Sermon:
Sunday, March 8, 2026
First Unitarian Church
The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

Will you settle into this spiritual space with me? Whether you know it or not, we're already in a moment of spiritual practice, just by being here, we are engaged in the practice of spiritual community. Even within this time together, I'd like us to just go a little deeper into that practice. So, I invite you here to find your breath, settle into quiet, let your breath move in and out of your body with mindfulness. To the extent that you can just let your thoughts go and be one with your breath as it moves in and out. We're going to sit together in silence for just one minute, and I will keep track of the time. I invite you into a time of silence.

I invite you to bring your attention back into the sanctuary and into our time together.

Over the years, spiritual practice has become central to my life. I sit in silent prayer, using a practice called centering prayer, which was developed by the monks in Spencer, Massachusetts, out of an ancient Christian mystical tradition. I sit in silence, and I simply sit with the intention to let my thoughts go and be at one with my breath in the world. In fact, I'm doing this with anybody who cares to join me on Wednesday mornings in Lent. So if you want to get on Zoom and have 20 minutes of spiritual practice with some poetry and art to help frame the experience, you can join me and a few others at 8 a.m. this Wednesday and the next few Wednesdays.

Some of you may have a different silent spiritual practice. You may sit in meditation. You may count your breath as it goes in and out of your body. It's a way I was once taught to practice Zen meditation, by just counting the breath. Whenever you notice that thoughts have overcome you and you've lost count, you go back to one again, in with one and out with two.

For me, another important spiritual practice is being outdoors. Thich Nhat Hanh, the late Zen Buddhist monk whose reading we just heard. In another essay, he says, we can encounter the beautiful things around us in the present moment. Elements of peace available to us anytime. I find that it's outdoors that I can really notice the present moment. That I have that feeling, look at this world. Feel the wind and hear the birds and notice the changes of the season, and that moment is always available to me and to anyone simply by going outside. For my entire life, I have practiced a spiritual practice of religious community. Of coming once a week to a congregation gathered for worship and fellowship and to live out its values. Lately, I feel this is my sermon every Sunday, spiritual practice can connect you to a source of love, peace and power in your life. I know this because I have experienced it.

As a mystic teacher says, through love, the holy is completely knowable by every separate individual. It is our spiritual practice that connects us to that source of love, and then out of that knowing that it is available to everyone, that the present moment is there for everybody.That source of love is the ground of compassion and kindness to one another. Yet I am also aware that saying spiritual practice is good for you is not quite enough for the focused religious life. Because just if we were to spend all of our time sitting in meditation or thinking about our grounding and the source of love, that

can get a little self-centered. It can Let us off the hook of challenging our own prejudice or trying to do something to make change in our communities. In fact, that's a joke about spiritual practices that it doesn't do anything. Ministers are supposed to enter into pastoral situations with a non-anxious presence. So, the joke is, don't just do something, sit there! But it can feel, after sitting there for a while, that you're really not doing anything.

I read the essay from Thich Nhat Hanh at an earlier meeting this week, actually, at a couple. I tend to think through my sermons as the week goes on and share the resources with different groups that I meet with. Somebody said, well, I don't like that. It sounds like you can just sit in mindfulness and connect with the present moment and not do anything. That if, If trying to work for a better world is too exhausting, it's because you just need to do spiritual practice instead. Our world, at the moment, is giving us constant reason to wonder why we cannot make it a better place, and what role our shared spiritual practices have in trying to live in a better world.

I had long planned for this sermon to be about spiritual practice. Yet, when our country and Israel went to war with Iran eight days ago, even I began to have doubts. Our leaders make war in our name, and we do not consent. They bomb civilians, even children. They have used the weapons of war on the streets of America.

I believe that we as ordinary Americans have more in common with ordinary Israelis, ordinary Iranians, ordinary Palestinians, than we do with our own leaders. I have talked to Iranian Americans in the past week who have mixed feelings about the war. because they hate the Islamic Republic. They desperately want change, and also,

they are fearful for harm in their home country and what will happen next. This felt so close to my own heart, these neighbors here who long for democracy, knowing as we certainly do, as Americans, and I believe, as Israelis do, and certainly as Palestinians do, that the mechanisms of democracy are fragile. Our democracy did not authorize war with Iran. We have a process for that, and it wasn't followed. Our elected leaders seem powerless, and it doesn't always feel like we are living in a democracy. I understand that worry, that desire for change and deep uncertainty, that the democratic process can get us there.

We are filled with outrage, and we tend toward helplessness. When so many people have a will toward peace, how can a few men, will the world into war. In this outrage, in this sorrow, I return to the silence, to my breath, to the present moment in the living world, to this gathered community. In my practice, I find my way toward my own power and a way forward for our shared values. Because far from doing nothing, our spiritual practices sustain us for the action we can take.

