Readings:

From *Let Your Life Speak* by Parker Palmer

I was in my early thirties when I began to wake up to questions about my vocation. By all appearances, things were going well, but the soul does not put much stock in appearances. Seeking a path more purposeful than accumulating wealth, holding power, winning at competition, or securing a career, I had started to understand that is indeed possible to live a life other than one's own. Fearful that I was doing just that, I would snap awake in the middle of the night and stare for long hours at the ceiling.

Then I ran across the old Quaker saying, "Let your life speak." I found these words encouraging, and I thought they meant: "Let the highest truths and values guide you." I lined up the loftiest ideals I could find and set out to achieve them. The results were rarely admirable, often laughable, and sometimes grotesque. But always they were unreal, a distortion of my true self--as must be the case when one lives from the outside in, not the inside out. I had simply found a "noble" way to live a life that was not my own.

Today, some thirty years later, "Let life speak" means something else to me, a meaning faithful both to the ambiguity of those words and to the
complexity of my own experience: "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you."

My youthful understanding of "Let your life speak" led me to conjure up the highest values I could imagine and then try to conform my life to them. There may be moments in life when we are so unformed that we need to use values like an exoskeleton to keep us from collapsing. But something is very wrong if such moments recur often in adulthood. Trying to live by an abstract norm, will invariably fail—and may even do great damage.

Vocation, the way I was seeking it, becomes an act of will, a grim determination that one's life will go this way or that whether it wants to or not...[But] vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.

That insight is hidden in the word vocation itself, which is rooted in the Latin for "voice." Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.
"The Journey" by Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life you could save.
Sermon:

Fifty years ago this spring, two beleaguered and dwindling denominations gathered at the table, wary and weary, to see if there could not be a way to reinvigorate their liberal traditions, to consolidate resources and leadership and avoid being consigned to irrelevancy and history. In seeking to address their declining memberships, both Unitarians and Universalists stepped back to assess themselves and their futures.

In the mid-1930s, the Unitarians charged a Commission on Appraisal to answer the following central questions: Has Unitarianism any real function in the modern world? How far does Unitarianism in America measure up to the requirements of the new age? What must be done to bring it reasonably close to that ideal? Is the effort required justified by the promise of success?

The report of that Commission addressed a number of topics, including a minor attempt to define areas of doctrinal agreement and disagreement, and to assess religious education and leadership. But the report weighed in much more heavily on issues of institutional structure and process. As a result, the Unitarians skipped over the foundational questions and simply assumed that Unitarianism was relevant, even if they didn’t define how so. Instead, they
focused their efforts on raising the profile of Unitarianism, using advertising and pamphlets like “Are you a Unitarian Without Knowing It?” to assert their place in American culture.

The Universalists were also in sharp decline, with membership dipping below 50,000 on a national level. They, too, began a process of self-assessment. But their questions were of a deeper sort: “What is the essential message of Universalism, now that mainline Protestants are no longer proclaiming doctrines of hellfire and damnation? Does Universalism have anything distinctive to offer the larger theological conversation? What does Universal Salvation mean in a pluralistic world grown ever more integrated and ever more interconnected?” The Universalists began to engage their theological tradition, and try to understand how to reinterpret that tradition for a new time in history.

So fifty years ago this May, the Unitarians and the Universalists came together to explore consolidation...but they came with very different agendas. As minister and professor David Bumbaugh sums it up, “Universalists brought to merger an important, but unfinished theological concern, while Unitarians brought to merger a set of highly questionable marketing plans.” The marketing plans carried the day, and have been driving our Association for the
last fifty years. Our Association has focused on slogans and bumper stickers, on branding ourselves, on attracting and retaining like-minded people, on growth in the size and number of churches. Indeed, I would even suggest that this fifty-year trend drove the election of our current UUA president.

Advertising. Growth. Numbers. Programs. And we defend all of this marketing because we insist that we have a vital, saving message to offer the world. We assert that we have a moral obligation to grow because our faith is life-changing and much-needed in the world.

But scarcely anyone in this movement would be able to tell you what, exactly, that life-changing, world-altering, saving message actually is.

We are fifty years behind, but we are not too late. It is time to return to that table, where the deep and difficult questions were left unanswered.

Whose are we?

Rev. Jon Luopo, the minister of the University Unitarian Church of Seattle tells this story:

It seems that in Seattle the interfaith clergy organization has a tradition of asking senior colleagues to share their life odysseys. On this particular occasion, a Roman Catholic Priest was telling his story, and he said that his life had been in large measure a failure. He remembered the heady days of Vatican
II and how hopeful he and his generation of liberal priests had been that real change was coming to the church he loved so dearly. And yet; these many years later he felt that the church had if anything become hardened and deeply conservative, and his dreams had not been realized.

