

The American Creed

Sermon Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke

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Opening & Call to Worship: The View from Salem

Good morning. It's good to be with you in this sanctuary today.

Back in July, I stood just down the road at the Salem Museum to give a talk on our nation's Semiquincentennial, this 250th year of the American experiment. That afternoon in Salem, surrounded by regional artifacts and local history, we gathered to talk about memory, localism, and the enduring strength of community ties here in the Valley.

Standing in this pulpit today, the conversation naturally shifts. Moving from a museum to a sanctuary means moving from historical analysis: *what happened and who said what* to moral and spiritual reflection: *What does this demand of us now? How do we walk together in a fractured world? What is our covenant with one another?*

If you think back fifty years ago, to the Bicentennial summer of 1976, many of us remember a year painted in simple primary colors.

I was seven years old, growing up in Austin, Texas, and completely captivated by the Bicentennial. I wore red, white, and blue daily. My mother even redecorated my bedroom curtains red and white stripes on one side, white stars on blue fabric on the other.

My favorite spot that summer was the Austin Public Library. They ran a summer reading competition with a patriotic poster to fill with stickers as you finished books. I tackled it with total focus, tearing through stories so fast the librarians had to give me a second poster when I ran out of room on the first.

I loved my country the way a seven-year-old child does: uncritically, uncomplicatedly, and without reservation.

As adults and especially as liberal religious people living in 2026, we know we cannot view our nation through the lens of a child's bedroom curtains. An adult's love has to be different. It can't be blind; it must be clear-eyed. An adult love acknowledges flaws, wrestles directly with dark historical contradictions, and chooses commitment and community anyway.

We stand here in 2026 at a major milestone: two hundred and fifty years since fifty-six men signed a document that effectively marked them for treason if they failed. Yet today, the broad optimism of the past has largely fractured into polarization, anxiety, and mistrust. We argue over monuments, classrooms, and textbooks. The national temperature feels high, and a coherent national celebration seems difficult to find.

Instead of panicking at these divisions, our faith tradition offers a way to approach this milestone with maturity. We can anchor ourselves in a simple truth: **our nation, like our faith, was never meant to be a static orthodoxy. It was designed as an ongoing, open-ended covenant.**

Part I: Orthodoxy, Covenant, and the Paradox of the Creed

To understand where we are in 2026, we have to look back at the intellectual spark that early religious liberals helped ignite in 1776.

Now, I know that for Unitarian Universalists, using the word "creed" can cause a bit of a shudder. We are a non-creedal faith. In our churches, we famously declare that we have "no creed to bind us." We reject theological creed, those static tests of orthodoxy that demand you swear belief in a fixed set of dogmas on pain of exclusion.

So why call a sermon "The American Creed"?

Because there is a vital difference between a **coercive theological creed** and a **liberating political creed**.

A theological creed demands that you believe in a specific definition of God or a specific dogma. But a political creed, what historians call the *American Creed*, demands something entirely different. It doesn't tell you what to believe about the heavens; it asserts an uncompromising standard about how human beings must treat one another on earth.

When Thomas Jefferson sat down in Philadelphia to draft the Declaration of Independence and wrote that "*all men are created equal*," he wasn't writing in a vacuum. He was drawing on the American Enlightenment, a movement deeply shaped by early Unitarians and Universalists like John Adams, Charles Chauncy, and later William Ellery Channing.

They pushed back against the dominant religious orthodoxy of their day. They rejected the idea that human beings were inherently depraved and destined to be ruled by arbitrary monarchs or coercive creeds. Instead, they championed a

revolutionary idea: the inherent dignity of every soul, the value of human reason, and the freedom of conscience.

Their logic was straightforward: If every human being is endowed with reason and conscience, then no king, no bishop, and no government has the moral authority to chain the human mind.

When early Unitarians built congregations, they chose not to write theological creeds. Instead, they formed **covenants**. A covenant isn't a test of intellectual conformity; it's a promise about *relationship*. It's an agreement to walk together, serve together, and search for truth together, even when we see the world differently.

When the Founders designed the American political system, they essentially took that covenantal model and scaled it up. They rejected an established state church. They rejected a monarch. They built a system based on a shared civic covenant, a political creed whose sole purpose was to protect the freedom of conscience for every individual.

Part II: 1976, the Tall Ships, and the Spirit of Localism

Look back at the landscape of 1976. It's easy to misremember the Bicentennial as a simpler, more unified time, but it wasn't. The country was deeply wounded. We were dealing with the fallout of the Watergate scandal and the resignation of a president just two years prior. The Vietnam War had just ended in painful evacuation. Inflation was high, trust in institutions was low, and social friction was everywhere.

Yet look at how the Bicentennial was actually marked.

The planning wasn't weaponized as a central political wedge. It was a bipartisan federal effort, but its execution was remarkably decentralized.

