are, starting from the bottom up and outside in, and learning from our history—are essential components of the great change that must come about if our democratic republic is to be renewed and to start to heal from its current wounds.

As 2020 looms, I hope and pray that we will face things as they truly are, that we will renew and act on our pledge to fight for those who are most at risk, that we will learn from our experiences, and that we won't get fooled again.

May it be so. Amen!



22. Service for December 8, 2019

Order of Service:

Welcome: Jon Porobil, Worship Associate

Gathering Music: "Jolly Old St. Nicholas," Sharps & Flats Cello Choir**

Opening Words: "The Wonder All Around Us" [Scott Tayler]

Lighting the Chalice: "New Light" [Charles Howe]

Hymn: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

Story for All Ages: "The Jacket That Came Home" [Margaret Silf]

Children's Recessional: "As You Go" [Suzelle Lynch/Ruben Piirainen]

As you go may joy surround you, as you go, go in peace.
Know our love is with you always, as you go, as you go.

Special Music: "The First Noël," Sharps & Flats

Musical Meditation: "Find a Stillness"

Sermon: "Pregnant Questioning," Rev. Jim Magaw

Hymn: "Let Christmas Come"

Closing Words: "Hungering for Meaning" [Bruce Southworth]

Sermon: "Pregnant Questioning," Rev. Jim Magaw

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In the Christian liturgical calendar, Advent is the period that immediately precedes Christmas. It is not, traditionally, a time of festive celebration but rather a time set aside for silence, for

contemplation, for waiting, wondering and experiencing awe, even in the midst of the darkness of the season.

Advent is something that has gotten lost in our culture at large in the mad merry-go-round of frenzied activity that takes place each year from Thanksgiving through New Year's Day. But it is important—and vitally necessary—to recapture the spirit of Advent in our lives as a time for anticipatory silence, wonderment, and holding with care the unresolved questions in our lives and in our world.

One of my favorite parts of the Christmas story, as told in the Gospel of Luke, comes in the midst of all the intoxicating rush of angels and shepherds and heavenly choirs and animals in the manger and the birth of Jesus. Right in the middle of all of this amazing and incredible stuff, this one little verse stands out, Luke 2:19: “But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.”

Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. In other words, she held all the questions and puzzlements that she must have been experiencing, close to her heart so that the meaning of all that had happened might be made clear over time, so that in her own time and in her own way she might come to an understanding of these events that must have felt overwhelming to her.

I'm reminded of this quote from Rilke: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue.”

As Mary “kept all these things and pondered them in her heart,” she was learning to love the questions themselves, to sit with the tension that always exists between the known and the unknown, between the present and the future, between profane surface and the sacred depths.

Richard Rohr, a Jesuit priest and author, writes:

“As a culture, it seems we are deeply afraid of silence . . . The running from silence is undoubtedly running . . . from our soul, from our selves, from the truth, and from freedom. One of the beginnings of freedom is to stop thinking and “just look” ([which is the literal meaning of the word] *contemplata* in Latin), or just be. . . . Give yourself permission to get out of your head, to let go of your sacred explanations and theological certitudes that too often make personal listening, waiting, [and] seeking a non-need!”

Rohr goes on: “My single biggest disappointment in serving as a priest for 44 years is the lack of spiritual curiosity among the vast majority of [supposedly religious people]. They too often settle for glib answers that make silent awe and pregnant questioning unnecessary—which is the very birth of the authentic religious spirit.”

Imagine what our lives might be like if we actually did make room for silent awe and pregnant questioning—especially during this time of year when we go breathlessly from one noisy thing to another. Imagine what it might be like to truly embrace Advent as a time of waiting and wondering.

Tish Harrison Warren is a priest in the Anglican Church in North America and associate rector and writer in residence at the Church of the Ascension here in Pittsburgh. She writes about Advent not as a season of mindless celebration but as a time to make room to ponder all that is happening within and around us. She writes:

“We need communal rhythms that make deliberate space for both grief and joy. For me, the old saying rings true: Hunger is the best condiment. Abstaining, for a moment, from the clamor of compulsive jollification, and instead leaning into the reality of human tragedy and of my own need and brokenness, allows my experience of glory at Christmastime to feel not only more emotionally sustainable but also more vivid, vital and cherished.”

Warren continues: “Our response to the wrongness of the world (and of ourselves) can often be an unhealthy escapism, and we can turn to the holidays as anesthesia from pain as much as anything else. We need collective space, as a society, to grieve—to look long and hard at what is cracked and fractured in our world and in our lives. Only then can celebration become deep, rich and resonant, not as a saccharine act of delusion but as a defiant act of hope.”

