In completing our new building, we've achieved a long held dream of the congregation to have a spiritual home where we can live out our mission and vision more fully. As we complete the year long celebration of our 175th anniversary it's time to ask: what's next? How will we live out the promise of Unitarian Universalism to be an inclusive, diverse faith and what new directions are our mission and vision calling us?

I got into it with the street preacher again. You'd think I sought him out just to provoke him but you know me better than that, right? There he was, saying: "God's going to fix everything that's wrong with the world." So I asked: "When exactly is this going to happen? Sure is taking Her a long time to get it done." To which he responds: "Oh God, it's you again." We know each other by name now although he refers to me as the godless Unitarian. Moi is hurt. He no longer calls me the gay atheist militant Unitarian hell bent on destroying the country. I asked him: "Has it occurred to you that God gave us everything we need- reason, free will, intelligence, compassion- to create the world we hope for and that it's up to us? In fact, we are commanded to care for one another, to show mercy, to create justice- that's from the Older Testament book of Micah." He had a bible in his hand so I pointed to it and asked: "Don't you ever read that?"

I don't agree with his theology but I've imagined us sitting down some time over coffee and having a conversation that would reveal something surprising- we share a common hope for the world. A hope for individual fulfillment and the creation of a world, as Rev. Bill Sinkford said in the first reading, that is hospitable to the human spirit. A hope that inspired 39 people, led by the Rev. A.R. Gardiner, to meet in Ed Foster's cabin on the west bank of the Iowa River on November 6th, 1841 to begin the Universalist Society of Iowa City. Iowa City had just become the territorial capitol and had a population of about 1000 people. The American Unitarian Association was fifteen years old; the Universalist Church in America was less than fifty years old. The country's dominant theology was the stern, harsh Calvinism of the Puritans, who believed that only certain people would go to heaven while everyone else was doomed to hell. As liberal Christians, Universalists rejected Calvinism, believing instead the radical idea that salvation was a gift for all people and that God called them to create heaven here on earth.

As this message of love and hope spread, especially among the liberal spirits here in Iowa City, the congregation grew rapidly. By 1868 its third church was under construction at
the corner of Dubuque and Iowa Streets but the building burned before being completed. The congregation met in a former bowling alley and then a Lutheran church until a new building at the corner of Clinton and Iowa Streets was completed in 1873. By 1878 the congregation had dwindled, so it merged with the Unitarians in Iowa City, who had founded a congregation of about 100 members in 1871. The agreement was that the American Unitarian Association would provide a minister and the Universalists would provide a building. The Unitarians of that time were also liberal Christians with equally radical theology. Along with proclaiming that God is one, not three, the Unitarians were interested in humanity's spiritual freedom and like the Universalists, using reason to discover truth. It was a match, one might say, made in heaven, and a foreshadowing of the consolidation eighty years later in 1961 of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America into the Unitarian Universalist Association.

When the Clinton Street building was damaged for the second time by fire in 1896, the decision was made to build a new church at the corner of Iowa and Gilbert Streets. This building was completed and dedicated in 1908. Eleanor Gordon, who had served as the congregation's minister from 1896-1900, gave a charge to the congregation during that dedication service, offering a vision of who the congregation could be. Over 100 years later, her words are still true and prophetic: "The blessings we have in this church today grow from seeds planted long ago, from the zeal and the toil of those who were here long before us. There have been dark days in the history of this church, days when some of you have wondered whether after all, your hard work was worthwhile. But as I read history, I find that nothing worthwhile has ever been won without struggle, that all enterprises worth contending for have had their dark days. But the faithful few helped in every way, and as you can see, we pulled through. And so I believe more than ever that from this pulpit and from these pews, there will go forth an influence that will make for honor in politics, truth-telling in business, justice in the home, and high ideals of human obligation and responsibility everywhere."³

There have been difficult times when the congregation struggled because of a lack of ministerial leadership or money or members, but through all 176 years, an influence has gone forth from our pulpit and from our pews. Our history is rich with ministers and generations of members and friends who have taken seriously the call of Unitarianism and Universalism and now Unitarian Universalism to bring about high ideals of human obligation and responsibility. Rev. Arthur Weatherly, who served the congregation from 1922-1929, was devoted to social concerns and honored as an outstanding minister in the field of social justice. Rev. Evans Worthley, minister for 21 years, worked with a local Baptist minister to integrate Iowa City restaurants and was local chairman of American Overseas Aid – United Nations Appeal for Children. During the 1950s the UU Women’s Alliance sent aid to the Navajo Project, collected and shipped clothing for Hungarian and Spanish refugees, and provided bedding for the Johnson County Home as well as speaking out about the need to improve conditions there. Our previous building was used many times for political party functions, drama and dance performances, gay and lesbian dances, yoga classes, and music recitals. When marriage equality became law in Iowa, our congregation hosted the weddings of over 150 same gender couples. Since 2006, the
congregation has given away the offering each Sunday to agencies in our community that help those in need.

