

2011 John Murray Distinguished Lecture
Rev William Sinkford

Be Not Conformed to this World

Romans 12:1-2

My thanks to the Murray Grove Association for the invitation to speak today. And thanks to Carol Haag for that overly generous introduction.

It is good to be attending a General Assembly where the responsibilities of being UUA President rest on other shoulders, where no one believes that I am in charge and only a few people have asked me to fix anything.

Many of you have asked, “How is parish ministry, Bill?” “How is that transition from the President’s office to congregational life working for you?”

It is, in fact, a long way from 25 Beacon St., Boston, to 12th and Salmon in Portland, OR. And a long way from organizational leadership of the UUA to pastoral leadership of one of our flagship congregations.

How is parish ministry for me? Reporting at the end of my first year, the answer is that I am loving it. First Unitarian Portland is a wonderful, spirit-filled community, brimming with energy and possibility. Challenges too. We are a large and, once again, rapidly growing church without enough room or staff or money. But the positive energy, the “good buzz” in the church, prevents any of our challenges from seeming overwhelming.

I love standing in the pulpit, looking out on people that I am coming to know, who have stories that they have shared with me. I love the intimacy and the week-to-week rhythm of the church. The fact that my travel now is primarily on foot to the church rather than via Logan Airport is a huge fringe benefit.

The short version, is that it feels like the congregation and I are in the early stages of a love affair that offers great promise for the future.

The Unitarian pedigree of First Church is impeccable. It was founded in 1866 by liberal religious pioneers from the east coast. There were a few Universalists among them but the majority were Unitarian. Thomas Lamb Eliot, of the famous Unitarian Eliot family, was the first minister. His son, William Greenleaf Eliot, followed him. Together they led the congregation for almost all of its first 70 years, right up to

1934. This is the same Eliot family, ministers from which established First Unitarian in St. Louis and Unity Unitarian in St. Paul. Eliots served as Presidents of the AUA and built 25 Beacon St. The Eliot's were American Unitarianism's "first family" ...for decades.

Earl Morse Wilbur, later President of Starr King seminary, served as the first Eliot's Associate and then for a brief time as Senior Minister. He practiced his Unitarianism at First Church and later wrote the 1000 page, two-volume history of Unitarianism that still elicits groans from seminarians preparing for the MFC. Wilbur taught us that freedom, reason and tolerance are at the heart of the Unitarian faith.

Unitarianism runs deep in the DNA of the church, but I was pleased to find Universalism there as well.

I found it in a few of the elders, who have been pillars of the church for years, but were Universalist in their youth and young adulthood. As one describes herself, "I was Universalist before I was Unitarian." Just before Easter, this woman took me aside and said, in almost a conspiratorial tone of voice: "If you want to know where they hide the old communion silver, I can show you where it is."

Universalists and Universalism tend to have a closer and a warmer relationship with the Christian tradition than the Unitarian side of our collective family tree.

Actually, the church traditionally holds a Maundy Thursday service, with Unitarian Universalist communion served, every Easter. They know just where the silver is kept and how to polish it. I had the privilege of celebrating that oldest of Christian rituals using that silver this spring.

Some of our newer members had some questions when they saw the notice about the Maundy Thursday service. "I didn't think this was a Christian church." "Why would you offer communion?" "Are we in the right place after all?"

I wrote about those questions on my blog and readership of the blog nearly doubled. No, First Portland is not a Christian church but our Christian roots are clear. On the blog, I talked about the other religious traditions that we honor: the labyrinth we walk every month, the solstice service, the Buddhist sengha and honoring the Jewish High Holy days. I talked about what it means to be a church that honors the wisdom of all the world's great faith traditions. And I asked if we should do more. Celebrate Dewali? A Passover Sedar? Ramadan?

“Bring Many Names, beautiful and good, celebrate in parable and story.”

That embrace of pluralism, too, is in our Universalist heritage. Remember Rev. Ken Patton and the Charles Street Meeting house, with its symbols of the world’s religions. More than a few of our UU congregations have adopted that practice. From early on Universalism as “World Religion” has been an important theme. Unitarian, too, of course. But it was, I think, almost inevitable that the Universalist name would lead in that direction.

There may even be an echo of that sentiment in “The religion for our time.”

I’m finding Universalism not only in the personal histories of some of our pillars and in the traditions of the church, but Universalism is also popping up in the church’s present.