I love Warren’s idea of turning away from the “clamor of compulsive jollification,” as she calls it, and working instead toward an experience of Christmastime that is “more emotionally sustainable” as well as “more vivid, vital and cherished.” What a wonderful goal for all of us, especially at this time of year.

If we are mindful, if we are willing to build in pauses in the midst of the holiday revels, if we are intentional about holding with care all the things of our lives, loving the questions and pondering them in our hearts, then we will be well on our way toward reclaiming Advent as a truly sacred time of contemplation and potential transformation.

I know that all of this is easier said than done. It’s so easy to get swept away by whatever is happening around us. But, if we are to live lives that are more centered, more focused, more impactful, we must take every opportunity we can to ponder and learn to love the questions.

It’s interesting to me that the character of Mary in the Christmas story sometimes gets short shrift and is often presented as merely a passive vessel rather than an active participant in events as they unfold. She was after all, according to the story, the mother of God. And it is through the story of Mary that we see not only the importance of pondering what is in our hearts but also the radical message that is at the heart of the birth and life of Jesus.

Author and journalist and D.L. Mayfield (who is also a preacher’s kid, God bless her) tells a story of how she discovered this more radical, activist side of Mary only in recent years. She writes:

“When I was 15, I was cajoled into playing the role of Mary in our church’s Christmas nativity scene. I was embarrassed, stuffing a pillow under a robe to signify pregnancy, but I felt I had no choice: I was the pastor’s daughter, and there was no one else who could play the role. My cheeks burning in shame, I remember feeling little connection to Mary, the mother of God. I was silent in the play. Mary, in our tradition, was a vehicle for Jesus: a holy womb, a good and compliant and obedient girl.”

“Much later in life,” Mayfield says, “I was shocked to discover that Mary wasn’t quiet, nor was she what I would call meek and mild.”

She’s referring to the first chapter of Luke and a song that appears there known as the Magnificat, which is sung by Mary.

The first verses are probably somewhat familiar to you: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” Also possibly familiar are the next few lines “about Mary being overwhelmed at the goodness of God looking upon a humble girl, that God is mighty and has done great things, that he is holy and will bless those who fear him.” But then comes this:

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

Mayfield writes: “In all my long years of being in church, of knowing the Christmas story backward and forward, I never heard these verses emphasized. Here, Mary comes across less like a scared and obedient 15-year-old and more like a rebel intent on reorienting unjust systems. I loved this Mary. Where had she been all my life?”

“Oscar Romero, priest and martyr, drew a comparison between Mary and the poor and powerless people in his own community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis, called the Magnificat ‘the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung.’

“Revolutionaries, the poor and the oppressed, all loved Mary and they emphasized her glorious song. But the Magnificat has been viewed as dangerous by people in power. Some countries—such as . . . Guatemala, and Argentina— have outright banned the Magnificat from being recited in liturgy or in public.

“And evangelicals—in particular, white evangelicals—have devalued the role of Mary, and her song, to the point that she has almost been forgotten as anything other than a silent figure in a nativity scene.”

It is time to return Mary to her rightful place at the front and center of the Christmas story. For far too long, Mary has been marginalized, her role reduced to a bit player when she was, in fact, after Jesus himself, the most important character in the story.

And I am 100 percent in favor of “putting Christ back in Christmas” if the Christ we’re talking about is the one who brings down unjust rulers from their thrones, who lifts up the humble, who fills the hungry with good things and vanquishes the oppressors. And, make no mistake, this is the Christ of whom Mary sang, the child of hers whose birth and life she proclaimed loudly as well as holding and pondering quietly in her heart.

So it is that Mary brings to us at least two vitally important messages to keep in mind during this Advent and Christmastime.

The first has to do with making space for awe, for wondering, for holding and loving the questions. This task requires a willingness on our part to step off the conveyor belt of holiday season over-consumption and mindless celebration and instead find quiet moments when can simply **be** rather than always **doing**.

The second message from Mary is that the particular event many of us are preparing to celebrate has, at its heart, a powerful, radical, and transformational message—namely, that each of us is called to incarnate, to bring into being, the fierce and unrelenting love that unseats the unjust oppressors and lifts up the humble and the forgotten and marginalized people of the world.

