Instead of drawing a cross on the wall, I used an outline of a flaming chalice, drawn on newsprint at the front of the hall behind the pulpit. As we did various parts of the service, we filled in the horizontal “candle holding” part of the chalice, then the flame, and finally the base, with the congregation’s answers to the 3 parts of the service.

WE BEGAN WITH SOME BACKGROUND, AND A MEDITATION:

Before we arrive at the meditation, here’s a little background on today’s service. The “Whose Are We” initiative was started by and for Unitarian Universalist ministers as a way to increase our own spiritual grounding. You might think that’s a straightforward task, but UU ministers (and those in other faith groups, too) are a diverse lot.

UU ministers are theists and atheists, pagans and Buddhists and Christians, and other groups not so easily defined — just like the members of UU Churches and Fellowships. So, before we began our Whose Are We retreat, we said a few words about language. Here’s part of that discussion:

During this time together, we will be having a conversation with one another about the things we hold closest to our hearts and the commitments we make with our very lives … We have been trained in the languages of theology, psychology, sociology, and justice-making. We have been schooled in group dynamics … While we will be considering our own journeys we will be invited to consider the larger journey we are taking together, and to find our place in a large narrative of liberal religion. To do this, we will be invited to speak metaphorically … Our conversation will attempt to evoke truth rather than define it … We invite everyone to speak from the heart, and everyone to listen for the deep meaning behind and beyond the words.

Of course, ministers aren’t the only ones who are called. Most people experience something calling us to our best selves. Some of us experience a call from some Mysterious Voice outside ourselves, and others experience a call from something deep within.

Given this Fellowship’s diversity, when we come together to discuss Whose We Are, there’s a danger that we’ll get mired in semantic debates. We could end up
talking about the words themselves rather than the truth they can evoke for us. So I invite you, as the group of ministers invited each other, to set aside some of your excellent analytical skills and engage your aptitude for metaphor and poetry. In our conversation today, may we honor each others’ differences, and handle each other with tender care.

These words of meditation are by Richard Gilbert:

Who of us can look inside another and know what is there of hope and hurt, [of] promise and pain? Who can know from what far paces each has come, or to what far places each may hope to go? … Handle with care! Handle with exceedingly tender care, for there are human beings within, human beings as vulnerable as we are, who feel as we feel, who hurt as we hurt. Life is too transient to be [thoughtless] with one another … Life is long enough for caring, it is lasting enough for sharing, precious enough for love.

THEN I BEGAN THE SERMON:

As we begin this exploration, the first questions are pretty straightforward:

- In your daily life, whose are you?
- Who has a claim on your time, and your attention?
- Who loves you?
- To whom are you accountable?
- Whose life is altered by your choices?
- With whose life is your own all bound up, inextricably, perhaps invisibly?

These questions ask about the interpersonal realm, the relational scale, the historical, horizontal, ground-level dimension. For this exercise you’ll need to sit facing a partner. (Aren’t you glad we have moveable chairs instead of pews?)

Here is a structure for the conversation: Decide who is the questioner first, and who is the first speaker. The questioner will ask the other, “whose are you?” And the speaker will respond with a short phrase, a word, a name, something or someone who has a claim on you, who loves you, to whom you are accountable. We’re not looking for a soliloquy here, just a word or phrase. And when the speaker has spoken, the questioner responds: God be merciful. And then the questioner asks again, “whose are you?” and is silent, while the speaker says another word or phrase. Again, the questioner responds: God be merciful.
As the questioner, you will strive to not react or respond to what is said, but simply receive it. Give your three word response, God be merciful, then ask the question again. Whose are you?

It’s important that the questioner does not “fill in the time” with extra comments, but simply waits, attentively, for any answer that may emerge. I’ll ring this bell to let you know when to begin, when to switch roles, and when our time is ended.

Let’s begin.

SCRIBE FILLS IN THE HORIZONTAL DIMENSION, THE BROAD FLAT PART OF THE CHALICE.

We have named and blessed the commitments of our lives. It is good to bear witness to and receive acknowledgement of the relationships that are essential in our lives. These blessings confirm the reality and significance of whose we are.

There is another dimension that lays claim to our lives as well. We often sing a song of gathering in the mystery, today we will open our minds and our hearts to that depth dimension, to the Holy Mystery that names us, and claims us.

Shannon will read a selection from Jeff Golliher, and then I’ll ring the bell to signify a shared time of silence. In this time you can let your mind wander, but please try to keep your body still. The insert in today’s bulletin has a blank side; it’s there for you to write or draw or mind map if you wish, as you reflect on the greater mystery that lays a claim on your life.

The first exercise explored the historic, relational scale. Now this reflective exercise asks you to look at the depth dimension, the eternal, the deep values that transcend this time in history.

UU minister Burton Carley describes this as “The source that is greater than us and not of our making.” Again, I’ll ring this bell to signal the beginning of our silent time, and the end.

READING: From *A Deeper Faith* by Jeff Golliher:
You have a journey to make, a sacred journey, that [perhaps] you’ll eventually come to understand as a path to follow. This will be the most important thing you’ve ever done.

