About ten years ago, when I was fresh out of seminary, and had just arrived at First Unitarian with my crisp new Master of Divinity degree, and two internships checked off, and I learned of the existence of a puppet theater in the sanctuary, that was the very first time, of many times, that I would think: they didn’t cover this at Harvard.

How I have grown to love Carl, Rebecca, and Sheldon. And Olivia the Owl, Ralph Waldo Raven, and Lucia the Leopard. They are continuously learning. Sometimes they learn the same things repeatedly. I can relate to that. I’ll bet you can, too. And Carl reminds me of some wise words I once heard: Whether or not you believe God exists, it is important to remember that you are not God.

Humans are certainly made of stardust, and some say we contain the breath or spark of the divine—a way of describing our aliveness and the inherent worth and dignity that are the birthright of every human. I say that.

And at the same time it is also true that... whether or not you believe God exists, it is important to remember that you are not God.

What that really means is that we do not know everything. It’s about spiritual humility.

It is important to remember that do not know everything. That, truly, is one of the central tenets, a cornerstone, of this church, and of our denomination, Unitarian Universalism.

We have a somewhat unusual expression of religion, or to put it in plain language, this is kind of a weird place. What I mean is that we are technically a protestant church, but we do not identify as a Christian church. Not many churches would say that they are protestant but not Christian. There are Christians among us—there are certainly Christian Unitarian Universalists—and we have a monthly communion service, but we also have Buddhist groups, a Seder service organized in part by members who identify as Jewish, and a pagan group that gathers regularly for ritual and friendship. I have met UUs who identify also as Hindu, some who draw inspiration from the Tao Te Ching (including our Senior Minister Emerita, who wrote The Twittered Tao, a book of tweet-sized lessons from the Tao). And there UUs of many other spiritual stripes.

Our Sunday services are protestant in their timing and in their structure—opening words, hymns, prayers, sermon. But they also include meditation, and often have rituals, readings, or sources that reflect diverse influences (today we sang in Arabic) and we hold these services in the embrace, literally, of religious diversity. Behind this pulpit, no matter our theme for the day, there is the centerpiece of this sanctuary, larger than the minister, the pulpit, and anything else in the room: a mural of symbols from the world’s religions that curves as though to hold us. In the candle corner, where you are invited to light candles of personal prayer, we see ourselves and this sanctuary reflected the cosmos, which is painted on the glass panels that define that space, the work of an artist in the congregation. And right now, in the nichos above us in the
Albuquerque sanctuary, we have a tribute to science, which we claim, fearlessly, as an important teacher in this church, even (and especially) when it might challenge our thinking.

When someone I’ve just met somewhere out in the world ask me what our church believes, and I say we do not have a creed, they are usually surprised. They want to know how it works, what even makes it a church, and, what are sermons about. And, they wonder, is this church new? Well, no. We go actually go way back.

Unitarian and Universalist churches in the US in the seventeen- and eighteen-hundreds were protestant Christian churches. They used to be two separate traditions, Unitarian and Universalist. But both were Christian. In this way, Unitarian Universalism traces its roots all the way back through the protestant reformation, through the story of Jesus, through Abraham and Moses, all the way back to the first stirrings of the ancient human question, “what does this mean?” That question, after all, is the root of all religion.

What does this mean? To be alive. To be conscious.

What are we? How shall we live? What does this mean?

A few historical influences or events inspired Unitarians and Universalists of the past, and set us on a trajectory to radically embrace theological diversity as we do today, set us on track to become a religion that names as its third source, “Wisdom from the world’s religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.”

One was baked into Universalist theology. Universalism, basically, means all are saved. No one is damned for eternity.

Early universalist arguments, which were by default Christian arguments, went something like this:

if, as it is written in Genesis, Adam and Eve were the first people, and all the people of the earth came from them,

and if, as Christian doctrine teaches, they sinned and it was handed down to everyone on earth who are their descendants,

and if, as Christian doctrine teaches, Jesus’s death on the cross was one of setting things right between God and humans in response to Adam and Eve’s sin,

then, it follows, it must have set things right for all people. Because all people descend from Adam and Eve. Therefore, everyone is saved through Jesus. Not just those who call themselves Christians.

Got that? They started with the Christian teachings, and applied logic. And that led them to believe that everyone, whatever their beliefs, was good with God, in the end.
Universalists also made the case that if God is all powerful and all good, then there cannot be such a thing as damnation. A good God would not revel in the idea of eternal suffering, an all-powerful god who was good would not allow it to happen.

By arguing that everyone (not just Christians) would be saved, Universalists were already moving toward religious diversity—although, at least for a little while longer, most of them would believe this theology of universal salvation was to be found in the Bible, and that the bible was the inerrant word of God.

Meanwhile, Unitarian theologians were making some bold claims of their own. They were greatly influenced by the Enlightenment that was sweeping the western world, bringing with it a fearless (if ultimately overconfident) commitment to reason and science. I say overconfident because we know that science, even when the method is sound, is only as good as its questions, and questions reflect the biases of the questioner. But the Enlightenment is where science began to take a big role in shaping human communities.

The Unitarians were also influenced by a new (two hundred years ago) school of thought coming out of Germany, biblical criticism, which examined biblical texts as though they were historical texts. The bible contains many different kinds of texts within it. In Greek the word for bible, *ta biblia* (τὰ βιβλία), means “the books.” Plural. Biblical criticism asked, if these are texts written by humans, what genre are they? Scholars eventually found that biblical texts aligned with other genres of the time, and genres dating back to long before that time. The creation story in Genesis echoes other creation stories from the ancient near east. The book known as the Song of Songs is clearly influenced by an ancient Egyptian genre of literature that celebrated adolescent romance. The wild and wooly Book of Revelations also is of a genre, and similar examples can be found outside of the bible, in other contexts.