First Unitarian, Portland never added “Universalist” to its name. It shares that with the other “Eliot “churches I mentioned. One congregant has taken up the cause of adding the other “U” to the church’s name. She, naturally, asked for my support.

Names have to do with identity and name changes are always fraught. We’re here in the newly re-christening SouthEast District, formerly the Thomas Jefferson District. That change of name has been worked on since the GA was last here in Charlotte, more than 15 years ago. I cautioned that congregant that identity always needs to be approached carefully, it is a tender topic, and that I thought it unlikely that the Board would simply put a vote on a name change on the ballot this year.

But I also said I thought this could be a wonderful opportunity for the congregation to learn more about the Universalist contribution to our religious heritage. First Church is beginning to imagine its 150th anniversary, 5 years from now. Universalist identity could be a valuable part of the education and reflection leading up to that celebration.

I overheard a volunteer talking with a visitor at the welcome table just outside the sanctuary not long ago. She was doing a good job of describing Unitarian Universalist beliefs, but the visitor had more questions and the volunteer decided to cut to the chase: “It’s all about love around here. This church is all about love.”

Sounded like Universalism to me.

It's all about love. If that is the primary message people are getting at the church, I am one happy minister.

An embracing love is at the very heart of the Universalist gospel. John Murray, for whom this lecture is named, preached the radical doctrine that Jesus's death had atoned for the sins of all of us, every one.

Murray agreed with the ambient Protestantism of the day, that we are sinful and need saving. But that task has been taken care of. Our debt has been paid by Jesus's death, at God's direction. It's done. Cross that one off the list. Oh, when we die we might not be gathered to God right away. There might be a period of punishment, "probation" it was later called. But ultimately every soul is saved, universally...universalist.

The Great Commission in Christianity was to spread the good news of Salvation through Jesus. You have to accept Jesus to be saved, so most Christian denominations proclaim. Hellfire is the alternative.

Murray said, "No".

"Give them not hell, but hope and courage."

God's love will redeem us regardless of whether we've heard the Universalist good News or not. The purpose of Universalist evangelism, for Murray, was to let people know about the good news of what was already a fact. The knowledge of universal redemption did not change the outcome but it could offer salvation from guilt and anxiety. Now that's something to think about.

Murray may have been the founder of Universalism on these shores, but Hosea Ballou was its acknowledged leader through the first half of the 19th century. And with Ballou, the Good News of Universalism got even better.

Murray's God still required the death of God's son to atone for the sins of the world. There was still disappointment with our sinful, fallible choices and some punishment in Murray's God.

For Ballou, God IS Love.

No hell. No probation. This was not partial, not half-way, not somewhat. We are all saved and we all will be redeemed and re-united with God in the next life. Period. Everyone. In the most important theological controversy in early

Universalism, Ballou's point of view came to be called "Death and Glory" Universalism.

This was truly radical. Most religions of the day, believed that the threat of punishment in the afterlife was critical to maintaining decency and good behavior in this world. Having a hell may have been justified theologically, but practically speaking, it was a technique for social control.

If you examine the statistics on incarceration in this country, especially for young black men, punishment as social control still reigns. And the evidence is clear that it works no better today than it did in the 19th century. In fact, the criminal justice system is being called the New Jim Crow.

Ballou's message was radical. Several years ago I preached at the Heartland/Four Corners congregation which was part of Ballou's first congregational circuit in 1804. The records of the congregation show that on the first Sunday that Ballou preached, one lay leader, known only as Captain Cheever, showed up with a club in hand, lest anyone attempted to prevent Ballou's preaching of this radical Good News.

Murray, Ballou and all the early Universalists understood themselves to be deeply Christian. They were "perfecting" the Christian faith. If Christianity is all a question about sin and salvation, the Universalist believed they had discovered the truth.

God's love is not "partial," only for some. It is also not contingent on our behavior, on how we live our lives in this world.

Our Unitarian ancestors talked a great deal about salvation by character and there is important work to be done in reclaiming what they meant by that. It had much to do with personal spiritual discipline and the religious practices of prayer, reflection and journaling. They took seriously the notion of "a life examined" and tried to live lives that brought more integrity and more love into the world.

But if the Unitarians held to salvation by character, the Universalists believed in salvation **irrespective** of character. For them, God's love did not depend on how we lived. God's love was part of the "givenness" of creation. Regardless of how we live, we will all be redeemed in the end and gathered to God in the hereafter. Some of us may be on probation for a while, up to 50,000 years according to early

Universalist leader, Elanon Winchester, but we will all, ultimately be united with God.

