We've been breathing together and singing together and clapping and moving our bodies together and we are going to keep that going this morning, with some embodied prayer during the sermon. So for some of these, I'm going to invite you to rise but please know that it is perfectly fine to do everything seated, if that's more comfortable for you.Right now, if good for you, I invite you to rise. Stay seated if you'd rather and I want to share a prayer with you that I learned from my fellow Unitarian Universalist minister, although I can no longer remember who or under what circumstances. We start with our arms up to the sky to honor the wisdom of the universe. And we bring our arms into our hearts drawing that wisdom to ourselves. And then we share it out with others around us. Let's do that again. Arms up, to welcome the wisdom of the universe and into our hearts to take what we need and arms out to share with everybody. Once more: arms up to welcome the wisdom of the universe, into our hearts for what we need, and out to share with everybody. Thank you for doing that with me. I invite you to be seated again. Ah, it feels good, doesn't it? It feels good to get our bodies involved in our spiritual life.

Unitarianism has half of our religious tradition here at First Unitarian church there in the name. The full name is Unitarian Universalism. So that First Unitarian half - unfortunately it has its roots in a long tradition in Christianity of being somewhat suspicious of the body. You can think about our Puritan ancestors who first came to North America from England and Holland, that worry that the body is probably wicked and wanting wicked things and we ought to be suspicious of it. Those spiritual ancestors of ours who founded congregational churches here in New England, they were Calvinists in their theology, and that meant that they believed that what you thought and believed is what mattered most and that you would know that you had achieved unity with God and you would know that because you would have an internal and personal experience of the saving power of Jesus Christ. It often came with setting aside the needs of the body entirely. People were anxious to show that they were one of the saved and they did this by saying, showing, how little they needed for their personal bodily lives. Everything was about your interior, internal spiritual experience. And even in Protestantism, written more largely, it's what we believe and understand about the Bible that matters. Most Protestantism has its roots in that disregard for Catholic rituals and rites. We don't want all of this waves of moving our body, of kneeling, of dealing with water and smells and candles. That's all to physical. What really matters is what's going on in our mind and hearts. This argument between the body and the spirit goes back to the earliest days of Christianity. And the very first centuries of Christianity, Christian communities were arguing with Judaism about what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. So remember, the earliest followers of Jesus were all Jewish as Jesus was himself. But this was a difficult time for Judaism. There were lots of different kinds of Judaism. Early Christianity was one of them. And arguments were going on about the right way to be in relationship with God. So as some of those Christian communities tried to separate themselves from Judaism, a suspicion began to arise that the Creator God, say of Genesis, God made the world and saw that it was good. And Jesus's God, the God who had performed the resurrection, were not the same.

One word that's used to describe this way of thinking is called Gnosticism, which comes from a Greek word for knowledge and wisdom. And the Gnostics believed that the knowledge of the true God was most important, and the body meant the resurrection was entirely spiritual, and the body was so worthless that it wasn't even worth sacrificing in order to be a good Christian. It just meant nothing at all.

There was a second century church leader named Marcion, who took it further and edited out everything in the Bible that has to do with the physical world. All those Psalms about mountains and trees, everything about creation, in fact, the entire Hebrew Bible and also most of the stories about Jesus until his Bible was just Paul's letters and the Gospel of Luke, and his own commentary. And that was it. This is a very early understanding of the matrix what's happening to our bodies, is fake. What we've experienced in our minds is what is, and in some ways, this can be a very powerful and salvific message. The directors who made the Matrix are trans women. And part of what the story they're telling in that movie is their own story experience, of gender dysphoria coming to understand their true gender identity. But another way of looking at it is to say that what's happening with our body is meaningless and it's nothing. It's fake entirely. And it's what's happening in our mind that really matters.

But there's another strain in our religious tradition. Even though we have our roots and all of that, in Judaism, and Christianity, Protestantism, Calvinism, there's another strain, which is the Universalist side of our name and Universalism claims very clear that our bodies are good, and they do matter, and they are part of our religious life together. So the Universalists have their roots also coming out of Calvinism in the early 19th, late 18th century. The Calvinists were very concerned about dividing people up into who was going to be saved and who was not. And spoiler alert: almost everybody is not, and a very few people will. Universalists living a very embodied life in rural New England, farmers, they began to preach a form of Christianity that said, “everything is good, because God is entirely good. And God made everything that is, and God is not capable of making anything that is completely bad, including our human bodies.” The universal belief that no one would go to Hell, and some of them believe that you might have to go through some kind of purgatory if you had been a wicked person while you were alive. And others believed that God's grace was so complete that everybody would be saved when they died. You can imagine these early Universalists living a life with all the stuff of the world. Universalism has its roots in rural New England. Farmers, tending their crops, taking care of their animals to bring in welcoming babies and tending to the bodies of their beloved dead themselves in their homes. And you can see this really affirming theology come out of that experience that stuff of the world, including our own bodies, are good. Now Unitarianism gets on the bandwagon in the middle of the 19th century with Transcendentalism. People like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau wrote about affirming the value in the beauty of the created world; said that we can find spiritual experience by being in nature, and by moving our bodies closer to the natural world around us by recognizing our affinity with it.

