

“Thick Faith”
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County
Rev Denis Paul and
June 8, 2025

Blurb

Order of Service

Sounding the Chime

Welcome and Announcements Rev Denis Paul

Opening Hymn 119, *Once to Every Soul and Nation*

Chalice Lighting

The words of Thomas Merton

Opening Words

“Generation Joshua,” by Elizabeth Doll

Reciting the Covenant Together

Love is the spirit of this congregation,

And service is its prayer.

This is our great covenant:

To dwell together in peace,

To seek the truth in love,

And to help one another.

Joys and Concerns

Prayer “The Lord’s Prayer”

Translated directly from the Aramaic by Dr. Neil Douglas-Klotz

Offering *Lean On Me, Bill Withers*

Offertory

Reading from *Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith*, by Kathleen Norris

Hymn #121, *We'll Build a Land*

Sermon "Thick Faith," Rev. Denis Paul

Hymn#67, "We Sing Now Together"

Closing Words

"Faith," by Frances Anne Kemble

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this chalice, but not its light that we take with us, out into the world, sharing it with those we encounter on our journey.

Closing Song

Carry the flame of peace and love, until we meet again (3x)

Postlude *Grandma's Hands, Bill Withers*

Script

Sounding the Chime

Welcome and Announcements

Welcome to the worship service of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County. I am Rev. Denis Paul, and I have the honor of servicing this congregation as minister. I also have the legal duty to point out that in the unlikely event of an emergency you should exit quickly. You can go out the way you came in. Please reserve the ramp for people who need it, or help them if you can. You can also exit behind the pulpit or down the hall and to the left.

Recognizing that we all have different needs for safety, we are a mask-friendly congregation. If you see someone wearing a mask, please give them a little extra space, and be mindful of touching. And if you aren't feeling well, even if it seems like just a little cough, please join us by zoom.

It's a sacred time in the week, so let's all turn off or silence our cell phones now, so we can just be present, as we celebrate joys and sit in sadness in the fullness of our being.

Whatever your economic situation,
whatever your citizenship or immigration status,
whatever pronouns you prefer,
you are welcome here,
in this congregation of like-hearted individuals,

dedicated to welcoming, loving, growing spiritually, and seeking justice.

I'd like to invite our congregational greeters to rise so that everyone can see who you are.

If you are a newcomer, we invite you to introduce yourself to one of these good people. They can answer any questions you have. And please, fill out the yellow Welcome Card in your hymnal, and put it in the collection basket during the offering.

If you're so inclined, feel free to introduce yourself during the part of the service we call Joys and Concerns.

Newcomers on Zoom, I'd like to invite you to introduce yourself to other participants, especially our virtual ushers, Jean and Aline.

Before we get started, there's a few announcements:

Next Saturday we are sponsors of South County Pride in Wakefield, where we will also have a booth. Festivities begin at 11:30. See Cathy Solomon if you can sign up to staff our booth and answer questions.

The Unitarian Universalist General Assembly is happening in Baltimore June 18-22. There's still time to register to attend online. You can either attend in full virtually, or you can serve as a delegate. Or both. See me if you're interested in joining Mary Fulton and me as we represent UUCSC, and spend some time unpacking the discussion after each general session.

Right after the service today, we'll hold OUR Annual Meeting. Members of the congregation — by that we mean folks who have officially signed the membership book — will vote on the proposed budget for fiscal year 2025-26, new members of the board of directors, and new members of the nominating committee. It's not a long meeting, but it is a very important part of congregational life: democracy in action. Everyone is welcome, member or not, so please stay if you can.

And a heads up that our last two services in June will be VERY different.

The 22nd will be in three parts, built around the Hymn Sing-Along happening at the UUA General Assembly, and broadcast by Zoom. We'll light our chalice here at 9:15, join the sing along at 9:30, then sing with our own choir and musicians until 11:00. You can drop in for any part, or stay for the whole thing.

Then, on the 29th, we're ending the year the way we started, with breakfast together, this time with a flower communion. Service starts at the usual time, but won't be on Zoom.

Check your newsletter for details about both of those services.

Please rise now, in body or in spirit for hymn #119, Once to Every Soul and Nation.

