Readings:
From “Who Do We Serve?” by Rev. Colin Bossen

There are lots of ways to unpack the story of Narcissus. One of them is that the story lifts up the importance of being connected to something other than, something greater than, ourselves. If Narcissus had been connected to something other, something greater, than himself he would not have died. The same is true for us. If we are not connected to something greater then we risk falling into a consuming self-love and spiritually wasting away.

It is an important lesson to remember right now, positioned as we are within the midst of a consumer culture. Constant advertisements try to sell us on the idea that the most important love is love for self. Everything from self-help books to advertisements for day spas to political ideology urges us to focus on our own needs before we focus on those of others. One of the dominant strains of political thought in the last decades argues that social good comes from looking out first for our individual interests. Advocates of trickle down
economics claim that if we just cut taxes and leave everyone free to spend their money as they choose then great wealth will be created for all.

The story of Narcissus exists to tell us that such views are lies. Looking only to our own needs causes us to overlook the needs of others and become victims of self-love. The standard of judgment for our own achievements becomes not what we contribute to society but how we feel about ourselves. Unfettered hedonism becomes the order of the day and people forget that they are social creatures, we need each other to survive. In such a trap the self and society both waste away.

From *Here If You Need Me* by Kate Braestrup

My children, like many other children, attached themselves at a very early age to what child psychologists call “transitional love objects.” [My husband Drew] used to call them “objets d’amour,” and the children picked up on it. “I can't go to bed!” Zachary might shout. “I can't find my objet d'amour!”
Zach had a stuffed rabbit named Rab-Rab. At least it started out as a rabbit. By the time Zach was three, Rab-Rab had dwindled and flattened into a limp, dingy, only vaguely zoomorphic thing.

Peter expressed his affection for his handwoven cotton blanket by chewing the long, soft weft threads that pulled easily from the loose weave. We would sometimes find these in his diaper....By the time Peter was in preschool, Blankie had been eaten down to the size of a well-loved dishrag.

On the theory that they might want to practice being big brothers when I was pregnant for the third time, I bought a sweet little baby doll in pink jammies for Zach and Peter. The boys spent a desultory afternoon taping toilet paper diapers to her, and then lost interest. A few months later, their sister was born. Ellie adopted the doll as soon as she was capable of deliberate, empathetic care, which for her was at about two months. At two years, she named the doll Jesus.

Jesus was quite a pretty doll until her infant caregiver inadvertently puked on her head. Jesus came out of the washing machine looking like Don King. Also, her cloth body proved less durable than her plastic head and extremities. Through the ferocity of Ellie’s toddler affection, Jesus was eventually
transformed into a macabre wind chime of plastic limbs and rags dangling from the doll’s still-smiling head.

Even so, Ellie dressed Jesus carefully in her old newborn t-shirts, fed her picnics of shredded leaves and gravel in the backyard, and placed her face-down for her nap, so her wide-open eyes could get a rest from seeing.

“*What a friend you have in Jesus,*” her father would comment soberly, as Ellie wheeled Jesus past us in a little plastic stroller. And Ellie would agree, no doubt wondering why her mother was suddenly convulsed with mirth....

My hands are damp and muddy. Mud rode up from the bottom of the lake on the brim of Jean-Pierre’s hat and moved from there to my hands....I wipe my hands on the thighs of my snow pants, but my hands will smell of thawing lake mud all day. They will smell of early spring when I go to tell the new widow that her Jean-Pierre has been found dead.

She will clasp my muddy hands, then seize my body. Literally hot with grief, Mrs. Levesque will sag against the front of my uniform jacket, and we will both descend to the kitchen floor. “I’m so sorry,” I will say, holding her....The lieutenant’s knee will brace me between my shoulder blades as I hold her. “I made the sign of the cross on his forehead. I said prayers for him.”
Mrs. Levesque will put me to use as witness, as crutch, as Kleenex, as proxy for Jean-Pierre—a temporary substitute for all the neighbors, church folk, friends, and family members who will soon come bursting through her door to share her grief. I am a transitional love object, an objet d’amour; I am Rab-Rab, Blankie, Jesus. What a strange privilege it is to be so used.

Sermon:

I used to wonder what it would mean to be faithful. What practices would be required, what sacrifices made, what stirrings would be felt in my heart that would signal to me that I could count myself among the world’s faithful people?

When I was in fifth grade, I concluded that I was not a faithful enough Methodist. I attended church regularly, asked annoying questions of my Sunday School teachers, sang in the junior choir. But I felt, well, ordinary. If I were doing it right, then surely I would feel something different, like I was special, or like I was right, or like I was being carried by Jesus, like in that footprints in the sand poem that everyone was always on about. Clearly, I was not faithful enough. And at the wise old age of ten, I set out to change that.
Each day, I closed the door to my bedroom, yanked my confirmation Bible down off the shelf, and sat down to read a part of it. Then, as my eyes would begin skipping over whole sections in hopes of finding something more interesting than who begat whom, I would set it aside and get down on my knees. This is a foreign posture for most Methodists, but I’d seen people do it on television, so I figured it was part of the requirement. I folded my hands and prayed as hard as I could (for peace on Earth, mostly, for lack of any more nuanced ideas). When the prayer was completed, I would sit for a moment and take stock. Was I different? Changed? More Godly, now? Was I faithful yet?

This artificial piety lasted about a week before I gave the experiment up—I had more interesting things to read, and at the height of the nuclear arms race, peace on earth seemed too impossible even for God.