Seeing this approach to the scriptures, one of the most famous—and at the time notorious—ministers of the 1800’s, Theodore Parker, argued that Christianity does not have a special claim to revelation. Biblical criticism also asked what the texts say for themselves, rather than what we say about them, and Parker noted that the Bible does not contain within it any claims to infallibility or claims to be the exact inerrant word of God. He also argued that there is a difference between the religion of Jesus and a religion about Jesus.

In a sermon he preached in 1841 called “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” Parker said that although the teachings handed down from Jesus were true, it was “hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid or Archimedes.” (You can really hear the Enlightenment influence there). He said if someone were to prove that Jesus never existed, then Christianity would still exist because at its heart it’s inherently true.

It’s hard for us listening today to reconcile this with the other christianities we know in this world. Indeed, even though Parker went on at length to make his case (sermons were often an hour long back then) it was hard for Parker’s contemporaries to understand, too. His fellow Unitarian clergy stopped exchanging pulpits with him—a shun, because exchanges were
customary back then. And soon the Boston Association of Ministers voted him out of fellowship with them.

Well, the best revenge is to live well. Parker kept preaching and soon was attracting crowds of two-thousand to his services. He also kept a gun in his desk to fight off any authorities who might come searching for fugitive slaves. Parker was known to harbor people. When I went through divinity school, his sermon and many others from that era were required reading for new ministers.

Much happened in this time. I’m giving you just a few snapshots here, because you and I would both prefer I don’t preach an hour-long sermon today.

Here’s one more piece I want to share:

That era was also the era of the Transcendentalist movement, led by notable Unitarians such as Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson (hence, the little friend I mentioned earlier, Ralph Waldo Raven). Transcendentalists believed that God was present in all of nature and humanity, and they were interested in the study of world religions. They published translations of and commentary on non-Christian religious texts.

More and more, both the Unitarian and Universalist traditions began to embrace theological diversity. Both struggled to define their traditions with statements of belief. Specific beliefs just became less and less important. What mattered most were values—of love, compassion, justice, and service. The two denominations came together in the 1960’s, and that’s why we have the long name Unitarian Universalist, and that’s why we shorten it by calling ourselves UUs.

The late UU minister and writer Forrest Church, who led All Souls Church in New York City, imagined a metaphor for human kind’s search for ultimacy, about human kind’s search for an answer to that ancient question “what does this mean.” It’s a metaphor that will be familiar to many of you. He invited readers to imagine a vast cathedral that is “as ancient as human kind.”

If you were to spend your entire lifetime exploring it, he says, you would not be able to find all of its limits. He wrote:

> The builders have worked from time immemorial, destroying and creating, confounding and perfecting, tearing down and raising up arches in this cathedral, buttresses and chapels, organs and theaters, chancels and transepts, gargoyles, idols, and icons. Not a moment passes without work being begun that shall not be finished in the lifetime of the architects who planned it, the patrons who paid for it, the builders who construct it, or the expectant worshippers. Throughout human history, one generation after another has labored lovingly, sometimes fearfully, crafting memorials and consecrating shrines. Untold numbers of these collect dust in long-undisturbed chambers; others (cast centuries...ago from their once-respected places) lie shattered in shards or ground into powder on the cathedral floor....

This, he says, is the Cathedral of the World.
Most striking of all are the windows. Countless windows. Some covered in grime from age and neglect, some dark or abstract, some “representational.” Others sparkle with bright colors. Each window tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death. The windows of the cathedral are where the light shines through.

Church (Forrest Church) said that a twenty first century theology of “many windows, one light” honors many different religious approaches, and only excludes the truth claims of fundamentalists. Because fundamentalists claim that the light shines through their window only. There is no light in any other windows, they say.

In this metaphor, I imagine a window not only for theologies, but for atheism, too. Atheism tells a different story, one in which the light may be simply the mystery, the spark of life, or that which draws humankind toward reflection and awe again and again. It represents reason, wonder, and holy curiosity.

I like to think of the squares in the mural behind me, with their symbols of the world’s religions, as being like those windows.

Over the generations, the UU faith has grown beyond theology in its commitment to radical inclusion. Today, that commitment extends to diversities of people. Our denomination not only welcomes, but also marries and ordains lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer people. As a denomination that is and has historically been majority white, we are in a time of intentionally decentering whiteness, from the way hiring is done and policies are implemented, to the sources and voices included in worship services and how they are included, to the way white UUs show up as activists for dismantling racism in their selves and in the wider culture. We are committed to welcoming people of all ages and abilities, too. And we are continuously learning how to do all of these things better.

Saying “yes” again and again to that learning is part of the practice of spiritual humility. We are not god. We do not know everything.

One thing I do know, though, is that the work of radical inclusion and embracing diversity is some of the most important work of our time.

It is the year 2020 now, a time when those who believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, who see that all people and all beings are interdependent, look around and ask once more “What does this mean?” What does it mean, this meanness of the larger culture around us, which sometimes threatens to seep into us and we would react with meanness to that which threatens what we love.

In this time we are led both inward by our faith, and outward. We are called to honor the light of the divine within ourselves and each other, and to live the weird, wonderful Unitarian Universalist message of radical welcome and the fearless embrace of diversity.

It’s good to be together.