Opening Hymn 119, *Once to Every Soul and Nation*

Once to every soul and nation comes the moment to decide,
in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side:
then to stand with truth is noble, when we share its wretched crust;
ere that cause bring fame and profit and 'tis prosperous to be just.

Though the cause of evil prosper, yet 'tis truth alone is strong;
though its portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong.
Then it is the brave one chooses, while the coward stands aside,
till the multitude make virtue of the faith they have denied.

Chalice Lighting

Whenever we gather in love, we light a flame within a chalice as a symbol of the incredible light that emanates from each one of us. It's a reminder that that as the rights of some are denied, we have the responsibility to take the side of truth and goodness. It's a reminder that together we can gird the institutions and traditions threatened with extinction.

_____, would you do us the honor of lighting our chalice? As I share the words of Trappist monk and social activist Thomas Merton:

There is something in the very nature of my freedom that inclines me to love,
to do good,
to dedicate myself to others.

I have an instinct that tells me that I am less free when I am living for myself alone.

The reason for this is that I cannot be completely independent.

Since I am not self-sufficient
I depend on someone else for my fulfillment.
My freedom is not fully free when left to itself.

It becomes so when it is brought into the right relation with freedom of another.

Opening Words

In a letter to members and friends of Braver Angels, the cross-partisan non-profit group dedicated to bridging the cultural divide, Politics Director Elizabeth Doll wrote about a fundamental Christian youth movement. She wrote

As a kid, I identified with a movement of Christian homeschoolers called “Generation Joshua.” My peers all read the book *Do Hard Things* by then-teenaged brothers Alex & Brett Harris and committed to defying people’s low expectations. My upbringing’s theme through the early 00’s was that others’ stereotypes and expectations didn’t define you or your achievements and that fear shouldn’t stop you.

We separated from secular society, recognizing that we were a “peculiar” people. I watched the Church of Fear emerge from fundamentalist legalism and among non-Christians looking to gain power not over fear but over other Americans. From the braggadocio of men who promised they’d die to protect their wives but couldn’t bring themselves to wash dishes for her to, people who proclaimed care for their neighbors but were too afraid to walk with them outside unmasked, I worried about the increasing unmooring of Americans from each other and from real adherence to the faith they claimed.

WE Unitarian Universalists are a peculiar people. We are bound together not by a fixed set of beliefs, but rather by the promises we make to each other and to the world. Promises to be kind, generous, justice-oriented. Promises about how we will behave, based entirely on our shared faith in people. Even when that faith gets shaken to its core by the behaviors of others, acting on their deeply held beliefs.

Please rise now, as we recite together our covenant, a litany of those promises, as Unitarian Universalists and as members of this congregation:

Reciting the Covenant Together

Love is the spirit of this congregation,

And service is its prayer.

This is our great covenant:

To dwell together in peace,

To seek the truth in love,

And to help one another.

[Move camera to altar]

Joys and Concerns

I'd like to invite you now to come up and share the milestones in your life, the joys and concerns that are just too big for you to keep to yourself. Remember, everyone is vulnerable when they share, and everyone is generous when they listen. We don't need to test each others' limits.

Folks at home, as always, please share using the chat function on Zoom, so that I can read your thoughts aloud.

Folks in the sanctuary, please come up the ramp, onto the chancel to share. Come all the way up on the chancel, and line up along these two walls. Keep the ramp free and clear for movement, so that nobody has to step down and around the piano and wires. And, just a reminder: we're still experimenting with this arrangement, which is intended to bring the choir into the congregation, so they can see and hear speakers better, and so that we can all sing together more fully.

So, who would like to begin?

(Read from Zoom Chat)

And this final stone is for all those joys and concerns that remain unshared.

[Move camera back to altar]

Prayer "The Lord's Prayer"

Translated directly from the Aramaic by Dr. Neil Douglas-Klotz

O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos, you create all that moves in light.
Focus your light within us — make it useful: as the rays of a beacon show the way.
Unite our "I can" to yours, so that we walk as kings and queens with every creature.
Create in me a divine cooperation — from many selves, one voice, one action.
Grant what we need each day in bread and insight.
Forgive our hidden past, the secret shames, as we consistently forgive what others hide.
Deceived neither by the outer nor the inner — free us to walk your path with joy.
From you is born all ruling will, the power and life to do, the song that beautifies all from age to age it renews.
May it be so.

