



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Fulfilling the Call

Rev. Lissa Gundlach, Candidate for
Senior Minister

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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

Good morning!

It is so good to be with you after so much anticipation. I'm so grateful to share worship with you as the commencement to our time together as a congregation.

In the peace of this fall morning, I invite you into a moment of reflection. Look back into your memory into your earliest experience of what you might now call spirituality. Perhaps you were in a house of worship, or out in nature. Maybe you discovered a gift or talent inside of you for the first time. What did it feel like? Who, if anyone, was there with you? Who did you tell about it, and who listened?

As a child, I discovered the "spiritual feelings" of reverence, belonging, and connection, in nature first, and later in church community. I loved being outside. I remember the vastness I felt wandering off into the wild backyard of my parent's home in Columbia, South Carolina, spreading my arms wide to try and catch the wind. My earliest experiences of church were in the cool stone chapels of my Southern Christian preschool and kindergarten. A natural curiosity developed in me about the felt-board Bible stories, the sacred music and the red and gold of the stained glass windows. I was captivated by the sights, sounds and ritual of church and wanted to know more. I asked my mother why we didn't go to church, and if we could. While we were living in the South, we didn't, but I persisted. When we moved north to New England when I was six, my parents sought out and found a Unitarian Universalist congregation. The inspiration came from my brilliant great-aunt Marjorie, who was the UU church historian for her congregation in Maine.

My fascination with the church as a child evolved into a calling as a young teen at First Parish in Concord, Massachusetts, my home church. First Parish became my second home in my teens. I led the youth group, starred in church musicals, and lived for my camp, conference and retreat experiences. During holidays, my mother, sister and I would hold hands as we sat together in the pews, often moved to tears. On Coming of Age Sunday, I remember climbing into the sturdy mahogany pulpit in the sanctuary to deliver my credo statement. Preaching my heart out, I fell in love with my teen's idea of ministry. I felt called to know more, and encouraged. I knew that I would dedicate my life to the church, but it wasn't always clear what that would look like, or how my service would manifest. During my young adult years, like many in our denomination I struggled to find a church home that held those same feelings of connection for me that I had as a youth. I felt some frustration about not belonging in the church as a young adult, often a difficult time to stay connected.

Still, I felt the call beckoning me forward. The more faith I had in my unknown future, the more risks I was able to take, the deeper and more resonant my call. I served community ministries with youth and young adults and faith-based HIV/ AIDS advocacy in New York City. Through theological education and ministerial formation, the deeper meaning of ministry's call on my life began to emerge. Flung across the country, to Chicago and Minnesota

and back to New York City, I fell in love with parish ministry, a love which was confirmed and deepened in my years of service at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City.

While this may seem like a typical path for a minister, I'm humbled and in awe of how these past months have unfolded with such beauty and synchronicity. Ministry with Neighborhood is the strongest call I have experienced in my life. True, this process of search has required a tremendous work and energy on my part and on the part of the Search Committee and entire congregation. But from the beginning, there was an effortless quality to the process for me. I had a sense of calm, a feeling in my bones that this is where my life was leading me. Along the way, many signs appeared beckoning me here.

Mentors, trusted friends and interfaith colleagues encouraged me to get to know Neighborhood and to hear about the possibilities for dynamic ministry partnership in the Pasadena area. I met your search committee and felt instantly connected and inspired by your dedication, insight, humor and brilliance. The more I learned about Neighborhood the more I imagined and yearned for a ministry with you. To be chosen as your candidate, and now to meet each of you is an exhilarating affirmation of this call.

The Latin word for call is *vocare*, which means to name, or to summon. This is the root of the word vocation, which is often used to describe an occupation dedicated to service, often centered in values or purpose. You may have heard the word used to describe the spiritual life of contemplatives like monks and nuns. Vocation is a way of understanding a life of service, whether that service is religious, creative or civic. From writing to politics, vocation is a calling to serve an aspect of life, helping it to flourish to its highest potential. I share my story of call, because I want to know how my life in ministry is connected to my spiritual sense of call.

I want to know your own experiences of spirituality and how these precious memories may be linked to your vocation, leadership and service, both at Neighborhood and in your lives. What risks have you taken to fulfill a call in your life, and what did you learn from taking those risks?

In the Bible, prophets and leaders often received calls to serve at times of deep crisis, when the future fate of a community hinged in the balance. Prophets and leaders like Moses and Isaiah were often reluctant to take up the mantle of leadership, feeling humbled by the scale of the task at hand and ill equipped to fulfill it.

You might remember the Exodus story, where Moses resists God's call and asks: "Who am I to lead?" Called the "Weeping Prophet," Jeremiah has concerns about being too young to speak to the powers that be. In these call stories, assurance always comes in two forms – one – that leaders never lead alone – leadership is a partnership in which a community brings its unique gifts in service to a higher goal; and two – that even in a time of distress, both the leader and the community have been resilient in times past and are equipped with the wisdom necessary to walk into the future. God gives Moses the affirmation: "I will be with you," and tells Jeremiah "Get yourself ready!"

