

*Sermon:
Sunday, May 17, 2026
First Unitarian Church
The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart*

There is a certain kind of conversation that smartphones have ruined. Maybe for the good, maybe for the worse, you tell me. This is arguing about facts we don't know. I remember one such argument from when I was a younger person. A heated conversation with a friend that went on over the course of a day about what the title of a certain YouTube song was. We didn't have a computer in our pockets, so we just had to go back and forth and back and forth all day, until one of us could get home and look at the liner notes, and see, I still haven't found what I'm looking for.

Now we don't get to have those kind of arguments anymore. We just look it up. For some simple facts, with our computers in our pockets, we no longer have the luxury of believing things that aren't true. This teaches us something about the nature of belief. A belief is like a hypothesis. It needs to be tested against reality to see if it is true. This works for all kinds of beliefs, the beliefs we have in our spiritual lives, the beliefs that scientists have about the way the world works. Testing our beliefs against reality requires rigor, humility, and ultimately curiosity about the world around us.

Religious beliefs have to interact with reality, even though some beliefs concern ineffable things. For instance, despite what is sometimes said about Unitarian Universalists, we cannot believe just whatever we want. It's true that in Unitarian Universalism we don't have a creed. There's never a point in the worship service where we all say I believe, together, as you might find in some other churches. There's not a list of things you have to assent to in order to be a member. We have instead a

covenant that says how we will be together that we reaffirm every Sunday. In order to be a member, you have to sign that you are in agreement with the principles and purpose of the parish, and that you understand the responsibilities of being a member of the church. It's not about belief, it's about how we are together. That means that each individual person here has their own understanding of ultimate reality. This has always made the most sense to me.

You know, I grew up as a child in the Episcopal Church, and I love the beauty of that worship service and respect people I know who are Episcopalians. But I began to wonder, how can anybody look inside my head and know if I really believe the things that are in the Apostles' Creed. It's not possible to compel belief in that way. Each one of us has our own understanding of ultimate reality. This is lifted up in the principles of Unitarian Universalism. We affirm and promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We also affirm the acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth. Each one of you is entitled to your beliefs, and you are part of a gathered community, and your beliefs have to work in the context of this community. Our beliefs are hypotheses that we carry with us into contact with other people.

I was once visiting another Unitarian Universalist Church in another part of the country, and I was in a small group discussion with members of that church. A woman began to talk about a certain spiritual experience that she had had. A moment when she was younger, when she experienced the oneness of everything and felt a deep comfort for some grief that she had gone through at the time. A man in the group, and I tell you their genders, because I think that matters for this story. A man in the group barely let her finish what she was saying before he said, "How do you know that was a spiritual

experience? How do you know. He thought that he was defending Unitarian Universalism as a place that was free from an unexplained experience of the divine. But in fact he had brought a belief with him into that interaction. The belief was we all should be atheists here. He was not living up to acceptance of one another. He was denying the possibility of his own spiritual growth, and he was denying what he was hearing from his fellow member in the church. I wish for that man a belief that says, I am an atheist, and I wonder what your experience is. A belief more grounded in humility and curiosity about the other person. It was as much in the way he pounced on her as it was in the words that he said.

Unitarian Universalism has room for atheism, for agnosticism, for spiritual experiences, for drawing inspiration from the Bible, from the teachings of the Buddha, from the natural world around us. It does not have room for fundamentalism of any kind. Fundamentalism is the belief that something, some belief, is absolutely true. You've often heard it in the context of biblical fundamentalism. So, biblical fundamentalists, they believe in the inherent truth of the Bible, and this is despite inconsistencies, despite the fact that this is this book, as I tell the children celebration Sunday every year. It's not a book, but a bookshelf that was written over the course of 1000s of years. It's not intended to describe, it's not intended to replace science. Some of it is humor, some of it is poetry, but a fundamentalist point of view would say no, it is all absolutely true, and we can make it fit if we try hard enough.

But there's another kind of fundamentalism too. A materialist fundamentalism that says what is absolutely true is only what we experience with our five senses. If someone, I may not experience the spirit in my life, but if someone else does, that has

to be wrong, and we, as Unitarian Universalists, we live in between these fundamentalisms. We do not subscribe to either one. We understand that the journey of faith and understanding is ongoing. We bring these commitments to it. We bring rigor. We commit to a community to fully live our spiritual commitments. We bring humility. We know our experience is just one among many, and we bring curiosity. I wonder what spiritual life is like for someone else.

