Who am I?

When I was seven years old, my family moved from Sioux Falls, SD to Cedar Rapids, IA. My older brother was in Junior High at the time which meant that he was also in confirmation class. My brothers, and later I, attended weekly confirmation classes after school in 7th through 9th grades, classes that prepared one to take communion and become a full member of the congregation. The traditional content of the classes in the Lutheran church was—not surprisingly—Luther’s catechism. A catechism is a book that teaches the doctrine of the church. So you would memorize, for example, the Ten Commandments, and also memorize Luther’s explanation of each. My mother, to this day, can recite from the catechism, not only the commandments but Luther’s answer to the important follow-up question: “What is meant by this?”

Upon moving to Cedar Rapids, however, we found ourselves attending a slightly more liberal Lutheran congregation and this was reflected not least of all in the confirmation classes that my brother attended. Bringing home his readings for the class, it quickly became apparent that they were not focused on the Bible or on Luther but rather on what one might call “identity questions.” They were less concerned with what was written 2,000 years ago and what it meant to someone 500 years ago, and much more concerned with the present, with having the students explore in their own present-day lives that most famous of identity questions: “Who Am I?” In fact, this was the title emblazoned on the workbook that my brother brought home.

“Who am I?” I remember my father saying derisively, “For God’s sake, what kind of question is that? Who is God? That’s what’s important. Who is Jesus?”

And my mother, hearkening back to her own confirmation classes, wholeheartedly agreed.

Now on one level, this might be seen as simply a clash of the old with the new; of tradition with innovation; of theology with psychology. It crossed my mind that maybe my parents were being a little old-fashioned. “Who am I?” sounded like an important question to me, especially as I grew into my teenage years and the answer seemed ever more confusing.

But I now think that what my parents were saying has a deep relevance, and we don’t have to agree with their particular theology to hear it. They were saying—as Quaker Douglas Steere and Unitarian Universalist Victoria Safford were saying in the reading—that you can’t really know who you are without knowing whose you are.

This is a little uncomfortable, especially for us who are the proud inheritors of a religious tradition that places a great value on individuality. We tend to glamorize the heretics, the non-conformists, the loners, the outsiders. Whose am I? I am no one’s, thank you very much. I am my own. I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.
Really? Even if that is true, what do I mean by “I”? How does this “I” decide its fate, steer its soul? What influences the choices I make? There is no identity outside of relationship. You can’t be a person by yourself. Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways? Who or what do you serve?

The affirmation of William Ernest Henley’s poem: “I am the master of my fate” stands right alongside another truth expressed in a Bob Dylan song: “You gotta serve somebody…”

You have to serve somebody or something…You are serving somebody or something, always. Often, it is intentional: we serve our families or our communities or the natural world; we serve God or science or a principle or an ideal or a vision for a better world. Sometimes it is unintentional, subconscious, unexamined. We serve our appetites, our need for acceptance and approval, our comfort. My son, Jack, in his usual straightforward way that so regularly cuts through the idealistic assumptions of my ministerial persona—as I explained the training I was going through and the questions that were raised, and posed those questions to him--whose are we? What do we serve?—he said, “Other people’s opinions.”

Other people’s opinions. How often are my actions directed by other people’s opinions? Sometimes this is intentional. It may be the opinions of people that I trust; the insights of people whom I look to for guidance. But how often is it submerged, subconscious, distorted and then justified within myself? How often does it restrain me from serving that which I wish to serve? How often does it keep me from doing that which I know is right or compel me to do that which I know is wrong because I am owned by the imagined opinions of the amorphous they? What will they think? How will they respond? They will never understand that. They will only understand this. And thus I end up doing things that I would not do or not doing things I should and saying upon reflection: “That’s not like me. That’s not really who I am.” Maybe not; but the question is not who I am, but whose I am in that circumstance. What am I serving? To whom am I accountable?

We will have many opportunities to answer this question throughout the year, both on an individual level (whose am I?) and on a congregational level (whose are we?). And so I will invite you to keep these questions with you. Whose are we? To whom do we belong? To what are we accountable? Whom or what do we serve as a congregation?

It is especially fitting, during this year of celebration culminating in the celebration at the General Assembly in Charlotte in June—as we commemorate the 50-year anniversary of Unitarian Universalism, that we revisit the question of what it means to be a congregation in this Association. What does it mean that we are Unitarian Universalist, such a cumbersome name. How do we wear it with grace? How do we explain it with conviction? How do we live it?

Or is it merely coincidental that we carry that name? A member of the congregation once told me that it didn’t so much matter that we were a Unitarian Universalist congregation; what mattered was the people and what we did together and how we took care of one another.