Both of these messages are counter-cultural in that they go against the prevailing current of soul-numbing consumption and celebrations that tend to be shallow and unsatisfying in many

ways. And, because it **is** counter-cultural, this approach to the holidays requires more work and more mindfulness on our part.

Each of us bears the light that illuminates the darkness within and around us and waits to break free in the world, righting wrongs, lifting and healing all that it touches like a great warm wave of endless and unrelenting love.

In the words of the poet Jan Richardson:

Blessed are you
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything seems
in shadow
and grief.

Blessed are you
in whom
the light lives,
in whom
the brightness blazes—
your heart
a chapel,
an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith
in stubborn hope
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.

I hope and pray that all of us might remember the message of Mary during this holiday season and that we will strive to follow her example of pregnant questioning—pondering in our hearts all that cannot be known and proclaiming, through our words and actions, the birth and re-birth of fierce love, healing justice, and stubborn hope in our often hate-filled, unjust, sometimes-hopeless, hurting world.

May it be so. Amen!



23. Note on Chalice Lighting and Extinguishing 2019

Where a chalice lighting is not explicitly shown, here are favorite readings often used:

1. Chalice Lighting

We light this chalice, symbol of all that we are,
all that we have done together, and all that will be,
as we work to encourage those within and beyond our walls.

"Light and Warmth of Community" (Jim Magaw)
We kindle our chalice as a reminder that,
Even in the midst of grief and uncertainty,
We are sustained by the light and warmth
Of this loving community.

"To Face the World's Shadows" (Lindsay Bates)
To face the world's shadows, a chalice of light.
To face the world's coldness, a chalice of warmth,
To face the world's terrors, a chalice of courage.
To face the world's turmoil, a chalice of peace.
May its glow fill our spirits, our hearts, and our lives.

"Our Faith Will Flame On" (Cynthia Landrum)
Mindful that,
With great power comes great responsibility,
We light this chalice in the hopes that
In brightest day, in blackest night,
Our faith will flame on!

2. Chalice Extinguishing

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth,
The warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

3 UUA on Chalice Lighting: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/chalice-lighting>

4 UUA on Chalice Extinguishing: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/closing/6049.shtml>

24. Hymns Chosen from UUA Hymnals for these 2019 Services

"Alleluia Chaconne" STLT # 386
"Come, Come, Whoever You Are" STLT # 188
"How Can I Keep from Singing" STLT # 108
"I Know This Rose Will Open" STLT #396
"Morning Has Broken" STLT # 38
"My Life Flows On in Endless Song" STLT # 108
"Spirit of Life" STLT # 123
"Be Ye Lamps" STLT # 679
"Blue Boat Home" STJ # 1064
"Come and Go with Me" STJ # 1018
"Come Sing a Song with Me" STLT # 346
"Do You Hear?" STLT # 112
"Find a Stillness" STLT # 352 (3)
"For the Beauty of the Earth" STLT # 21
"For the Earth Forever Turning" STLT # 163
"Gather the Spirit" STLT # 347
"Hava Nashirah" STLT # 394
"Here We Have Gathered" STLT # 360
"I Know This Rose Will Open" STLT # 396
"I'm On My Way" STLT # 116 (2)
"I've Got Peace Like a River" STLT # 100 (2)
"Just as Long as I Have Breath" STLT # 6
"Let Christmas Come" STLT # 224
"Love Will Guide Us" STLT # 131
"Morning Has Broken" STLT #38
"Now Let Us Sing" STLT # 368
"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" STLT # 225
"One More Step" STLT # 168 (2)
"Oshana, Shira Oshana" STLT # 260
"Sing and Rejoice" STLT # 395
"Spirit of Life" STLT # 123 (3)
"There Is More Love Somewhere" STLT # 95 (2)
"There's a River Flowin' in My Soul" STJ # 1007 (2)
"This Is My Song" STLT # 159 (2)
"Voice Still and Small" STLT # 391 (4)
"Wake Now My Senses" STLT # 298

“We Are Building a New Way” STJ # 1017

“We Would Be One” STLT # 318 (2)

“When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place” STJ # 1008

“When the Spirit Says Do” STJ # 1024

“Winds Be Still” STLT # 83

With careful searching, *Youtube*™ presentations of these hymns can be located online.

Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) hymnals:

Singing the Living Tradition (STLT) (Beacon Press, 1993).

Singing the Journey (STJ) (UUA, 2005).

UUA Hymnal Index (online): <https://www.uua.org/worship/music/hymnals/singing-living-tradition/index-hymn-title>

Some hymns were chosen from alternative sources.