Parker Palmer is a Quaker educator who writes about vocation and leadership in his popular book *Let Your Life Speak*. Palmer tells his own story of facing a period of depression and career burn out which moved him to seek another way of being in relationship to his life purpose, one focused on “call.” He discovered Quaker spirituality, inspired by a phrase that would become the title of his book: “Let your life speak.” He first interpreted this phrase to mean: “Let your highest truths and values guide you. Live up to those demanding standards in everything you do.” Palmer began to reshape his life purely according to his highest principles, emulating his moral and religious idols. He found the harder he tried, the more his life did not feel like his own. His interpretation of call became as he put it: “An act of will, grim determination.” Palmer began to listen to his sense of calling in his life with new ears.

Here are Palmer’s words:

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.

Like the Biblical leaders, Palmer had questions about what calling would require of him. Rather than being his authentic self, he tried to emulate the principled lives of people he admired, without leaving space for his own authentic voice or his sense of the holy to shape his destiny. Once he shifted his understanding of calling, he discovered new gifts within him and was newly inspired to help others do the same. Joy, courage and adaptability replaced his fears.

Palmer’s story reminds me of an old Hasidic folk tale that tells of beloved a Rabbi’s final reflections. Before his death, Rabbi Zusya said “In the coming world, they will not ask me ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”

I think Palmer’s words are important for us to consider as next week you vote to fulfill our call to shared ministry and invite me to be your next senior minister. Our tradition cherishes the process of searching for and calling our ministers. It is one of the most unique aspects of our faith. Rather than any bishop or pope sending a congregation a leader, the congregation organizes its own leadership to listen to its own deep sense of call, and seeks a match in a minister whose own call deeply resonates. The process of search explores the potential of this relationship to create a strong partnership; the call affirms it. From the Unitarian Universalist Minister’s Association’s definition:

By the corporate act of call, the members of the local congregation acknowledge their need for the service of one prepared by education and personal commitment for the

work of ministerial leadership. They pledge to labor with the minister in bringing to fruition the promise of the free church, and to provide for their sustenance.

In the context of both congregational and community-based ministry, the ministerial call signifies creation of a distinctive partnership in which minister and congregation alike affirm their intention to share in a religious pilgrimage of mutual care, joy, forbearance, self-discipline, and a desire to serve the common good.

Neighborhood Church, you began this process by listening to your deepest aspirations and hopes for your beloved church, and for your lives. A call to shared ministry is about fulfilling a potential for a greater good, and a deep commitment to the purpose of this church: to create and sustain a beloved religious community in which all SEEK truth and meaning with open minds and hearts, to WELCOME all on their spiritual journeys, to NURTURE the spirit, to TRANSFORM ourselves and our world, and to GIVE BACK generously. Within the church, you know how to build beloved community, and your ministries and programs are vital. Your relationships are healthy, and leadership strong. You are generous stewards of your congregation's past, present and future. Unlike the Biblical call stories, our call does not come at a time of crisis for the institution, but rather at a time of hopeful dreaming about the future. While Neighborhood church is not in crisis, the world is, and many people are suffering. Each day we see more examples of cruelty, violence, oppression and intolerance. Our political system is deeply broken, with more and more need for the heart of democracy to be reengaged with the tools of beloved community. Perhaps our call will be for the church to expand that sense of beloved community deeper beyond the walls of the church in even bolder ways.

To call me as your leader means to entrust me with the care of your community. As your minister, I begin first by listening to your stories: what you are most passionate about, what values you hold dear, and how you live your faith. I want to help understand how each person's experience fits into Neighborhood's unique story. Through listening and discernment, together we will let Neighborhood's life speak and lead it forward together to help the congregation flourish to its unique potential. But, as Palmer warned, we must be careful not to make our call a willful or rigid set of expectations and goals. From our reading this morning, Rebecca Parker writes:

You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?
Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will,
(It is) a moving forward into the world
With the Intention to do good.

I began by asking you to dig deep into your memory, to your childhood experiences of spirituality. I want to close by sharing such a story from Kay Northcutt, a professor of preaching in Tulsa, Oklahoma and author of the book *Preaching as Spiritual Direction*. She tells this story:

When my sisters and I were little girls, every time we closed the backdoor behind us – as we left home to walk to school – Mom called out the door after us, “Girls! GIRLS! Go find your greatness!” My sisters and I would look at one another and roll our eyes – *all we were hoping for was to survive one more day of school at Western Oaks Elementary* – and our mom? Well our mom was literally calling us to imagine a future – and prepare for it – when that was the farthest things from our minds . . . Across all our preoccupations wisdom calls to us, reminding us: Go! Find your greatness!

Kay’s story reminds us that to fulfill our call is to imagine a future of greatness, and to prepare for it intentionally, as you have done to prepare for me to serve you as your new senior minister. This call is for us an opportunity to be our best selves, helping Neighborhood to flourish by expanding the transforming power of our ministry. Our shared calling is to listen and to care for one another, to give and receive love, to struggle for justice, to create and sustain beloved community: SEEK, to WELCOME, to NURTURE, to TRANSFORM and to GIVE BACK. Neighborhood, let’s go and find our greatness together!

Amen and Blessed Be