Call it the “call of God,” call it the “call of the Spirit,” call it the “call of the Great Mystery,” call it a “catastrophe,” call it whatever you like, but a “call” of some kind is hidden within the troubles.

The purpose of this call may be to draw out something hidden and wonderful within you, and if you don’t mind me saying so, to bring about your awakening from a kind of spiritual slumber.

I should tell you now: the journey ahead may not follow a very straightforward path, with clear-cut steps to take and easily identifiable problems to solve.

Why? Because the foundation of your life, the core of who you believe yourself to be, is shaking quite a bit.

It doesn’t really matter how secure or insecure you believe that foundation is. It is unnerving and outright scary when this happens.

At the same time, all those doubts about yourself and questions about [the Holy] are evidence of a Great Mystery at work within you.

*Bell rings to signify quiet time...*

**CONGREGANTS ARE INVITED TO SHARE, AND SCRIBE FILLS IN THE FLAME OF THE CHALICE.**

Sometimes the Holy Mystery is gentle, like a spring rain, calling the tender shoots of new beginnings to slowly unfurl in our lives. And sometimes the Holy Mystery is a downpour, a raging flood that sweeps away everything before it. We sing, “Gather here in the mystery of the hour, gather here in the struggle and the power.”

Here is a metaphorical rendering of the formidable, sometimes terrifying struggle with Deep Mystery.

Spirit, draw near.
Jacob is a legendary figure, more metaphor than history. In ancient Hebrew scriptures, Jacob is the grandson of Abraham, and the father of twelve sons whose descendants became the twelve tribes of Israel. In this part of Jacob’s story, he’s on his way home after a long absence. It’s a tense homecoming, because when Jacob left he was running away—he’d done his brother Esau a grave injustice, and his brother had vowed to kill him. But the land promised to Jacob’s ancestors, and to his descendents, called to him. This story is a moment in that journey home.

In the middle of the night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and sent them across a shallow place in the Jabbok River. He sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

Jacob was left alone.

All of a sudden a man came upon Jacob, and wrestled with him until daybreak.

When the man saw that he did not defeat Jacob, he wrenched his hip at the socket. And Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he continued to wrestle with the mysterious stranger.

Then the man said, “Let me go, for daybreak is almost here.” But Jacob said, “I won’t let you go, unless you give me a blessing.” So the man said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.”

Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have contended with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But the man said, “You must not ask my name.” And there he blessed him, and quickly departed.

From that day Jacob called the place Peniel, “face of God,” saying “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”

The sun rose upon Jacob, Israel, as he crossed the river, limping because of his hip.
I have to admit, right from the start, that I identify with Jacob and his struggles. I can say this here without much self-consciousness because I feel certain there are a few Jacobs among you, as well. And “Jacobs” know: There’s a lot of darkness on a journey. Deep shadows.

At the start of a journey, who knows that the journey might actually change us? It’s so much easier to look at the technical aspects of the trip, the practical, clear-cut steps. Jacob’s journey begins a few chapters before the excerpt we just heard. Right from the beginning, he wants help from the Source of Ultimate Mystery (hey, who doesn’t?) So he tries to make a deal with God (hey, who hasn’t?): IF God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear so that I return home in peace, THEN the Lord shall be my God.

IF <condition> THEN <outcome.> Computer programmers recognize this structure. It’s a clear cut command. It’s not a request for transformation. At most it’s a call for affirmation. This is like pasting a bumper sticker on your car that reads, “God is my co-pilot.” Or maybe my stewardess.

At what point on a journey do we realize that we need more? When do we recognize that any Ultimate Mystery worth praying to will not sit passively in the co-pilot’s seat, or bring us peanuts and pillows?

In the passage we just heard, Jacob is at that point of realization.

Some of us would call this a moment of clarity. Perhaps even a moment of sanity. Jacob is beginning to recognize just how much will be required of him if he’s going to step across that borderline.

And the river is a border, a literal border as well as a symbolic one. The Jabbok was a tributary of the Jordan river; it marked the border between the place where had been living as a stranger and his home, the land promised to Jacob’s ancestors.

This crossing was a turning point in his life, too. Behind him lay a dubious past, full of trickery and thieving and running away. Ahead of him was an uncertain future.

So Jacob must have been uneasy. Maybe that’s why he and his large entourage settled down to camp, in sight of home, but on the wrong side of the river. He couldn’t have been sleeping very soundly, could he? And so he got up in the mid-
dle of the night, and rousted his large family — two wives, two baby mamas, eleven children — (NOT the most easygoing group) and he sent them across.

The story says, “Jacob was left alone…” I wonder if Jacob was ambivalent about this transition. Do you think? I don’t mean to suggest that he was considering backing out, leaving his responsibilities behind. But it does seem like he had some mixed emotions, at least. He hadn’t decided not to go, exactly, but he hadn’t quite decided to go, either.

“Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” He knew quickly that this mysterious adversary was no ordinary opponent. But was the force he struggled with divine, or demonic? Doubt was woven into the process.

I can relate to Jacob here, too. Have you ever wondered, what’s this struggle about? Who is it that wrestles with me? Could it be Deep Mystery, or is it a trap laid by my own ego? I have responded to so many of those decoy voices before.