Offering

it's that time of year again, when young people leave behind the childhood world of school to enter the adult world of working for pay or studying for professional degrees.

Talk about renewal from age to age.

I live near a park where the graduation ceremony was being held for the public high school. As I drove here to officiate the memorial of Warren Beckwith, I passed all these parents with these headshots of their kids, cut out like giant full color masks on sticks.

It was like a parade of two dimensional young adults with fresh faces.

I thought we should have masks like that of everyone showing a whole range of emotions throughout our lives. Joy and sadness. Pride and shame. And the beatific looks we all get when we give our money to organizations like this that matter to us.

So, while the baskets are passed to collect this morning's offering, I'm going to go around and get some shots of you all, looking your best.

Offertory *Lean On Me, Bill Withers*

Gratitude

For all of the ways you give of your time,
For all of the ways you indulge me in my silliness,
For all the ways you share your treasures
Thank you.

Reading

I'd like to give a special place in the service to a reading, by poet and memoirist Kathleen Norris, who has spoken a couple times at Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. It's from her book *Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith*. She writes:

The confidence that faith requires is notoriously easier for small children than for adults. No matter what the circumstances of our upbringing, our capacity for trust, allegiance, and confidence is badly battered in the everyday process of growing up.

I had a radiant faith as a child, mostly related to song and story. Like many people of my baby boomer generation, I drifted away from religion when catechism came to the fore, and the well-meaning adults who taught Sunday school and confirmation class seemed intent on putting the vastness of “God” into small boxes of their own devising. Theirs was a scary vocabulary, not an inviting one. And religion came to seem just one more childhood folly that I had to set aside as an adult. In my mid 30s, however it became necessary to begin to reclaim my faith, scary vocabulary, and all.

Pleaser rise as you are willing and able to sing hymn #121, We'll Build A Land. In the interest of making vocabulary less scary and divisive, in the chorus, instead of “sisters and broths,” let's sing “people together.”

Hymn #121, *We'll Build a Land*

We'll build a land where we bind up the broken.
We'll build a land where the captives go free,
Where the oil of gladness dissolves all mourning.
Oh, we'll build a promised land that can be.

Chorus:

Come build a land where sisters and brothers,
Anointed by God, may then create peace:
Where justice shall roll down like waters,
And peace like an ever-flowing stream.

We'll build a land where we bring the good tidings
To all the afflicted and all those who mourn.
And we'll give them garlands instead of ashes.
Oh, we'll build a land where peace is born.

Chorus

We'll be a land building up ancient cities,
Raising up devastations from old;
Restoring ruins of generations.
Oh, we'll build a land of people so bold.

Chorus

Come, build a land where the mantles of praises
Resound from spirits once faint and once weak;
Where like oaks of righteousness stand her people.
Oh, come build the land, my people we seek.

Chorus

Sermon "Thick Faith," Rev. Denis Paul

Like Kathleen Norris, as a child I had a lot of faith. I believed with every fiber of my being in God, who I was sure was an English speaking version of my maternal grandfather, all white haired, old and wise. Like my grandfather, this God was profoundly interested in my well-being and wanted me to be happy. I talked to him constantly. My lips were always moving, soundlessly. I knew he heard me.

I thought he was like Santa Claus and could see everything I did, but, being a child I didn't REALLY understand omnipotence or omnipresence. I thought he couldn't see what was done TO me.

June is Pride month. I think it's okay to say it. I took a lot of abuse from my brother, my cousins, kids at school and in the neighborhood for being a little fag. And a couple of the older boys, who'd taken the same kind of abuse from the same kind of people, used me in ways I knew were wrong. But I had no way to stop it.

And I was sure that if God found out, he'd abandon me in horror, sure as I was that it was all my own fault. If God saw my punishments, he'd think that I'd done something to deserve it.

I don't know if they meant to, but Catechism teachers made me believe that I deserved whatever abuse I suffered, and STILL I had faith that God would take care of me. Someday. As long as he didn't find out.