I understand that on one level. People can do powerfully important things together, regardless of the banner that flies over their activities.
And...And I also wish to challenge that assumption. It matters to me that we are Unitarian Universalist. It matters that we are not a club but a congregation. It matters that we are not a lone congregation, but a congregation in association with other congregations. It matters that we are beneficiaries of a courageous liberal religious tradition which we will pass along to future generations. It matters and it mattered from the very earliest days of this community.

Let me tell you a story that one of the founders, Jean MacKeen, shared with me last week. When the group was first meeting, they were trying to decide whether to become a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association or whether to simply join the Church of the Larger Fellowship as a group of individuals in affiliation with the UUA. They researched the question; they talked amongst themselves; they reached out to others to find out what would be the best course of action; they consulted with ministers in the area, most notably the Rev. Scotty Meek who strongly encouraged them on the path they chose, which we know today was to become a member congregation.

And let me just say, at this point, that it would have been much easier—far fewer headaches—to join the Church of the Larger Fellowship. And let me further say that I fully support the work of the Church of the Larger Fellowship and am grateful for its services to individuals that have no congregation to attend in their area. But it would have been a qualitatively different choice. It would have been saying, in effect, we are a small group of individuals in sympathy and support with the ideals of Unitarian Universalism and we have no congregation in the area. Instead, what they chose to say is: we are a small group of individuals in sympathy with and support of the principles of Unitarian Universalism and the liberal religious tradition and, having no congregation in the area, we join together to be that congregation! We have a vision not only of who we are and what we want at this point in time, but we carry a vision for the future and we pledge our time, talents, resources, presence, and commitment to that vision.

And because they made that decision, we who are gathered here today and those who will come in the future share in that vision. What do I serve? I serve this congregation, which means I also serve that wider vision of Unitarian Universalism, honoring its past and helping to establish its future. But I think we need to engage that question together: whose are we? What do we serve? To whom or what are we accountable?

My sabbatical was framed by this question of “Whose Are We?” I went to a facilitator training in June prior to the General Assembly with Wendy Williams who serves the congregation in Flagstaff, and we facilitated the workshops for the Pacific Southwest District ministers just this last week at a ministers’ retreat. In between, we took part in a workshop at Ministry Days and General Assembly and we attended the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists Ministers’ Meeting at the Rolduc Center in Holland, and listened as ministers from Uganda and the Philippines and Transylvania and England and the Czech Republic and Kenya and Canada and South Africa and Germany and all across the United States responded. More than any single answer to the question, I was struck by the deep reflection that it inspired. I was struck by the way in which it drew people together, no matter what their answers happened to be. I found a powerful hope in the fact that, however different our expressions of service happened to be in our widely varying contexts, there was common ground in describing that which claimed us: an ever-deepening awareness and honoring of our connection to all of life; a willingness to grapple respectfully with the questions and challenges across differing perspectives; a commitment to calling forth more justice, more compassion, more love somewhere. This experience has expanded my vision of the community to which I belong; I am held accountable on a scale that I had not previously imagined. Deeply inspired by colleagues and congregants across the world, from the
dangerous work being done by the congregation in Uganda in opposition to the almost unimaginably cruel anti-gay laws to the work being done by congregations in the Philippines working with the poorest of the poor, I am called to reflect on our own context and congregational activities. Just as we have a covenant with one another inside the community, can we also imagine a covenant that extends to the congregations in our Association and even beyond to those congregations across the world? What is our responsibility to one another? What is our responsibility to our own vision? Whose are we? What do we serve?

I can strive to answer that question for myself, but I can’t answer it for the congregation. We can answer it together. We already have inspiring responses to it
In the very founding of this congregation;
In the work and the wisdom of those who came together over the years (and the many moves!) to keep this community’s vision alive;
In the financial and spiritual commitment you made to ministry, first hiring me part-time and in two short years calling me to full-time ministry;
In renting an office to offer space for gathering, tools for doing the work of the congregation, and to present a proud and prominent face to the community that bears all of those ten syllables Unitarian Universalist;
In enthusiastically engaging the work of the Welcoming Congregation workshops and voting to become a Welcoming Congregation, allowing us to stand on the side of love in a faithful and forthright way.

Whose are we? What do we serve? To whom or what are we accountable?

I am deeply grateful for the opportunities for rest, renewal and reflection that sabbatical provided. I am very excited about the possibilities that this years holds for the congregation. I am humbled and privileged to be walking with you, holding this question before us in search of deeper understanding of ourselves and a more vital connection to the world which we share.