One of my favorite bumper stickers of a few years ago captures this Universalist belief. “God Don’t Make No Junk.” Do you remember seeing it? We are all worthy, in God’s sight, no matter how badly we behave.

But is Universalism just about what comes “after” life? Is it just about heaven? Hosea Ballou, it is reported was challenged about his embracing beliefs by a Baptist preacher: “Why, if there is no hell, I could beat you over the head, steal your wallet and your horse. I’d still get into heaven.” “That’s right, you could” responded Ballou, “but if you were a Universalist that thought would never occur to you.” For Universalists, what we believe about God and heaven and hell is important. It has an impact on how we live.

At First Portland, there are a few people who worry about hell. Many, especially my age and older, are thinking about what happens after death. There may be some who still wrestle with whether you have to be a confessing Christian to get into Heaven, but I haven’t met them.

Folks are very concerned about this world, however. They are worried about living with integrity, about finding forgiveness, they long for community and connection...here, in this world. They worry, as I do, about increasing disparities of income, about police brutality and racial profiling, about the impact of greed and corporate decision-making on our lives and on our planet. Concerns about this world.

St. Paul is little quoted in most Unitarian Universalist circles. I understand the reason why. Paul laid many of the cornerstones of the Christian believe system that most of us reject. And he got a lot wrong...women’s role, sexual orientation...just about anything having to do with sexuality. Belief in and acceptance of Christ, for Paul, is required. You have to be “born again.” Without that, hellfire awaits. You can’t talk much about institutional Christianity without running into St. Paul.

We like a few of Paul’s thoughts...I Corinthians 13 for example. “Faith, hope and love abide, these three. But the greatest of these is love.” The Universalist in us loves that, of course. At the church, we say together each week, “We light this chalice in faith, in hope and in love.” It’s right from that I Corinthians’ verse.

Our chalice, at the church, is a replica of the one we use here at General Assembly. Two deeply overlapping circles representing Unitarianism and Universalism with the off-center flame. The circle with the off-center flame comes to us from another Universalist source, a group called the Humiliati at the Tufts Divinity School. The circle represents the whole, the great love that embraces us all. Rather than a flame, they had a cross off-center within the circle, representing the Christian tradition but making room for all others as well.

“... be not conformed to this world,” wrote St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, “but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind that ye may prove what is the good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”

Be not conformed to the world.

I chose that as the title for this talk, because I think our challenge is to figure out how to live in this world which in so many ways violates our human sensibility and our religious convictions.

I’ve certainly thought about what might come next and I’ve spoken to Unitarian Universalists for whom that is an important question. When asked what we believe about death and what comes after death, my best response is that we just don’t know. I and we are thoroughly agnostic on the issue. That doesn’t close off any possibilities of course and some of us hold open more possibilities than others.

But what we can know and what we are called to pay attention to is how we live in this here and now.

“Be not conformed to this world.” Here, in Romans, arguably Paul’s most theologically comprehensive letter, in which he proclaims the Good News of individual salvation through belief in Jesus as the Christ, here, where he wrestles with the great diversity question of that era (the relationship of the developing Jesus communities to the Jews who have heard the message and refuse it), even Paul takes time to talk about how to live in a world that doesn’t live up to your hopes or hold to your vision.

As Unitarian Universalists, trying to live in this world, that is a question we can relate to.

“Be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind”...we need a whole new way of thinking, says Paul. “That ye may prove what is the good, and acceptable and perfect, will of God.” By thinking and acting in new

ways, different from the ways we are encouraged to by the world, God's will can come into the world.

As Dr. King said, "There are some things to which I am proud to be maladjusted. Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted."

Be not conformed to the world. Live differently he says. And then Paul goes on to give a long list. It concludes with, "Be not overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good."

We serve almost 1000 adults every Sunday at First Unitarian. There are many reasons the people come. One of the most common reasons is to associate themselves with a religious community that stands up for justice, that stands prominently on the side of love.

But even for the most aggressive activists in the congregation, an important reason they come is to find sanctuary. People need a safe space to rest and renew, to recover and recommit. They need a place and a space that nurtures their spirits and helps them get through the week.

Our justice work needs to be understood in that context. We know that we refuse to be conformed to this broken world and that we will work to change it as we are able, but we need a time for "us," a sanctuary for our spirits.