It made no sense. I was a kid. And my faith then, I now know, is what theologians call "thin faith:" a superficial belief in something that I *wanted* to be true. It was an unexamined faith, based on simply believing what grown ups told me, even when I knew in my guts that it was wrong, without ever questioning it.

Somehow, that faith evolved. Somehow, I found the strength to forgive myself for not being what everyone seemed to expect me to be, and I forgave them for being so afraid of who and what I was. I realized that people are people and they're going to do the people things that people do:

They're going to *lash* out when they feel cornered, and *reach* out when they feel supported. They're going to hold on tightly to everything they have when they're afraid of losing it all, and give whatever they can spare when they feel like they have enough. Fear, I learned, rarely motivates compassion or generosity.

People love best and most when they can love themselves, and ironically can't love themselves if they feel no one else does first.

Somehow, along the way, I found my real faith. My faith in people.

Notice I didn't say my faith in the GOODNESS of people. I'm a Universalist through and through. While I believe that all people have the capacity for good, and maybe even that goodness is our base as children, I don't believe all people are good. And I know for a fact nobody is good all of the time, because nobody is perfect.

My faith is that, no matter what, people will always act like people. And that belief is rooted in what those same theologians call a "thick faith." My confidence that grows stronger the more it is tested, the more I learn about US, the more I commit myself to people.

Even when we aren't at our best. Perhaps especially when we aren't at our best.

Right now, I don't think ANY of us are at our best.

We're ALL feeling disenfranchised right now.

The people with power in this country are the people with the most money.

The 20 or so wealthiest people on earth are getting even richer and even more powerful than gaming the system.

the people who are most under attack are US or the people we love: our rights are being taken away, our jobs in teaching, research, protecting the environment, and caring for the most vulnerable among us are being slashed with glee.

Even people for whom everything is going great I don't think they're at their best either.

While Marjorie Taylor Greene may be thrilled that the trans people who terrify and disgust her are being erased from our government, she's also PISSED that the "big beautiful bill" she voted to support contains things that terrify her. Like not even addressing the regulation of artificial intelligence.

Real democracy is disappearing. If it isn't already gone.

Elon Musk may have broken up with the president he's been fangirling over, but there are plenty of oligarchs ready to take his place, so even if you saw this coming six months ago, there's no joy in it.

It's just people being people.

The super powerful are doing what the superpowerful have always done: rig it so that we'll fight each other, drowning in despair and apathy.

They want us to forget that we connect with each other when we are vulnerable, because ultimately, most people want to be helpful most of the time. We all need to see vulnerability in order to be reminded of that fact, and act accordingly.

Some people are in a pit of despair and dread. Others are energized by the fight to resist. And most of us are a little of both, some days charged up, and some days depleted by despair and apathy.

So it can be hard to go into any situation leading with hope and curiosity when we just feel so beat up. It's hard to show up, even among the people who are ON OUR SIDE, feeling cooperative.

What we need right now is the opposite of those despair and apathy. We need hope and curiosity to deepen our faith ... in people.

Louise McLeod told me that hope and curiosity keep her going when things get tough, and THAT, I think, is the glue that holds us Unitarian Universalists together. Hope and Curiosity. Even when's tough.

Many of you were here on May 18, when we gathered after the service for what the Committee on Ministry called a "listening session."

Our goal was not to FIX anything. Our goal was to allow a few folks to speak with vulnerability about their experiences, as the rest of us made an effort to actually HEAR them, paying attention to their emotions and — perhaps more importantly — their unmet needs. We tried to even read between the lines to ferret out the UNSPOKEN unmet needs.

Some people REALLY wanted to be heard, and had a hard time speaking.

Some people REALLY wanted to listen, and perhaps wanted a little more strongly to find the "problem" and fix it.

Some people came in skeptical of the process and left feeling HOPEFUL.

Some people came in feeling confused or even oblivious and left feeling frustrated.

It was definitely one of those times when the way we interacted with each other tested my faith in people and reinforced it. Because everyone — every. Single. One of us — behaved the way people behave.

It wasn't perfect, because certainly there were some disagreements and hurt feelings.