So have you. So had Jacob, of course. He was no stranger to struggle. His family of origin was — well, calling it “dysfunctional” would be kind. He had learned conniving and cheating at his mama’s knee. They had conspired, like two common thieves, to rob his brother’s inheritance.

The family group he ran to was no better, and his relationship with them was marked by tricks and traps and double crosses on both sides. But Jacob had had a turning. Something — was it a voice? Was it from without, or within? — Something had called him home.

I’ll bet some of you “Jacobs” know the experience of which I speak. Does something call, or tug at your heart, or take your face in gentle hands and turn your head to look in a new direction, or grasp you by the back of the neck and propel you down a dark and unfamiliar road? If so, who can say from whence the call comes? Maybe it’s all bubbling up from within, the way a car is driven forward by the torque from its engine.

However it was, Jacob — like all the Jacobs who have ever lived from ancient times to the post modern era — Jacob would have had to be called or compelled to turn and take even one small step in this new direction. Think about what was at stake: In the past, Jacob primarily looked out for number one. Now, he was called to relationship, to community, to sometimes (perhaps often) putting the needs of his community above his own. In the past, Jacob avoided conflict — he ran away! Whenever he was confronted he clapped his tail against his hind end and scuttled away. In this new life, Jacob was called to face conflict head on, to step towards it,
not away. In the past, Jacob could easily measure his success. “Count the number of sheep in my flock, observe the span of my tent, the treasure I have laid by.” Now Jacob was called to faithfulness, and to covenant.

No wonder Jacob wrestled as if his life depended on it. No wonder he clung so hard to this nameless presence. No wonder he said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

Bless me. In the struggle, bless me. If Jacob was to journey towards what called to him on this path, he needed a blessing. And there, in the dirt, in the desperate, grinding, wrestling struggle, Jacob got his blessing. And he also got a wounding, a wrenching dislocation that would be with him the rest of his life.

And in the thin, early light of a new day Jacob took his first, limping steps across that borderline, across that boundary, across that Holy Ground. He had a new name, a new identity: Is/ra/el, God engages us, God wrestles us.

And yet our wounded lives are spared.

THERE WAS SPECIAL MUSIC FOLLOWING THIS PIECE, Wounded Heart by Bonnie Raitt. THEN I ASKED:

Is there anything you want to add to this flame, this depth dimension?

THEN, POINTING TO THE INTERSECTION WHERE THE FLAME, BASE, AND CHALICE MEET:

This intersection is a place where we should pay special attention. There’s a lot of energy here.

Once many years ago, before she moved to Alaska, UUFT member Debbie Koontz spoke in a Sunday service about the deep meaning she still found in some Christian ideas and symbols. Debbie had been raised in Korea, by missionary parents, very loving and liberal and not pulpit-pounding haters, so Debbie didn’t have a lot of negative baggage around Christianity.

Even so, I remember I was surprised to hear that the Christian cross was still a very powerful symbol for her. She said that the horizontal “arms” of the cross represented her daily life, and the vertical “pole” of the cross represented the divine.
Debbie said that in her meditation she liked to focus on the intersection, because that represented where the two dimensions came together.

I’d say that the Jacob story was a good metaphorical description for the torque and the tension we often find in that intersection.

But I’m not drawing a cross here. I’m drawing the Unitarian Universalist symbol, the flaming chalice. I’ve purposely left the foundation blank, though you could argue that I should have started there — better for balance, you might say.

Burton Carley notes that while “there are many names for the [Holy Mystery] and many practices or paths to … this source that is greater than us and not of our making … the church is at the intersection … where the sacred and the human meet.”

And one way to describe the relationship that holds us together, a relationship strong enough to withstand the torque and the tension inherent in this intersection, is as a covenant.

The UU theologian Alice Blair Wesley said,

…The center of the free church, the heart of the whole thing, is a promise of fidelity, a covenant, which each member freely makes upon joining. Actually also, each member begins again with, or renews or renegotiates, his or her promise many times in the course of the life of the church, in the privacy of renewed conscience or spiritual growth. Too often our promise, or covenant, is implicit, not consciously explicit. But it doesn’t really matter whether it is verbalized. It matters whether it is faithfully meant.

Some churches say a covenant together every time they gather. And some of those communities still fight like cats. “…it doesn’t really matter whether it is verbalized. It matters whether it is faithfully meant.”

In a spirit of openness and of faithfulness, let us read together the covenant printed on your bulletin insert.

Love is the doctrine of this Fellowship;  
The quest for truth is its sacrament  
And service is its prayer.

To dwell together in peace,  
To seek knowledge in freedom,  
To serve human need,
To the end that all people shall grow into harmony
with each other and with the Holy.

Thus do we covenant with each other
And with the Holy Mystery that calls us here.

These words are one description of a congregational covenant. What word or short phrase would you use to describe the covenant that holds us together in fellowship?

WE SCRIBED THE WORDS TO FILL IN THE BASE OF THE CHALICE

And, what is being faithful to your covenant with this Fellowship requiring of you now?

A FEW MORE WORDS WENT AROUND THE OUTSIDE OF THE BASE