Last night was a good night for the Beloved Community as Marriage Equality was approved in New York State. Support for marriage equality and the rights of BGLTQ folks, the alphabet people as our intern minister this year lovingly called the queer community, provides an interesting and important example of the importance of sanctuary. This year, we celebrated the 7th year anniversaries of the same sex Oregon couples who were legally married in the narrow window of opportunity in 2004, before that right was again stripped away.

It was a huge celebration and organizing weekend. First Church is a recognized leader on these issues. It was the wrapping of the buildings in ribbon and declaring them a hate free zone at the beginning of my predecessor, Marilyn Sewell's, ministry that led to the last dramatic growth of the congregation in numbers. We are a primary partner of Basic Rights Oregon within the religious community. All of that does not make First Church that unusual in Unitarian Universalism.

But within the church today, there is hardly energy to keep the Pride Committee in operation. Interesting, isn't it. BGL folks have been openly welcomed for, actually,

decades now in the church. Families headed by same sex couples light our chalice, serve on every board and committee. It has become normative. And what several BGLTQ folks tell me is that this normalcy is a huge gift. They appreciate the church's public stance. In fact, that is what drew some of them to the church. They are glad when their straight minister deals with the issue from the pulpit. All of that is true for them.

But the unique thing First Church provides is a place where they can simply be. A Sanctuary for their spirits. A place where they do not have to be leading the charge for justice. They simply want to go to church.

I'm well aware that the work of my church on this issue is not done. Trans folks are still quite a mystery to some. And marriage is being put back on the ballot in 2013. That will, no doubt spark more organizing energy. We continue to turn out when violence strikes BGLT people on the streets of Portland and we hope and pray that we will soon celebrate yet another victory for marriage equality in California.

But within the church, perhaps the lack of interest in the committee work is a hint of what success might some day look like.

Perhaps one sign that we will be approaching the Beloved Community on this one issue is that the committee sign up sheet will be blank.

Salvation is one of those big words, carrying real theological weight. It's about saving your soul, right? But the "primary meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words which have been translated "salvation" in the Hebrew scripture is actually non-religious. ...In fact, recent translations often render...[the word] as victory.... When God is the source of "salvation" in the Hebrew Bible, the meaning is overwhelmingly physical rather than spiritual, and in this life rather than in some "afterlife," ...the 'salvation' prophesied is the restoration of Israel in its land, not some otherworldly bliss." (Oxford Companion to the Bible)

But the majority of occurrences in the New Testament of the Greek verb *sozo* ("to save") and its derivatives, especially the noun *soteria* (salvation), have to do with the ultimate salvation of individual believers in Jesus Christ.

This is an important distinction. In the Hebrew scriptures, salvation is a victory for the people. It is in this world not the next, and salvation is **collective**, not individual.

In the New Testament, sinfulness and salvation are no longer collective. They are individual. Religion became primarily about the individual.

This may seem like a long way around to a simple point. But for me it is critical. Because our Universalist ancestors were reacting to the Calvinist notion of partial salvation for some, hellfire for most... individuals. The solution to this problem was an individual solution. That is how universalism as a theological position is most often understood.

But Universalism is one of the biggest words there is. For more than a century, an important question has been whether our tradition has done enough with it. Here is one sample. Universalist James Pullman, at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, “Universalists have squatted on the biggest word in the English language. Now the world is beginning to want that word, and ...Universalists must either improve the property or move off the premises.”

We don't own the franchise. People keep discovering universalism. In fact, universalism has been much in the religious news this year. Did you miss it? Universalism became news, in the Christian community, thanks to a young evangelical pastor in Michigan. Rob Bell, pastor of the 10,000 member Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, published his new book, “Love Wins”, and, based only on advance copies of a few chapters sent to selected individuals to review, the book and Bell generated more press coverage and controversy about Universalism than we have managed to generate in the 50 years at the UUA.

The full title of Bell's book is “Love Wins, A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived.” It begins:

“Several years ago we had an art show at our church. I had been giving a series of teachings on peacemaking, and we invited artists to display their paintings, poems, and sculptures that reflected their understanding of what it means to be a peacemaker. One woman included in her work a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, which a number of people found quite compelling.

But not everyone.

Someone attached a piece of paper to it. On the piece of paper was written: ‘Reality check: He's in hell.’

Really?