I want to offer you three ways our spiritual practices connect us with our hope and work for a better world. First, when we engage in spiritual practice, we reconnect with and strengthen our values. There is a lot of distraction in the world, and I hate to tell you this, but the news is itself distraction. I know that we like to be informed. I like to know what's going on, but there's often almost nothing that we can do to change the bad news stories that we hear. It is true that news organizations are trying to make money, and they make money by feeding us bad news, that grabs us and takes our attention away from our own lives. Yet we are people with a moral center and spiritual

practice reminds us of it. This is even more important when our leaders preach lies and hate. It is even more important when we can't trust our screens.

In this church, we love the truth. We say so in our covenant every Sunday, the natural world, our own breath, human in person, community. These things are true. They are irrefutable. Through them, we understand what truth is, what it looks like, what it feels like, how to know it. We are connected to our values and strengthened enough. We gain courage to stand up for them, even in the face of our fears.

Secondly, spiritual practice reshapes our everyday lives. It is practice, and just like practicing an instrument, or practicing a sport, it plays dividends in your everyday life. In spiritual practice, you are practicing non-reactivity, patience, kindness, honesty. Skills we need daily. It invites in practice of simply noticing. Noticing, oh, look, I had that thought. Oh, listen to that bird. Oh, here is this person in front of me in church. It allows me to notice what is in my relationships and not to react, but to be present.

I recently came across a powerful story of how this noticing spreads out from spiritual practice into every aspect of our lives. You may remember hearing about Mohsin Madawi, a Palestinian living in America, seeking citizenship in America, a Columbia student and a pro-Palestinian activist. Early in this new Trump administration, he was arrested, probably because of his demonstrations and his pro-Palestinian activity. He was arrested in April 2025 at his citizenship interview in Colchester, Vermont.

He was well connected to his community, including a Unitarian Universalist Church in Vermont. He had his state senator ready to go. So his community knew, and

he knew, that this arrest might happen. So as soon as he was taken into custody, his community, and especially his state senator, went to a judge and got a stay to remove the threat of deportation. He was almost on the plane to Louisiana when the order came through and he was removed. Now he is living in freedom again in Vermont. But he was arrested for a while, and he was shackled, and he was led to get onto that plane that was going to take him to the holding facility in Louisiana, and from there, who knows where. He had to walk in the shackles to get to the plane. In the shackles, he could only take little steps so that he wouldn't trip. Afterward, he said it was okay, that kind of slow walking, those slow steps, mindful of every step. That's my walking meditation. I just remember this is how I walk in when meditation, this with the shackles on my feet, is a moment for meditation. That is the power of bringing that practice into our everyday lives. It turns out that what we are practicing for is life.

So spiritual practice connects us to our deepest values. It shapes our lives. And finally, spiritual practice cultivates soul force, which is how we confront evil and make change in the world. The Reverend Dr Martin Luther King coined the phrase soul force. It's best known from his *I Have a Dream* speech in 1963. He said, let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

Spiritual practice cultivates the soul force that we need to confront evil. It was soul force that animated the civil rights movement and invited people to march in the streets for the humanity and dignity of African American people. It was soul force that

moved people into the streets in Minneapolis to confront ICE agents, even at the risk of their own lives. It is soul force that helps us see our neighbor as ourselves, whether they are an immigrant in America or a civilian in Gaza or Tehran. It is soul force that lets ordinary people stand up to violence.

One of the protesters killed in Minneapolis was Renee Good, and her wife said about her, said something about her that tells me that she had soul force. Becca Good, Rene's wife says Renee lived by an overarching belief that there is kindness in the world and we need to do everything we can to find it where it resides and nurture it where it needs to grow. Renee was a Christian who knew that all religions teach the same essential truth. We are here to love each other, care for each other, and keep each other safe and whole.

In Minneapolis, the government sent 2000 armed agents to subdue the city, and they failed. They failed because of the soul force of ordinary people in the streets like Renee Good and Alex Preddy. Ice wanted to open a detention facility in Merrimack, New Hampshire. It failed because of Citizen Action. Spiritual practice sustains us for the long haul, for marching in the streets, lobbying leaders working for change. That work can be scary, frustrating, boring, long. Soul force keeps us moving forward, never moving back.

We sitting here today, cannot stop the bombing in the Middle East. We don't have that power. But we do have the power to build the soul force. The commitment to our values and the kind of community that resists tyranny. We can build mindfulness, relationship, grounding and power in our communities. We can refuse the power of

despair to take us over or swamp our will. We are children of the holy, connected in power and presence to the source of our being and to each other. Stand here together and we shall never be moved.

I love you all Amen.