Some two thousand years ago, the famed Jewish sage known as Rabbi Hillel posed three enduring questions:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

And, if not now, when?

These three questions are at the heart of an examined life, so I invite you to sit with them this morning and in the days to come, and I hope you will make them your own.

For our answers to these questions—and how we live into those answers—can help to build a better world, by moving us to recognize the sacred bonds that bind our lives together with those of everyone else—bonds that call us to care, bonds that call us to compassion, bonds that call us to act for the well-being of one and all.

* 

Rabbi Hillel’s first question: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” speaks to the reciprocity that undergirds all human community.

It speaks to that calculation that each of us makes, from time to time—of whether we stick with the herd or strike out on our own.

It speaks to the deep concern we rightfully have for our own well-being, and even our fear that others might not come through in our time of need.
It speaks, then, to the understandable temptation to just go it alone, thinking we can manage well enough by ourselves.

And, of course, often enough, we can and do.

But there are limits to this life.

And there are upheavals that routinely upend our sense of security and stability.

Moments when we find ourselves in need of help.

This can be an extremely hard lesson to learn—especially so for we proudly independent Unitarians, who are sometimes surprised to learn that there actually are some things we cannot do for ourselves.

This hard truth of life
sits right at the tension
between our quest for independence
and the recognition that, whether we like it or not, we are ultimately bound up with one another in webs of interdependence.

Our well-being is tied up with the well-being of everyone else.

Perhaps no better articulation of this idea can be found than Pastor Martin Niemöller’s well-known words, penned in the midst of World War II:

First, they came for the Jews
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Jew.

[They then] came for the Communists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Communist.

[They then] came for the trade unionists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me
and there was no one left
to speak out for me.

There are times when you and I can and will speak up and out for ourselves—
times when we must “be for ourselves”—
when we are able to draw attention to our own needs,
and to whatever ways we might be suffering.

And then there are times when another voice is needed,
when we require someone else to simply witness and understand our situation,
and then speak up on our behalf.

In those moments, we need someone capable of compassion
to help do what we cannot do for ourselves.

Not to feel pity or sorrow,
but to bear witness and offer to us the healing gift of compassion.

Such was the case for Ian O’Gorman,
a ten-year-old boy, diagnosed with cancer.

Before he began chemotherapy,
his doctors warned him that all his hair would fall out.

Proactively taking matters into his own hands,
he decided to do what many a ten-year-old has tried,
and cut off all his own hair.

It was a bold move, and the result made him a bit anxious
about how the other kids at school would respond when he returned.

But when he left hospital and went back to class, completely bald,
the thirteen other boys in his class, and their teacher, too,
greeted him with shiny, shaved heads of their own.

* 

The word compassion, quite literally, means to feel or to suffer with.

It doesn’t always involve alleviating or even easing the pain of another,
but it does mean being present to it.

Sometimes, bearing witness is all that is called for,
and more often than we would wish, it may well be the only thing that can be done.

And, even still, such acts of kindness and care can help to heal our world.

And, in unexpected ways, they can take on a life of their own.

The story is told of two young men, working their way through Stanford University, back in 1895.

When their funds ran desperately low, one of them had the idea to engage the great Paderewski for a piano recital and to devote the profits to cover their tuition, room, and board.

To book the concert, Paderewski’s manager asked for a fee of $1500.

Undaunted by the hefty sum, the two students proceeded to stage the concert.

They worked hard, but found, when the curtain came down, that the concert had raised only $150.

Unfortunately, they’d scheduled the concert during the Easter break, when most everyone else on campus was away.

After the concert, the young men sought out the great pianist to tell him of their efforts and the disappointing results.

They gave him the money they had and a promissory note for the rest, explaining they would earn the balance, and send it to him as soon as possible.

Though it seemed a reasonable solution, under the circumstances, the pianist immediately said that these terms would not do.

He then tore the note to shreds, returned the money and said to them: “Now, take out of this all of your expenses, and keep for each of yourselves ten percent of the balance for your work. You may then send me the rest.”

The young men were overwhelmed by his generosity
and never forgot his act of kindness,  
or the depth of his understanding.

Years rolled by, and in 1919,  
Paderewski the pianist became the Prime Minister of Poland.

Serving at the end of the first world war,  
Paderewski did everything possible to feed and clothe  
the starving people of his country,  
eventually requesting aid from the United States.

To his surprise, his request was granted at once,  
and when all the food and clothing had been distributed,  
Paderewski personally thanked President Herbert Hoover  
for the relief his country had provided.

“That’s all right,” the president told Mr. Paderewski.

“[Y]ou don’t remember it, but you helped me once  
when I was a student at college and I was in a hole [myself].”

And the rabbi asks: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”

The answer to this question is rooted in relationship.

But, given the element of reciprocity involved, the tit-for-tat of it,  
it’s something of a calculated answer.

Which is where the rabbi’s second question figures in:  
“If I am only for myself, what am I?”

This question moves us beyond an ethic of reciprocity,  
beyond even the guiding wisdom of The Golden Rule,  
to ask about the kind of world we want to live in,  
and how and who we see ourselves to be within it.

It asks what would become of us,  
if we were always to put ourselves  
at the centre of our own universe,  
over and above anyone or anything else.

The tension between selflessness and selfishness

\footnote{1 from Edward W. Bok, \textit{Perhaps I Am}. (Details of this story are up for debate.)}
is one many of us wrestle with throughout our lives.