Gandhi's in hell?

He is?

We have confirmation of this?

Somebody knows this? Without a doubt?

...

Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?

...

What kind of faith is that?

Or, more important:

What kind of God is that?"

Jesus is still critical for Bell. "When people use the word 'Jesus,' then, its important for us to ask who they're talking about.

Are they referring to a token of tribal membership, a tamed domesticated Jesus who waves the flag and promotes whatever values they have decided their nation needs to return to?

Are they referring to the supposed source of the imperial impulse of their group, which wants to conquer other groups 'in the name of Jesus'?

Are they referring to the logo or slogan of their political, economic, or military system through which they sanctify their greed and lust for power?

Or are they referring to the very life source of the universe who has walked among us and continues to sustain everything with his love and power and grace and energy?"

And hell? Bell writes,

"God is love and to refuse this love moves us away from it,

in the other direction, and that will, by very definition, be an increasingly unloving, hellish reality."

I don't know about you, but that language resonates in my spirit. The non-theists among us have to do some translating, but if you substitute 'Spirit of Life' in place of 'God,' I think many of us could find ourselves in Bell's words.

Rob Bell has discovered Universalism. The furor within the Evangelical community in response has been intense. It appears that Universalism is still radical.

Bell does not call the gospel he is proclaiming "universalism." He doesn't indicate why, nor does he tap into the history of religious discourse and reflection that is our heritage. Bell draws only from the Bible, including rehearsing every mention of hell in both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. There are very actually few.

Universalism, despite its' proclaimed theological victory within mainline Protestantism, appears still to be radical. Rob Bell could use a Captain Cheever with a club to help protect the preaching of this universalist message.

Bell is far from the first conservative Christian to find Universalism in our time. I think of Bishop Carlton Pearson who was drummed out of the Oral Roberts family when he started preaching his "gospel of inclusion" that all are saved (including BGLT folks) and found a religious home at All Souls Unitarian, in Tulsa. That story is for Bishop Pearson and the folks at All Souls to tell.

However, among the many things to note, is that most of the conservative Christians who discover universalism don't, as their first step, make an appointment at 25 Beacon St.. As far as I know, Rob Bell hasn't made a date with the MFC.

There are lots of reasons, I'm sure. Our virtual disregard of Jesus would make folks steeped in the Jesus narrative uncomfortable. There are important cultural differences as well. How many of our congregations get to 'praise' in their worship?

At First Church, we started using monthly spiritual themes this year. We borrowed this approach, with his blessing, from Marlin Lavanhar of All Souls Tulsa. It is being used by quite a few of our congregations. The congregation takes one of the "big" religious words or concepts...Grace, Forgiveness, Justice...and uses it as the focus for the month. It is dealt with from the pulpit, in the education programs, the small group ministry, etc.

It is a way to go deeper spiritually than any one shot approach allows. And it opens the possibility of different conversations as the idea is worked in the various parts

of the church's life. It also opens the possibility of genuine intergenerational conversation as children as well as adults deal with some of the same stories.

We've loved the themes this year. But some have been easier to deal with than others. Forgiveness...that resonated deeply and easily and we found many resources in our tradition to help. Justice...resources aplenty, its one of our religious strengths.

Joy, however, was a test. We found some UU resources, but, frankly, they are thin. We seem to be a pretty serious lot. Remember that the Unitarians were called God's Frozen People. It might be that we haven't put Calvinism that far behind us.

But I want to return to Rob Bell and my earlier comments about salvation.

Bell is a compelling preacher and writer. But the salvation Bell is talking about is individual. God's love is a personal love. But there is a connection Bell doesn't make.

If heaven is not "someplace else," if we create "hell" for ourselves by the choices we make, aren't we called to create heaven here on earth?

"Thy will be done, **on earth** as it is in heaven."

Aren't we called to create Eden here...and now?

Rebecca Parker, who delivered this lecture last year, and her co-author, Rita Brock, have provided us with a wonderful theological corrective to the idea of individual salvation in another life and resources to imagine reclaiming paradise here, in this one, as the goal.

And if salvation is for all of us, don't we need to pay attention to our collective life, not just our individual souls.

Aren't we called to dismantle the structures that press down on people, structures that oppress, structures that prevent classes of people from experiencing the fullness of life? Aren't we called into an accountability, not just to our own integrity and freedom, but to the communities in which we live?

Aren't we called to Stand on the Side of Love?