Now, this priest was someone who was valued among his interfaith colleagues, and they were somewhat hurt and stunned by his revelation. And yet; one colleague noted, despite the severity of his words, his demeanor seemed quite peaceful and content. “How can you claim that your life was a failure, and yet appear so calm and serene?” “I know whose I am.” replied the priest. “I know whose I am.”

Whose are we? To whom or what are we accountable? Whom and what do we serve? There must be more to our movement than satisfying our own egos, our own wish to feel important and good, more than simply finding our own tribe. Whose are we? We will explore this urgent question for the next three Sundays, beginning here: How we are called.

The biblical prophets seemed to be pretty clear about what was asked of them. God dialed them up on some kind of cosmic Batphone, and depending on who you were, it was either, “Yes, right away!” or “Hell, no!” but either way, there wasn’t any confusion about the message. While this makes for a
convenient literary device, it is not my experience of how we as human beings are called.

We are called out of self-absorption and into the presence of others who are both like and unlike us. We are called to awaken from the status quo and into prophethood, naming what is broken and demanding justice for all people. We are called away from our own hurt and brokenness to be healers of bodies and souls and minds. We are called in small, ordinary ways--stop to offer assistance, become more generous, remember to say “I’m sorry” sincerely and often. We are called in life-altering, risky, earth-shaking ways--trade mere work for vocation, become a foster parent, take religious life and practice seriously. We are called by the sound of a still, small voice that we might slowly recognize as our own; we are called by the cries sounding from around the world for more equality, justice and compassion; we are called by deep, profound silence, and yes, we are called by God, by the unnameable source and presence of Love.

Ministry is not my job, it is my calling, my vocation. I have been moving toward ministry, and ministry moving toward me, my whole life. My call did not come by Batphone. It did not take the shape of dreams or visions, or voices large or small. My call is shaped like a hole.
When I was a teenager, my parents divorced after long years of tension, avoidance, stony silence and repressed anger and hurt. I packed for college at the same time that we packed up our family home to sell, numb to whatever it might have meant for me, intellectually sure it was the best thing for everyone, oblivious to the hole in my own soul. The hole had always been there--it urged me to keep my distance from people, to set myself apart, to be cautious in relationship--but the loss of my family made the hole dark and gaping, and I fell into it.

I left college for a semester, in the grips of a deep depression and a profound sense of despair. I thought to myself that this must be what people feel like when they think about suicide. So I thought about suicide, since it seemed to me that I ought to want to die, and I was surprised to find that I didn’t. There was too much to see and learn, to taste and wonder about. I tried to fill the hole, with relationships and rituals, with places and people, but it cannot be filled.

The hole, I have realized, is not the source of my despair or sense of isolation. Rather, it is a break in the wall--it is how the Universe breaks into my isolation and urges me back toward interconnection and wholeness. This urging toward connection is how I am called. It is ever-evolving, always in
process, and it has a momentum and an insistence to it that I may not refuse, except at my own peril.

We are called toward a fullness of being, toward wholeness, toward the alignment of our lives as they are lived, and the imperatives of the spirit of Life and Love. It is possible to turn away from these calls. It is possible to run in the other direction like a willful child, like Jonah. It is easy to drown out the steady, low voice of a life that is trying to speak with the voices all around us shouting their bad advice. When a call comes and it is unmistakable what we ought to do, we can turn away. But the price is high. We can only run so long before we will find ourselves in the belly of a giant fish, imprisoned by our own stubborn resistance to surrender, by our own foolish persistence that we are, in fact, in control.

When we are called beyond ourselves, to serve or to give or to minister or to transform and be transformed, we are being invited to be instruments of our own faith. It will not be about what makes us feel good about ourselves, or what makes us look good in the community. It will not be convenient or without struggle. When we are called, we are invited to step into what is so central to our identity that we must live it. We are invited to be catalysts, vessels, containers, beacons of possibility and love, courage and responsibility,
the pillars of our religious tradition. We are being invited to embody our deeply-held belief in hope, to take our place in the world as one of the resources that we know will help to bring about more light, more love, more life.

So listen. Listen carefully for your life to speak, to sing, to urge you to place your faith and your determination and your energy here, just here. One day you will know what you have to do, though the wind pries its stiff fingers, though the melancholy may be terrible. Know that you will have the strength, the courage to answer that call when it comes, if you are only willing to hear. And Whose we are will keep us company as we stride deeper and deeper into the world, determined to do the only thing we can do.