Whose Are We? Sermon by Rev. Michael Leuchtenberger, Unitarian Universalist Church of Concord, NH, on April 10th, 2011.

Show of hands: Who here thinks of themselves as a fiduciary? [pause] Perhaps I should have asked first: Who here knows what fiduciary means? Or has voluntarily used the word in a sentence? [pause] Well, here is my hope: I hope that by the time we leave this sanctuary today every single one of you will feel like a fiduciary, be proud to be a fiduciary, and have at least a rough sense of what that word means.

For now, let me just say that fiduciary is related to the Latin word fides, translated as faith.

Last October, I went to a meeting of Unitarian Universalist ministers serving in our Northern New England district. We were invited to split up into pairs and ask each other a simple question:

“Whose are you?”

My silent yet immediate reaction was visceral: “I am not anyone’s. I am my own. What are you implying here? Why should I be someone else’s? Belong to someone else? I like my freedom, thank you very much. And my theology doesn’t fit this question either.”
Yet the instructions were clear: One person will continue to ask “Whose are you?” and after each response the questioner will say: “God be merciful” and then repeat the question: “Whose are you?”

So I submitted to the task.

“I am Daniel and Noah’s father.” “God be merciful.”

“I am Cara’s husband.” “God be merciful.”

“I am my mother’s son.” “God be merciful.”

“I am my mother’s oldest son who lives an ocean away from her, missing her.” “God be merciful.”

And so it continued, only the answers got deeper and more involved. By the time my three minutes were up, I was deeply moved. I was moved because the question gently, yet relentlessly, asked me to look at my life as inherently interdependent. I was moved because it made the assumption for me that what really matters are the relationships that make me feel I belong, belong to someone, belong to a community, belong to a purpose.

For many decades our culture in the West, has encouraged us to focus on a related, yet quite different, question: Instead of asking “Whose am I” we have asked: Who am I? What kind of individual am I? What does it take to make me the individual I want to be?
The exploration of the self has been at the center of much of our culture, and Unitarian Universalism at the radical edge of liberal religion, has been deeply immersed in propagating this culture of individualism. Individualism has become the de facto orthodoxy of our time.

This presents a special challenge for religious liberals. Religious liberals, after all, see their role as challenging orthodoxy. Yet by challenging the orthodoxy of individualism we challenge ourselves. We challenge ourselves to accept and define, once again, our role as a countercultural force. Religion, and especially liberal religion, needs to play that role.

Culture, after all, is conservative. Culture tries to preserve the status quo. Culture is resistant to change. This resilience to the fad of the moment is its strength in providing cohesion and a sense of identity. Yet, culture tends to reflect the interests of the powerful and the privileged.

For that reason, culture needs to be challenged. For that reason, religious liberals need to remain countercultural by continuing to ask: Whose am I? What do my relationships say about my purpose in life?
Yet the challenge for liberal religion goes beyond the challenge of personal individualism. For a number of decades now, many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations have been preoccupied by a kind of community individualism. The burning coal at the center of these congregations was their quest to understand themselves and to become a healthy and mutually supportive community.

No question, those are worthy goals that deserve our attention. Yet what happens when we shift the question from “Who are we?” to “Whose are we?” “Whose are we as a congregation?” What are the relationships that make us feel we belong, belong to a larger community, belong to a larger purpose?

The goal of being a healthy and mutually supportive community no longer seems sufficient when we ask this relational question.

Whose are we? In a literal sense, that’s asking, who owns this church? Who is the owner of our congregation?

If we were a for-profit corporation, the answer would be clear. For-profit corporations are owned by their stockholders. Dan Hotchkiss in his book *Governance and Ministry* reminds us that “[c]orporate stockholders can vote to liquidate the corporation’s property, pay its debts, and divide the proceeds among themselves. A congregation – or any other nonprofit – that did likewise would be violating several state and federal laws.”
Hotchkiss continues: “For-profit corporations are required to benefit their stockholders, while non-profits are forbidden to benefit their members. To call the members ‘owners’ under these conditions stretches the idea of ownership quite far.”

“And, then, is the owner of a congregation? Who plays the role of the stockholders in a business? Not the members. Not the board. Not the clergy or […] the staff. All these are fiduciaries whose duty is to serve the owner.”

There it is again. That word. Fiduciaries. Hotchkiss describes a fiduciary as “anyone whose duty is to act in faithfulness to the interest of another, even at the cost or peril of him- [or her]self.” Again, “a fiduciary is anyone whose duty is to act in faithfulness to the interest of another, even at the cost or peril to him- [or her]self. A parent, for example is a fiduciary for his or her children and must care for them, no matter how much sacrifice that might require.”

Our board, the Prudential Committee is a fiduciary also. Like a for-profit board, it controls our church property and financial resources on behalf of its real owner.
And Hotchkiss makes the claim that “the real owner that the board must serve is the congregation’s mission, the covenant the congregation has set its heart to and the piece of the Divine Spirit that belongs to it. Or to put it differently, the congregation’s job is to find the mission it belongs to, the real owner for whose benefit the leaders hold and deploy resources.”

He goes on to explain that “a congregation’s ‘bottom line’ is the degree to which its mission is achieved. The mission, like stockholders in a business, has the moral right both to control the congregation’s actions and to benefit from them.”

That’s where you come in as fiduciaries. When you vote as members of this congregation, you vote as fiduciaries, as someone whose duty is to act in faithfulness to the interest of another, in this case, the mission of our congregation, even at cost or peril to yourself. Paraphrasing Hotchkiss, when your interest as a member conflicts with our congregation’s mission, your duty is to vote the mission. Like the board, each of us as members has a duty to make sure the congregation serves its mission – to vote as a fiduciary for the owner – even if that goes against our private preferences or wishes.
Being a fiduciary is serious business. Holding ourselves accountable to our mission is serious business. Hence, figuring out what our mission is, or ought to be, is critical business. To act in faithfulness as fiduciaries requires us to do all we can to find the mission our congregation belongs to, to answer the question “Whose are we?”

Earlier in the service, four of our fiduciaries bravely stepped forward to share their initial response to this question. They got me thinking, and I hope they got all of us fiduciaries thinking. And I hope they will get all of us fiduciaries talking, and listening, until all have been heard and our sense of purpose, our mission, begins to be felt as a shared understanding.

I am not talking about a mission statement. That will come later. I am talking about that clarity of purpose of the creepy-crawly bug that held up her head, looked out at the beautiful meadow, and said, “I don’t know much, but I know what I know. I gotta go! I gotta go! I gotta go! I gotta go to Mexico.” And she creepy-crawled away just as fast as she could go.

Today, then, let me challenge you to spend social hour continuing this conversation. Find two people, at least, and ask them “Whose are we?” Or ask each other, “Whose lives do we intend to change and in what way?” For our congregation’s mission, Hotchkiss
suggests, will be our unique answer to this very question: “Whose lives do we intend to change and in what way?”

Listen deeply to each other, that is, listen for the meaning of what you hear without giving advice or offering judgment. Then reflect back what you heard, and find a piece of paper to write down a sentence or two of what you recall. Bring your papers to the office or leave them with Sara at the pledge card box.

Fiduciary. What a strange, and hard-to-pronounce word? Who knew it could be used exactly twelve times in the course of a single sermon. Yet that’s what just happened. (Show of hands: Who here thinks of themselves as a fiduciary?) May we all live up to the duty and the faithfulness that comes with this critical role, a role whose label I promise not to mention for a 13th, or rather, a 14th time.

May it be so. Amen.