**Sermon –** Changing Paradigms; Building Possibility – Feb 1, 2026 — Patrick

Back when the pandemic started — note that I'm not saying "during the pandemic," because it's not over, we're still in it. Just because national authorities and CEOs have decided it's good to pretend it's over doesn't mean it is. We're actually just past the peak of the twelfth spike — but back when it started, I found myself preaching over and over that we needed to let go of the hope that we could go back to how things were. That world is past, and it's not coming back. And we can't get it back. Covid is loose in the world; it's endemic, and we'll be dealing with its effects for the foreseeable future. And the same is true for the kind of society and democracy that we had — or thought we had — before fascism came to power in America. Even if — by some miracle — all those people were swept from power, the damage that's been done is so deep and so profound that we *can't* go back. Not only are our institutions deeply damaged; some of them have been destroyed. But more crucially, the norms and expectations that were boundaries and guardrails have been ripped out and ignored. And once those have been destroyed, you can't just wish them back into being by announcing that we're back to normal.

Those past realities, however much they were reality, and how much they were shared fantasies, are gone.

We need to recognize what's real *now,* **and** think in new ways — in ways that are appropriate for **now.** Let me give you an example; I asked a friend in Minneapolis about how Flagstaff could be ready for *when* ICE swarms into Flagstaff.

Don't imagine it won't. It's already starting to, in Phoenix. And while one of our local law enforcement leaders says that things are still fairly safe here now, he said — and I quote — "It *will* get worse."

So here is what my friend asked in response;

Do you have mutual aid networks?
Do you have block captains?
Do you have ride systems in place?
Do have whistles?
Do have resources to talk to your kids?
Do you know your rights?
Do you have your songs?
Do you have your art?
Are you ready to rise up?
In the cold? In the rain? In the snow? In the wind?
If you aren't ready, it's time to get ready.

Do you? Do we?

The time to start, she counseled, isn't *after* ICE shows up. Minneapolis was able to respond as well as it has *because* they had experience already, because some of those networks of self- and mutual-care started being built in that city after the murder of George Floyd.

Start now, while you can, was the implicit subtext.

The old paradigm that we had, that the authorities and police and law would protect us, isn't reliable. Some of them may, but more and more, it now rests on us to protect each other. To care for each other.

These paradigms — the models, the assumptions — have been revealed to have been less true than we believed. People who aren't white — who don't pass for white — in America have long known that the police and the law weren't going to protect and care for them equally. And now those paradigms are crumbling, being shattered.

There are other paradigms that may have served us, but don't now — and if we rely on them, they can even harm us. As the American economy has changed, it has become harder and harder for congregations to sustain themselves, because it has become harder and harder for normal people to support and sustain themselves. The time and energy and money it takes to support all of this has become less available. Historically the average size of a religious community in America — regardless of the religious tradition — has been about 100 members. And congregations that size could comfortably sustain themselves; their building, a small staff, and a minister.

Not any longer. I've done the math, and given the things that UU congregations like Beacon want and expect aren't sustainable for 100 member congregations. That paradigm is broken — and it's not your fault. The paradigm became false.

Now? The match I've done suggests that it's more like 150 members.

That's the central reason that your board embraced moving to two services; because for Beacon to be what you want, it will have to be bigger. It will have to grow.

One of the great blessings of liberal religious communities is that we've learned to be comfortable talking about sexuality, about sex — and that's literally been liberating and life saving for many people. There are people who've gone through OWL (Our While Lives; the sexuality, relationships, and ethics programs for ***all***

*ages* that we developed with the United Church of Christ, and teach in cooperation with them)… those people have told me — and told others — that it saved their lives. And they weren't being metaphorical. It's been incredibly important, saving lives and minds, and making lives better, healthier, safer, and more joyful. There are programs for your age group; if you think that might be of interest for you or people you know, please let me or Linda know.

The old paradigm that religious people couldn't — and shouldn't — talk about sex was a bad paradigm. We've abandoned it.

But there's a paradigm that liberal religious people don't talk about money. Because money is… well, private, you know. Like… sex. Because not everyone has the same amount of money, or the same income, and talking about that inequality — which exists right here in this room — makes us uncomfortable. So let's not talk about it. Right?

We can talk about sex, but not money.

Ironically, that same dynamic is common in the workplace. Years ago, when I realized I was being misused by an employer, and complained about it, I got told that I was one of the two highest paid tech writers in the department. And when I talked to my co-workers about that, they were incensed — they were all being misused, only most of them were being abused even more. Our employer got furious that we had talked among ourselves about how much we were — weren't — being paid. And chided and threatened us about it.