Ultimately though, it felt like we were holding the discordant needs and expectations of different groups of people, even while so many of us fell into multiple categories. Because people, it has been proven to me time and again, often fall simultaneously into multiple categories, even when those categories seem at odds with one another. Because we can be hopeful and desperate on alternate days. Or even at the same time.

We can claim to be all about love and peace and still find ourselves hating that person we don't understand. And then feel ashamed for feeling that way. Even though it's perfectly human, and we'd never act on those feelings.

I think that is the biggest challenge in ministry. We are wildly complex which makes us super inconsistent, which makes the diversity joyful but also super difficult to live into. So... we can't be all things to all people all the time. And even though we know that our diversity is exactly

what makes us strong; even though we know that our diversity is exactly what makes people want to join us.... We still struggle with the diversity we value so much.

And THAT is exactly what I love about people. We contradict ourselves all over the place, get all messy even in our love, and end up GROWING together because of it. IF we let the struggle renew our faith in people. IF we just let ourselves and each other be people.

The bottom line is that if we are going to practice this faith together, to get THICKER in it, we must live in the messiness and the contradictions, all the opposing needs that can feel like conflict, if we let them. We have to accept that we can be two different things simultaneously:

We can be charged for the fight AND exhausted and hopeless
We can welcome newcomers AND prefer the company of our old friends
We can encourage the presence of children AND feel a little grumpy when they don't act like grown ups
We can want to change things up to keep up with the times AND hold on tightly to that which has given us comfort, support and fulfillment

We have to live in the tension, find the usefulness in it. We cannot let ourselves be divided whenever we don't agree perfectly, and acknowledge our own mixed feelings. We have to simply accept the fact that we all ACT LIKE PEOPLE all of the time. Imperfect. Broken. And absolutely perfect just as we are. Even when we make no sense at all.

Our job is to accompany each other. Exactly as we are. Our job is to remind one another that our power comes from uniting. Even if it isn't perfect.

That's why the 2,000 year old words of a rebellious rabbi half a world away speak to me so clearly now. It's an appeal to a higher power, our higher selves:

Focus your light within us — **make it useful:** as the rays of a beacon show the way.
Unite our "I can" to yours, so that we walk as kings and queens **with every creature.**
Create in me a divine cooperation — **from many selves, one voice, one action.**
Grant what we need each day in bread **and insight.**
Forgive our hidden past, **the secret shames,** as we consistently forgive **what others hide.**
Deceived neither by the *outer nor the inner* — **free us to walk your path with joy.**

It's a song to the power of the universe as we journey together fully human: frail and powerful, broken and strong, willing to be curious enough about each other to find the joy behind that which is hidden.

May we be so to each other.

May we be so in the world.

May it be so.

Please rise now, in body or in spirit, for hymn #67, We Sing Now Together.

Hymn #67, “We Sing Now Together”

We sing now together, our song of Thanksgiving
Rejoicing in goods which the ages have wrought,
For life that enfolds us, and helps and heals and holds us,
And leads beyond the goals, which our forebears once sought.

We sing of the freedoms which martyrs and heroes
Have won by their labor, their sorrow, their pain;
The oppressed befriending, our ampler hopes defending,
Their death becomes a triumph, they died not in vain.

We sing of the prophets, the teachers, the dreamers,
Designers, creators, and workers and seers;
Our own lives expanding, our gratitude commanding,
Their deeds have made immortal their days and their years.

We sing of community now in the making
In every far continent, region and land;
With those of all races, all times and names and places,
We pledge ourselves in covenant firmly to stand.

Closing Words

Our closing words are a poem called “Faith,” by Frances Anne Kemble, a British Actor and poet who lived through most of the 19th century.

Better trust all, and be deceived,
And weep that trust, and that deceiving;
Than doubt one heart, that, if believed,
Had blessed one’s life with true believing.

Oh, in this mocking world, too fast
The doubting fiend o’ertakes our youth!
Better be cheated to the last,
Than lose the blessed hope of truth.

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this chalice, but not its light that we take with us, out into the world, sharing it with those we encounter on our journey.

Closing Song

Carry the flame of peace and love, until we meet again (3x)

Postlude *Grandma's Hands, Bill Withers*