And how we settle that tension,
how we resolve that great conundrum,
reveals a great deal about who we are.

It’s not uncommon, of course,
for us to bounce back and forth between the extremes—
sometimes doing for ourselves and sometimes doing for others.

A balanced and sustainable life is to be found somewhere in-between.

But it’s no accident that we tend to honour and celebrate
those who commit themselves in extraordinary ways
to serving the common good.

There is something about selflessness that moves our hearts.

An example we would do well to remember
was that of Lotta Hitschmanova.

This small, determined woman, dressed in her self-made uniform,
trekked around the globe in a life of service to others.

Born in Czechoslovakia, she became a journalist,
and, over time, spoke out against the rising power of the Nazis.

As Europe descended into war, she fled for her life,
first to Belgium and then to France, where,
like so many, she scraped by on meager provisions.

She was, at times, desperately hungry.

And, on one occasion, overcome by hunger, she collapsed
and was taken to a clinic run by, of all people,
the Unitarian Service Committee.

Eventually, she found her strength and recovered.

And, in time, she received a visa to immigrate to Canada.

But the work of the Unitarians in France made a lasting impression on her.

And, so, shortly after she moved to Ottawa,
she promptly founded the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada.

During the rest of the war and for decades to come, she raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to feed refugees, particularly children across Europe, and then in other parts of the world, drawing on the resources of congregations across this country, including ours.

So successful was her cause, and so lasting her commitment, that to this day, she is arguably the most famous Canadian Unitarian.

The street address of the Unitarian Service Committee in Ottawa, heard repeatedly during her appeals on the CBC, was known for years to countless Canadians. (Does anyone still recall the address?)

And the rabbi asks, “If I am only for myself, what am I?”

In the story of Dr. Hitschamanova, I am inspired by how compassion begets compassion—how small acts of kindness can give rise to so many more.

But, more than anything, what most inspires me about her life is the fact that things could have turned out so differently.

Enduring the sting of hunger, forced to abandon the country of her birth, learning, in time, that both of her parents had died in concentration camps, any and all of this could have understandably shattered her world, leaving her full of bitter resentment.

Yet, she chose another path through her pain, deciding instead to allow it to open her heart in magnificent ways.

*  

In his book, *Love and Death*, Forrest Church explains that The Israel Museum in Jerusalem holds an impressive collection of tiny ceramic cups, cups I saw myself when I visited the museum a few years ago.

“They are sacramental vessels,”
each collecting one person’s tears.

“A callused heart remains invulnerable,” he writes.

“[But,] that was not the fashion among the ancient Hebrews. They were not afraid to cry…. The fuller one’s tear cup, the more a person was esteemed.

“Great-hearted people, it seems, cried far more readily than small-hearted people.

“Life touched them more deeply, not only the pain of it but also the joy.

They wept into their cups of tears until they could truly say ‘My cup runneth over.’”

Such is the way of compassion and care.

This is what it means to suffer with someone else—to feel deeply, by checking our own ego just long enough that we can place another at the centre of our concern.

The remarkable religious writer Karen Armstrong says that the capacity to feel for another is the truest test of anyone’s religion.

While I agree, I would add that often more is required of us—that feelings of compassion must, at times, move us to action, if healing is to take hold or justice is to be realized.

Idle concern in the face of suffering is not always enough.

This faith of ours asks us to both “feel” and “do.”

Compassion and service are, to me, the two sacred sides of the coin of our religious tradition.

In my experience, one without the other makes for a fairly shallow and vulnerable faith.

Which brings us back to the rabbi’s question of what we become,
if we’re concerned simply for ourselves.

While this is a question we must each answer in our own, I can tell you that I have yet to find an answer that satisfies without involving compassion and action.

The third and final question the rabbi asks is one of timing.

“If not now, when?”

Where the first question asks on whom we can depend, and the second invites us to imagine the world we long to see, the third begs the question of exactly when we plan to get busy bringing that world into being.

This is, perhaps, the most important question of all—because it is the one that asks us to take ourselves and our faith seriously.

It beckons us to get up from the comfortable pew, with a sense of urgency, and to get to work in the service of the greater good.

It challenges us to move beyond dreaming and begs us to get on with creating the world that we seek—one that is more loving and just than the one that we now know.

It’s safe to say that in this world of hurt, we’ve got our work more than cut out for us.

As Ted shared with us earlier, Amnesty International is one of the ways we take up this work as a congregation.

Across the year, Amnesty volunteers here and elsewhere help us to see and understand some of the world’s gravest problems.

They call us to care, and they call us to action, by calling us to be awake to the realities of the world around us.

Helping us to comprehend and respond to the suffering of others, our Amnesty group invites us to live lives of integrity that resist, in the words of Martin Luther King, becoming “adjusted to injustice.”

In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Dr. King wrote:
Any religion that professes concern for the souls of [others] and is not equally concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that [undermine] them is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried.”

Dearly Beloved, ours is a living faith concerned for every soul on this good green earth AND for the conditions in which they live.

While we cannot right every wrong and heal every wound in this world, we can give ourselves in service to the greater good, knowing that our efforts can make a meaningful difference.

We can be awake to the suffering in this world, and we can open our hearts with compassion.

And, to the rabbi’s question about when?

There’s no better time to begin than this precious, present moment.

Amen.