Rev. Al Henricksen, who served our congregation from 1951 to 1957 and worked to desegregate Iowa City barbershops by accompanying African American men for haircuts, said: "I would like to think of the liberal church as having its feet on the ground, its hand to the plow, and its eyes on the stars. Let us dance and sing, let us create within our walls masterworks of art, images of newer and better ways of living—at concerts, art shows, committee meetings, public protests, in classes and in corridors, from the pulpits and in the hearts and minds of those who, when they join a church community, become greater by far than the sum of their parts." This is the promise of Unitarian Universalism- the promise that our faith has the power to change lives and together those changed lives can change the world. A promise that is incredibly hard at times, of loving and being loved, of welcoming and being welcomed, of sharing our lives with one another, of caring for and collaborating with one another, of comforting and being willing to be uncomfortable, of ever-widening the circle of justice and mercy. A promise we make and remake because the world needs us desperately.

This country is divided and filled with hatred as racism and white supremacy continue to destroy countless lives. Hunger, poverty and greed prevent people from living fully and taking part in the abundance that is every person's birthright. People are more lonely and isolated than ever in this age where virtual reality robs us of intimacy and true connection with one another. There are people right here in this room grieving, struggling with illness, or facing other challenges who need to know: you're not alone and that we are here, ready to support and help you. GLBTQ people want to hear that we are loved just as we are and that we are not a curse but a blessing to the world. Undocumented immigrants need the hope of just and compassionate immigration policies that our First Principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, asks us to work for. Our Seventh Principle, the interconnected web of all existence, calls us to be environmental activists willing to name and fight global climate change, recognizing that our planet and our survival are at stake.

For years, our beloved building in Iowa City held us back from doing this work more fully, from realizing our potential and fully living out our mission. Now, our dream of a beautiful, very green, accessible, flexible building has been realized and the only limits to what we can do are our imaginations, our commitment to this liberal faith, and our willingness to give of ourselves. This is exciting and at the same time, it seems like a lot to ask of one another. We've all worked incredibly hard. We're tired. And we're not done. But for at least today, if not a week or two or three, we're entitled to celebrate, to wallow in self congratulations, and to beam with pride at this incredible accomplishment. But then it's time to get back to work. This afternoon the dedication service will be about renewing our commitment to put our love into action, to live up to a promise we've made the world: a promise to be a place that touches hearts, and to help those touched hearts change lives, and to inspire those changed lives to change the world. A promise to continue the work our spiritual ancestors began, to build on their legacy, and in turn leave
a legacy for the generations that will follow us. In the second reading Wendell Berry says:

If we will have the wisdom to survive,  
to stand like slow growing trees  
on a place, renewing, enriching it...  
then a long time after we are dead  
the lives our lives prepare will live  
here, their houses strongly placed  
upon the valley sides...⁶

What is the legacy we will leave for those future generations? In 2015 as we prepared to vote on buying this property and selling our building in Iowa City, I asked you these questions: Who will we be in this next chapter of our history? Will our new location help us become better caretakers of our fragile, beautiful earth home and deepen our commitment to being a green, sustainable institution? Will we be caught in a mindset of scarcity as we take on debt to finance our dreams or will our generosity and willingness to share all we have increase because we are so blessed with abundance? Will we know who our neighbors are in Coralville and how we are called to serve them? Will our love of justice invite us to open our eyes to the suffering and needs in other areas of Iowa City and inspire us to reach out with love and compassion? How will we create the Beloved Community here in the Iowa Corridor? Who will we be together? In the first reading, Rev. Bill Sinkford includes a quote from the Rev. Rebecca Parker:

There must be communities of people  
Who seek to do justice  
Love kindness and walk humbly…,  
Who call on the strength of Soul-force  
To heal, transform, and bless life."⁷

Today, let us renew our commitment to be one of those communities. Let us dare to be bold... to be audacious... to be a people whose generosity knows no limits as we share the gifts of our time, our energy, our passions, our money; a people working together in this place and out in the world to fulfill Unitarian Universalism's promise of fullness of life for every person and the creation of a world where all of life will dwell together in peace and justice. I invited the street preacher to attend our open house. He was here and he came to me to say: "Wow! This is really impressive! I can't wait to see what you and your congregation do with it." I replied with a big grin: "Neither can I, my friend. Neither can I. And you're welcome to join us."

As we honor our past and rededicate ourselves to fulfilling the promise of Unitarian Universalism, may we continue to be a community of people who do justice, who love mercy, and who hear Life's call to heal, transform and bless life.

May it be so, and in the spirit of the Love that makes all things possible, it is together we will make it so.
References

3 Gordon, Eleanor, Address for the dedication of the new UUSIC church building, October 24, 1908
4 Information taken from "Within These Walls" and the UUSIC Timeline.
6 Berry, Wendell, ibid.
7 Sinkford, Bill, ibid.