Whose are we? To whom do we belong and to whom do we feel responsible and accountable? From reading the Christian Bible we can see that Christians are very clear about whom they belong to. If we examined the texts in the Jewish scriptures or in the Koran, we would find the same sense of belonging in the Jewish and Moslem communities. These three, Christians, Moslems, and Jews, all belong to their gods and their religious communities.

Okay, so who, or what, do we belong to? Douglas Steere, a Quaker writer and teacher, says that our identity is linked to our relationships. We cannot be a person by ourselves. Before we talk about our relationships, let me say a few words about our existence.

We belong to the universe. We always have. The elements that make up who and what you are, are found in the universe, there is no place else for them to be. While we have been alive, we are part of the universe. Yet, before we were born, we were a part of the universe than too! After we die, we will still be a part of the universe, even if pronouns, like “we” or “you” or “I” break down and don’t make sense any longer. As Einstein demonstrated, matter like our bodies can be created or destroyed, but the precursors and the products of such reactions retain both the original mass and energy. Nothing is and nothing is gained. The mass and energy of our physical being today, having always existed, always will, or so the physicists tell us.

At a basic level, we are a part of a family, as I explained to the children. That we belong to a family is a given. The questions raised by Douglas Steere are good questions. Family is where we first learn to ask and to answer those questions. Who loves you? Who do you love? Who needs you? Who do you need? To whom do you answer? Today, I am on the threshold of being an old man, yet I still need my family and my family still needs me. I am still accountable to my family, but more and more I am accountable to the younger generations in my family, as the older generations are passing away. To be accountable means to be that someone others can count on.

Families have a great influence on who we are. We first learn our values from our family of origin. This is true whether we are very close to our families, or not. Our confidence to face the wider world, our sense of belonging, is first gained from our families.

Our families can also be very frustrating at times. There are days when we don’t want to have anything to do with them. We can’t imagine actually being related to these people. Perhaps we were adopted? When we were born, perhaps
the wrong family took us home? Didn’t you have times as a child, at least once, when you through some clothes in your favorite blanket, announced to your mother that you are leaving home, and stormed out the door? I know I did! Yet, I always came back home in time for supper! Family is where we belong. A wise person once defined a family as those people who, if you had nowhere else to turn and were to knock on their door at four in the morning, they would have to let you in.

We are a part of the universe and we are part of a family. These relationships are clear, but what is less clear is that we are also citizens of the Earth. For some people, this relationship does not exist. In fact, it gets in the way of other relationships, such as nation or tribe. “A Citizen of the Earth” is an anathema, because other nations or tribes on the planet are “the Other” and are viewed as possible enemies.

I take a different view. For me, global citizenship is very important. We humans belong to the same species, no matter how some people may try to demonize others. And unlike other species, we have some say in the events that will prevent, or at least postpone our species extinction. First of all, this implies an obligation to pursue a much more responsible stewardship of the natural resources on this planet. I personally aspire to be a “Leaver,” which is writer Daniel Quinn’s description, in his book, Ishmael, for one of two types of people in all of human history. The other type, he has called, the “Takers.” The labels that Quinn uses, “Leavers” and “Takers,” describes the orientation of human beings to this planet. So I aspire to spend my time on this planet leaving as soft a footprint as I possibly can.

Second, and equally important as a Citizen of the Earth, I personally feel compelled to be an ambassador of peace and justice by advocating for the self-determination of my fellow global citizens. I believe that as a global citizen I am called to do all I can to help the human race overcome its tendencies toward tribalism and ideology that divide rather than unite.

We also live in the United States of America. And because of the accident of living here, we have a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” This fact carries with it certain rights and responsibilities. We have numerous rights both implied and written explicitly in our laws. We have responsibilities as well, to make our voices heard and to vote for the most well-qualified candidates for public office, though we might disagree about which candidates are well-qualified and which aren’t!
I take my citizenship rights and responsibilities very seriously. I am dismayed about those whose rights have been denied, but I am also discouraged by the lack of responsibility by many of our citizens. The voters’ turnout in our country is embarrassingly low. Yes, I am an American, but I wish there was a way we could all be held more accountable in exercising our citizenship.

We are also citizens of the State of Minnesota and of our local communities. And speaking of the rights of citizens, it looks like we will have to organize to defeat an effort to make lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual people, second class citizens when it comes to marriage equality. This is one example of the tribalism and ideology I mentioned a moment ago that is moving the human race toward extinction. Fortunately, we have at our disposal the means to convince and encourage our fellow citizens not to go along with this overt discrimination!

Outside of our biological families, I believe we experience our greatest sense of belonging within a religious community. Of course, that may not be everyone’s experience in every religious community, but I believe it can be our experience within the Michael Servetus community. As Rev John Beuhrens has said, “To be religious is to make connections. To lead a meaningful life among the many competing forces of the 21st-century, each of us needs support in making meaningful re-connections to the best in our global heritage, the best in others, and the best in ourselves.” And so I ask, who among us does not want to be reconnected to the best that life has to offer?

The quotation from Douglas Steere suggests that belonging, needing, loving, and accountability are all wrapped up together. This is the definition of the so-called nuclear family, but I would argue that it is an important characteristic of a well functioning religious community also. Buehrens tells us that our support in this life comes from making meaningful re-connections. The process of reconnecting to people and to the things that matter in our life requires an ongoing effort.

“No man is an island,” the old saying goes. Yet, American culture, with its emphasis on rugged individualism, has been trying to subvert that saying for a long time. Individualism has lots of inherent disadvantages, not the least of which is that it leaves us lonely and alone. Autonomy in the extreme has a very high price.

What is the alternative? I believe it is for each of us to search for the answers to the “whose am I” question. You can start with the question, who needs you? That question is similar to the question, who loves you? Love, in this sense,
is not the emotional, romantic Gothic-novel kind of love, though there might be some of that love in your answer too. Love is about commitment, who you can count on and who can count on you. Whom you can count on and who can count on you is what accountability is all about, and nothing more.

I know that almost all of you will answer these questions by filling in the names of your family members. It is my hope that many of you can also answer these questions by filling in the names of those in this religious community. Okay, maybe not all of the names, but that you can answer with the Michael Servetus community as a whole. It is my hope that if you can’t do that today, you will be able to do it perhaps next month, or maybe, next year, or eventually.

Whose am I? I am a product of the universe, and so are you. I am a member of my family for whom I can count on and they can count on me. My wife, Wendy, figures prominently in that family relationship. And I know many of you have a similar relationship in your family as well.

Whose am I? I am a minister in the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations and for all of its flaws, I am deeply committed and accountable for its ongoing viability, vitality, and voice in the larger world. To that end, I am committed to the vision and mission of the Michael Servetus community, realizing that communities aspiring to be the Beloved Community must be deliberately formed and reformed, nurtured and renewed.

Those are my commitments. It is my hope that you share the same commitment to building the Beloved Community. I know that many of you do, so then let us continue in this important task. Let us also keep this most important question in our awareness, which is – whose are we?