Not that what we'd done was illegal. It is in fact entirely legal to discuss what you're paid with your co-workers. And it's illegal for an employer to tell you that you can't, or to punish you for talking about it.

But it's common; most of them do that. Because when we talk about things that are important, meaningful, and powerful, we have more information and more control — more agency, more ability to make rational decisions. So they don't want us talking about money.

And I think that flows over into our congregations. We aspire to a far more equal, equitable, and egalitarian society. We would like to model that. Everyone has a vote, right — and it's the same vote. But being silent about money issues means that power is hidden, not out in the open where people can see it, recognize it, and make rational decisions about it.

I mentioned last week that incident when bells in Waltham, Massachusetts were rung in anger and sorrow when an escaped enslaved man was dragged back into

slavery by federal authorities. But not the Unitarian bells in that town, because they were “stuffed with cotton.” I am certain that that congregation didn’t have any conversations about money and power; the people who had money had immense power and influence in that congregation — enough that it kept their bell from being rung. Because had it run, it would have been in criticism of them, as well as the system that sustained and supported slavery. And in all honesty, that church needed to have that conversation.

Our expectation as UUs is that having more wealth doesn’t entitle you to more power, to a greater voice. Instead, it’s an obligation — what are you going to do with that power that you have? How are you going to use it ethically and responsibly to foster and grow the kind of community, and the congregation, that you are part of?

All this takes money. That’s the nature of our society. Doing almost anything costs money. There’s a cost to have lights on, and heat. There’s a cost to have staff doing the jobs that you, the members, want them doing. Usually because either you don’t have the time to do those jobs as volunteers, or because you don’t have the specific expertise or skills to do those things and want them done for your community.

And it costs more than most of us imagine. I remember when Barbara and I were first members of our home congregation. We donated what we could and thought was reasonable. And things were tight; we were a one income family and we had kids. But over time, and particularly after I was elected to the board and was going over budgets and so on, it became clear that the few hundreds we were donating weren’t fully our fair share.

Now this gets complex here, and can cause all kinds of guilty feelings. That’s not my goal.

I knew an elderly fellow there who contributed what he could — and it wasn’t a lot. That was the reality of his economic situation. But what he did contribute was generous for his income and budget. When that congregation decided to have a building campaign, he wanted to contribute, and he did. But for him it meant shutting of the heat in his mobile home for the winter. Here, that would be insane. But in inland Southern California, it still gets cold in the winter; there are still frosts. Art decided to live through that, to live differently, so he could participate in that capital campaign. I only learned about this years later, after he died.

And I'll admit, I suspect I'll never be that generous or committed. But while Art's contribution to the building campaign was quite modest, it was unquestionably the most generous contribution anyone made.

And I'm grateful to him for the lesson — whenever I am asked to contribute to a cause that's important to me, I try to figure out how much I *can* give. I want it to count, and I want to be able to look in the mirror and say that I learned the lesson Art modeled.

And honestly, that's harder for those of us with *more,* with plenty, than it is for people like Art. Survey after survey shows that the richer people are, the less they give — as a percentage — of their income. But of course, they could afford to be even more generous.

And I think that's one reason that our congregations — the vast majority of them — don't talk about money. Because if we did, we'd make people look in the mirror and ask "Can I — should I — really be giving more to this to make it thrive?"

I'm not saying that you should give until it *hurts*. I don't believe that there's a moral value to suffering pain. But give until you feel it? Yes. Give so that it make you forego — or delay — something else? Very possibly, yes.

Those questions from my friend in Minneapolis hint at what it takes to build and maintain real communities — doing the hard work of being connected and organized. Getting to know each other. And some of this isn't just work, it's actually *fun* and fulfilling doing it. Making preparations. Planning. Learning how to do things to support each other — and letting others know how you might need support. Those aren't displays of weakness; they're building deep and fundamental strength and power.

Here we are, learning what our songs are, hearing how they weave into each other's songs. What song will you sing? What gifts are you offering, and receiving here? What would you like to see happening here — what would you like Beacon to be doing for its members and the larger community?

Your congregation is a key building block for you. These are people who you deeply share values with; this is the easiest and probably safest place to start building that larger network that you — and all of us — need and *will* need.

But it can only be what you make it, with your time and energy, and yes, your money.

And all of you get to make that decision together. It will take more, if it's going to be what you keep telling me, your board, and each other what you want it to be. To do that, you'll need to do three things — give what you *can* (until you feel it), do what you can, and invite other people to join you in building this — Beacon, an outpost of the beloved community so many of us are working to build.

May it be so.