Both Hosea Ballou and blessed Saint Paul recognized that if we experience the love of God, it will change our lives.

For me, and for us, that is not simply about our being “nicer” people. We are already pretty decent folks. Our call is to create the Beloved Community.

“We’ll build a land where they bind up the broken.,

We’ll build a land where the captives go free.”

We know that ours are the only hands on earth, and our UU faith calls us to work for a world made fair, with all her peoples one.

At First Church Portland, being a voice for justice is a high priority. My predecessor’s ministry featured a strong, prophetic voice. The history of the congregation is that of a shaper of the community and the congregation named on-going and deepened work for justice as one of the pre-requisites for their new minister.

That part of the job description, it will not surprise you, is one of the reasons I answered their call. We are crystal clear on the need.

Building the Beloved Community requires its own disciplines (however). Among them, how to sustain energy when the work spans generations. None of this is easy, but when the victories come, they renew our spirits. We can celebrate and even get to joy.

The long haul poses greater challenges.

And then there is that vexing question about working with others. How can we make common cause on particular issues with other religious folks who don’t agree with us on so many things? We need to get over our own fundamentalism.

But there are deeper issues to address as well.

Every week, at the church, we share our plate collection with community organizations whose work is consistent with and supports our mission. Many congregations are doing this and if yours is not, you should consider it. Every congregation that I know of that has adopted this practice, has found the overall giving to the church has gone up. Generosity creates generosity. Acting out of a spirit of abundance calls people to live more fully in that place of abundance.

As the offering is received, the minister says: “We give thanks for the many blessings in our life and for these gifts to support the larger ministry of this church.”

The thought is right. Gratitude for our blessings. The practice has certainly worked for us financially. But I wonder if that feeling of gratitude runs deep enough in us.

As the first minister of color of First Church, race and diversity are on the agenda at the church. In the search process that led to my call, diversity was identified as one of five “big chunk” issues the church needs to address. The congregation was firmly of two minds about the issue. Some want the church to seek greater racial and cultural diversity. Some want to celebrate the diversities that already exist.

We began by convening what we are calling “Beloved Conversations,” but not with the goal of greater diversity per se. I framed the objective this way from the pulpit:

“There has to be a better conversation than how we can acquire a few more dark faces to make us feel better about ourselves and this church. Let us start by asking what we are called to do in confronting a world in which racism and oppression persist.”

What we are called to do?

Racial diversity is a dream I embrace for our faith, but not an outcome I can decree. We can welcome diversity...it is all around us. We can celebrate it. But diversity alone will not be our salvation.

Our universalist heritage assures us that we are all already loved, just as we are, right now, irrespective of how fully our congregations model the diversity and fullness of the beloved community.

We are loved. But what are we called to do?

Are we called to create the “World Religion,” drawing bits of inspiration from everywhere? Some from the Sufi’s of Islam, a pinch of paganism, a hint of the Hindu, a bit of Buddhist practice, A Native American prayer followed by an African American spiritual, perhaps even something from the Christian tradition from which we sprang, all held together by a humanism that empowers us to help the universe bend toward justice?

That, in fact, my friends, is what we have already created. And, in my view, that is not enough. It invites us to be dilators and to celebrate our faith as a kind of theological Epcot Center. A bit of this, a bit of that, held together, if at all, by our justice commitments.

Universalism is present in that creation, just as I found it at First Unitarian in Portland. It is present in the breadth of our religious embrace and our commitment to welcome people with increasingly complex identities of many kinds.

Yes, I found Universalism at **First Unitarian**. It s a Universalism with all of the blessings and all of the challenges that that words brings.

What are we called to do?

Do we need to reclaim access to more of the Christian tradition from which our faith grew? Yes.

Do we need to recognize our privilege and refuse to accept habits and structures in our world that work to deny others and ourselves basic human worth and dignity? Yes, we need to stand on the side of love.

Do we need to welcome and join with others to create our own “coalitions of the willing” to make this a world made fair with all her people one? Yes.

But do we also not need to begin at a deeper place, a place of gratitude for all that we have received. A place that delights in the world as well as wanting to change it?

Do we not need to grow our justice work and our spiritual work from a place of thanksgiving and joy?

The benediction I use at First Unitarian closes this way:

This is the day we have been given. Let us rejoice in it and be glad. Go in peace and practice love.

Love will guide us and gratitude may sustain us the way.

Amen.