So, really, Unitarian Universalists cannot believe just whatever they want. We believe what we know to be true in the context of this shared community that we're building together. So these beliefs are always undergoing testing and revision and exploration, and friends, that is the joy of this faith community.

The discipline of our spirituality requires this exploration of our beliefs, and the discipline of science requires the same thing. In science, a belief is a hypothesis, and then it is tested against reality, and then it is shared with the wider world, so that those that test can be challenged and understood and responded to by the community. It sounds simpler in science than in religion. I'm sure we all learned about the scientific method in elementary school. It's a basic foundation of the practice. But science too faces its own problems when it comes to arriving at the truth. For one thing, that sharing your results with the community has a bias toward positive results. So, if an experiment is done and the results are negative or null, they're often not published. Which means if you do a meta-analysis of study results, they're biased toward positive results. Negative results are also informative. Hey, we tried this and it didn't work. That's interesting to the world of knowledge and understanding, but they don't always get out there. And, of course, scientists are people, and so they can be subject to the lure of

influence, of needing to be right, of greed, sometimes unfortunately. You see this most clearly when science needs to become policy.

I heard a podcast this week about the struggle in the early 20th century to get poison additives out of our food. Food companies used to put borax, formaldehyde, salicylic acid in food to either cover up the fact that it wasn't really food or to be able to sell people things that might not be fresh. The effort of one scientist, especially, working for the government, to get these food companies to stop doing that, to stop feeding poison to the American people. It was harder than you would think. It took more than a decade, and quite a few policy initiatives, and the publication of other people's research in order to get that done. We look back, and we say, well, that was then, this is now, that would never happen today. We would never put up with that today. But just this week the Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, Dr. Marty McCarty, was ousted over his opposition to re-legalizing flavored e-cigarettes or vapes.

A journalist wrote, the scientific process was meant to approve products shown in studies to help cigarette smokers transition to vapes without attracting a new generation of nicotine users. Vapes might be safer than smoking cigarettes, but we don't want new people to start using them, especially children. And guess who flavored cigarettes appeal to, children, especially. So the science is not in doubt about this. But even though science knows this truth, it can still be captured by the efforts of those companies that make the cigarettes to want their products to be legal and competitive against products being brought in illegally from other countries. Policy makers don't necessarily have to listen to the science. They can, they can use policy to shape what they want it to be, despite what the science says. So, in this case, even though science

knows the truth, it can still be captured by greed or play to power. Presumably, the president will find a new commissioner who is willing to sign off on flavored vapes.

At other times, science discovers something completely new, something that challenges long-held beliefs and opens our minds to something we hadn't considered before. Also, this week I read about how science has discovered that there is movement of fluid in the body between the circulatory and the lymphatic systems and connective tissue in the body. If you get a tattoo on your skin, for instance, it's thought that tattoo should only live on the epidermis, only beyond the skin. But studies have shown that the ink travels somehow deeper into your body. It was thought before that these different systems in the body were completely separated. Now this discovery of this system of connective tissue may explain why acupuncture works. So suddenly Western science has found an explanation of acupuncture, which has been known to Chinese traditional medicine for 14,000 years. This new understanding brings those two disciplines closer together. It opens up new fields of study. It makes new understanding possible.

Science is not a result, but a process. Like religion, science demands rigor, humility, and curiosity. Carefully designed studies and understanding that what is already known might not be all of what will be known and wondering what else is out there. Scientists are trained to commit to care and precision and non-bias in their work. They are humble because they know their minds may be changed. Curiosity drives new exploration.

I want to close by just lifting up the middle piece of that process, which is humility. Humility is not the same as humiliation. It doesn't mean that something is

wrong with us. It means an attitude of understanding our limits and opens up the possibility of curiosity in the world. One medieval mystic wrote that to be humble is to see ourselves the way God sees us, the way a loving God sees us. Things we have done that are good, things we have done that are bad, possibilities and limitations in how our minds and souls operate. Humility is nothing more than self-awareness without self-hatred. Anything we know now, we know on trial, on loan, awaiting further information. Information may be an encounter with a new person, or a new culture, or facts waiting to be discovered.

So, as you go into your week, I invite you into an attitude of curiosity grounded in this humility. Curiosity instead of judgment, turning down the dial on that part of you that says, How do you know? How do you know that's a spiritual experience? How do you know that's true? And turning up the dial on what, say more about that. What is that like for you? What more could I understand? What might you learn about a person or the world around you that you don't know now? What marvel might you discover? Approach the world like a scientist or a person of faith, knowing that new possibility abounds in the infinite universe we call home.

I love you all. Amen.