Today, as modern Unitarian Universalists, even in a world where we live a lot of our lives in the entirely unreal world of the internet, we can lay claim to the strands in our religious tradition that affirm the wisdom and value of our bodies. So, in a minute, we're going to do another embody prayer. I learned this from Dr. Christina Cleveland. She is a biracial theologian doing work in liberation theology, and she introduced me in a recent workshop, to a book by Kelsey Blackwell, another woman of color, and her book is called *Decolonizing the Body- Healing Body-Centered Practices for Women of Color to regain confidence, dignity and self-worth.* Now, I know that not all of us here identify as women of color. So, we're not the target audience for this book. But we're going to receive the wisdom from the author Kelsey Blackwell and from Christina Cleveland, who taught it to me. Blackwell connects our unconditional work as worth and dignity that we have in our first principle. She connects it to the width of our bodies. So I invite you to stand up as you're willing and able. I'm gonna start just by reading some of what Blackwell wrote. “Imagine a scroll, like your centerline, and unroll it all the way to its edges. Let yourself inhabit your full frame. You may even extend your arms and legs wide to take up more space. Stretch out your full wingspan. Let your body settle into a dimension of width that feels like the right amount for this moment. Feel the width in your breath. In our width, we feel our inherent worth and value.” And now this is the part that Christina Cleveland taught a group of us UU ministers recently, you have both arms out now. You're going to take one arm and put it on your chest and say “This is me!” And the other arm comes in and says “I'm who I am!” And now you can add a little jump if you want and put both arms back out and say “I take up space!” Let's do that again. “This is me. I'm who I am. I take up space.” One more time. “This is me. I'm who I am I take up space. ”All right. Oh, wonderful. Please be seated. Do you feel the power in that? How important is that, especially for people of color, whose bodies face suspicion and violence in our world. And for women, who are often encouraged to play small; for larger bodies among us who feel pressured to take up less space than they do in the world. For disabled bodies who face barriers to inclusion. For any body that doesn't meet that ever narrowing ideal of perfection, not just how much you weigh and what your hair looks like, but what your cheekbones look like and where the fat is deposited on your rear end. This practice of affirming who you are and the space that we take up, it affirms the value and dignity in our bodies. Our bodies are here. They are good. And the space that they take up in the world is a blessing.

Now, in this worship service, I'm focusing on body-based prayer but so much of our religious lives, not just the prayer part, is lived through our bodies. We come into this embodied space to worship together. We stand up to sing. You know, during the pandemic when I wasn't leading the service and I would turn it on to YouTube to watch, I still stood up to sing the hymns. It's so ingrained in me that that is how we move our bodies to sing together. Sometimes we're out in the streets marching for justice or taking a knee. We sleep overnight at the homeless shelter. We cook food for community meals. We give each other rides. We help with yard work. We take our bodies into hospitals and into homes where people are sick or where they've welcomed a new baby - in order to be there for one another. We chaperone youth events - sometimes we wake our bodies up at one in the morning to help keep the youth safe at they're overnights. We speak out with our voices in front of city council. We tend to the church garden. We live our Unitarian Universalism with our bodies. After all, Unitarianism and Universalism rejected some of those Calvinist groups that are in our history.

We don't have a creed here at First Unitarian Church. There's no point in the service where we all say together what we believe. We don't inspect into each other's minds to see if the belief is correct. We commit to action. We have a covenant instead of a creed and in our covenant we agree to worship what is holy and serve what is good. Things we do in the world we do them with our bodies. Our bodies carry out our sacred actions, and we affirm the body's good work on behalf of what we love.

Our third and final embody prayer is one that we can all do sitting down and this is a breathing meditation from the Buddhist tradition. I'm sharing with you some words by the late Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. So, I just invite you to settle your spine into your seat and reach your head up. So you're sitting tall, you might imagine that scroll again Blackball talked about running down your spine. And you can put your hands on your thighs or you can make a cup shape of your hands. One palm rested on the other thumbs touching just in your lap. I invite you to breathe in through your nose. Let the breath go deep into your belly and then out as you continue to breathe and your own pace. I share with you these words by Thich Nhat Hanh “Breathing in I calm my body. Breathing out I smile. Dwelling in the present moment. I know this is a wonderful moment.” So, let's just breathe together… Sometimes it's our bones that are dried out, we feel lifeless, and we can't find that breath. The sign of a spirit in our bodies. Our breath is the intersection of our bodies and the world. Breath teaches us a lesson if we are to care for others, we must care for ourselves. Tending to our own bodies is the beginning of care. I'm going to preach over the next two weeks about the spirituality of care. Caring for elders and caring for children. But your breath in and out if your body reminds you that care begins with your self. Care can be a spiritual practice taking the time to sit in meditation or to pray or to walk. Care is nourishment, eating the food that fuels your body. It is sleep. It is relaxation. And time for both solitude and companionship. Care for your body is movement. The mindfulness of breathing we remember that illness and ultimately death are the journey of every human being alive. So we do not tend to our bodies in a crazed race to stay off death. We tend to our bodies to celebrate life and to give the blessings of our lives to the world. Our bodies are a blessing your body is a blessing. You're blessed identity and holy self is spirit, knit together with bones and both the bones and the Spirit are good. Our bodies make our values real. Sitting where you are, place your hand on your belly and feel your hand rise and fall with your breath. Say “thank you” to your body, for it is good. I love you all. Amen.