A scant twenty-five years before one girl’s attempt to get religion, the Unitarians and the Universalists gathered together to see if they could save their religions. The Unitarians had been roundly, and rightly, critiqued for their boundless optimism for human nature and the world, an optimism that began to look rather absurd in the face of the mounting moral calamities of the 20th century. The Universalists no longer had a unique message as
mainline Protestant churches turned away from preaching hell and damnation, and embraced a God of love. In May of 1961, the two denominations consolidated. Strengthened in numbers and resources, the newly-formed Unitarian Universalist Association was, nonetheless, weak in clarity of purpose and message.

For the last two weeks, we have considered an urgent question: Whose are we? As Unitarian Universalists in the 21st century, to whom or what are we ultimately accountable? Whom or what do we serve? For fifty years, the emphasis has been on how we ought to do things, and what we ought to do. Now, it is long past time to consider why our association exists at all, our relevancy in our culture, and what is at the heart of this faith that we share.

Ours is a faith that believes whole-heartedly in actively bringing about justice and transformation in the world. Good will not materialize out of thin air--we all share in the responsibility to work against evil and for what is life-giving. And so, part of our faithfulness as Unitarian Universalists is to listen for the ways in which we are called, both as individuals and as a community. We must be open to hearing and answering calls to justice and to action, to listening for the ways in which our gifts can be offered in service. What we offer them in service to--that is whose we are.
Ours is a faith that believes whole-heartedly in an ongoing, evolving search for truth and meaning that is both free and responsible, where individual experiences of truth and insight can inform and be informed by our shared, common religious tradition. And so, part of our faithfulness as Unitarian Universalists is to walk together--to be in covenant, person-to-person and church-to-church. We must be accountable for our individual actions and behaviors, but also for the character of the collective. We must be both steadfast and humble--committed to our covenants, and willing to acknowledge when we step out of them, and to forgive one another and begin again. The shared, mutual loyalties that our covenants are oriented toward--these are whose we are.

It is easiest for me to say whose we are not: We are not our own. We do not exist to serve ourselves, to sing our own praises, to remake the world in our own images. Each year at General Assembly, I worry about whether we are slipping into that kind of closed feedback loop better known as idolatry, as the events feel more and more like Unitarian Universalists gathering to celebrate their own Unitarian-ness. It is not uncommon to hear comments about how evolved we are in comparison to other people of faith, language that exposes plainly our elitist roots and that sends us on a self-referential
search for other people who are similarly *evolved* so we can claim them as Unitarian Universalists who just don’t realize what they are yet.

But we claim the inherent worth and dignity of *all* people, and we claim that we believe that revelation is progressive and ongoing. So anyone...anyone at all could be the next piece of the puzzle, the next source of wisdom or love that we and the world needs. *Anyone at all* might help bend the moral arc towards justice, might be the transitional love object our lives need just then--not just the people who dress or look or vote or prioritize like you do. *We* have not arrived at the truth. *We* are searching for it, catching little glimpses in fragments. *We* are not the pinnacle of human religious thought and practice; *we* are one group of pilgrims among many. *We* forget that at our own peril.

When we listen for the call for justice and compassion; when we remember and step back into our deep interdependence and our covenants, then we recognize that we are not our own. *We* are called out beyond our own selves and preferences and habits. *We* are called by something that is greater than our part in it and upon which we are ultimately dependent.

Whose are we? *We* are one another’s. Caught up in the mutuality of our covenants, *we* strive to stay in right relationship with one another, to bring
comfort and sustenance to each other, to lighten each other’s burdens and magnify each other’s joys. Outside this immediate community, we belong also to the other humans traveling on this earth, some of whose faces we may never know, but whose lives are nonetheless bound up with our own in countless large and small ways. Our families. Our co-workers. The boy who picked the strawberry you ate for breakfast. The men who build the ships that bring the coffee you buy. The Japanese woman who will benefit from the donation you made to the Red Cross last week. The children who go to bed with full bellies because you will walk three miles in the CROP walk. We are one another’s, all of us, and the ancestors’ and the children’s.

Whose are we? We are History’s. We belong to the story that is unfolding every moment, that we did not begin, cannot fully control, and whose end we cannot and do not know. We belong to this time and place which we did not bring into being, and which we might hope to influence only briefly, but which shapes us in ways we are only barely conscious of. We belong to process and change, to evolution and emergence. We belong to the freedom of possibility and the fate of the context we were born into. We are Time’s.
Whose are we? We are Love’s, both resting in its embrace, and called to be its instrument in a world riddled with pain. We are Truth’s, its humble students and its voice when the distortion is too great. We are the Earth’s, our strong and suffering mother whom we did not create and cannot survive without. We are God’s, formless, mysterious source of the singularity out of which it all erupted.

We are not our own. We belong to Hope, which makes possible our insistence that the moral arc of the Universe bends toward justice, however slowly, and which urges us not to wait passively, but to be participants in bringing that justice about. Hope, which strengthens our voices when we must speak against evil and softens our hands when we must reach out in love. Hope, which guides us beyond tolerance and toward compassion, beyond comfort and into struggle, beyond the still reflecting pool and out into a world in dire need of some good prophets.

May we be faithful to this religion of ours, to this promise of more light breaking into the world. May we be faithful to the calls we must hear, to the covenants we must honor, to the unconditional, inescapable Love that would use us to do its work in the world. What a privilege it would be to be so used.