Consider the arrival of the tall ships. When those massive sailing vessels came from around the world to honor the nation's 200th birthday, they didn't just gather for one single spectacle in New York Harbor. They fanned out. They sailed into Newport, into Baltimore's Inner Harbor, and into smaller ports up and down the coast.

That was a deliberate choice. The Bicentennial worked because it was a bottom-up effort rooted in localism. It wasn't dictated from a central podium; it belonged to cities, towns, neighborhoods, and local historical societies from coastal ports to a public library in Texas, to gatherings right here in the Roanoke Valley.

The citizens of 1976 understood that the best way to navigate a fractured national moment was to let people engage locally, in their own backyards. They showed that **our past is meant to be a living, local dialogue, not a forced national monologue.**

Nearly two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville observed this exact dynamic while traveling across the young republic. He noted that America's real strength didn't sit in Washington, but in its localism and its knack for "associationalism", the habit of everyday citizens forming local committees, historical societies, neighborhood groups, and congregations to solve their own problems.

Tocqueville called these local groups the primary schools of freedom because they pull individuals out of isolation and force direct, face-to-face relationships with neighbors.

When we view the country entirely through national cable news or online outrage algorithms, we see mostly gridlock and hostility. But when we look through our local communities, our churches, local boards, regional museums, and neighborhood projects, we remember how to talk to each other. Localism brings us back to direct human interaction, which is where empathy actually grows.

Part III: The Myth of Consensus and the Four Pillars

In her writing for *The New York Times*, journalist Jia Lynn Yang points out that Americans often fall into despair because we mistakenly believe a healthy nation requires complete consensus on its history. We see arguments over textbooks and monuments and assume the experiment is falling apart.

But as Unitarian Universalists, we know that **we have never had complete consensus, nor were we meant to.**

Our national memory has never been a single, uniform script. In the early 19th century, a book peddler named Parson Weems wrote a famous biography of George Washington where he simply made up the story of young Washington chopping down the cherry tree and saying, "I cannot tell a lie."

Why did that fabricated story become a massive bestseller taught to generations of children? Because a fragile young republic wanted a pristine hero to enforce moral unity. Early Americans embraced the fable because they feared that without a flawless origin story, their experiment would collapse.

They were worrying about the wrong thing. Our strength doesn't come from pristine myths or forced agreement.

Our fourth UU principle calls us to a *"free and responsible search for truth and meaning."* That search is continuous. Applied to our national story, wrestling with our past, confronting slavery, the displacement of Indigenous communities, and systemic injustice isn't disloyalty. It's an act of civic responsibility. It's the difference between holding a rigid, dead orthodoxy and engaging a **Living Tradition**.

The system was built for debate and revision. Consider four moments that show this living covenant in action:

1. **The Promise of 1776:** When Jefferson wrote that all are created equal, he was a slaveholder in a society built on bondage. The glaring contradiction was real. Yet embedding that moral standard into the founding document created a permanent standard by which future generations could judge and fight American hypocrisy.
2. **Washington's Resignation (1783):** In December 1783, Washington walked into the Continental Congress and surrendered his military commission. By stepping down, he established civilian authority and ensured the nation's direction would be set by votes and debate rather than military force.
3. **Frederick Douglass (1852):** In his speech, *"What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"*, Douglass delivered a severe critique of American hypocrisy. Yet he didn't abandon the Constitution; he called it a "glorious liberty document" and used the principles of 1776 to demand the end of slavery.
4. **The Reconstruction Amendments (1865-1870):** Following the Civil War, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments marked a "Second Founding." By abolishing slavery, defining birthright citizenship, and guaranteeing equal protection, the nation altered its constitutional framework, proving that justice requires ongoing, deliberate work.

Part IV: The World Cup and Our True, Attractive Face

This brings us to our present moment and something we witnessed just a couple of months ago.

It's easy to convince ourselves that we live in an irredeemably fractured, paranoid country, a society deeply suspicious of anyone from a different background or culture. We are told constantly that tribalism and division are the only real forces shaping our public life.

But think back to the FIFA World Cup hosted across North America this past June and July. Think about what actually happened on our streets, in public transit, and in stadiums across the country.

We saw genuine hospitality, spontaneous connection, and collective excitement. Fans from every corner of the globe wearing different colors, speaking different languages, representing different faiths gathered alongside Americans in our cities to share a common event.

That tournament showed a clear disconnect between our national anxieties and our day-to-day capacity for connection. When given the chance, people were far less hostile, far less xenophobic, and far more welcoming than our online feeds usually suggest.

That was America showing an attractive, grounded face to the world: a capacity for hospitality, pluralism, and open-hearted engagement. It showed that when we step away from the digital noise and interact in physical space, our community capacity is far more generous than we give it credit for.

Conclusion: A Prophetic Civic Faith for 2026

What is America at its core?

Historically, many nations were defined by tribalism, a single shared ethnicity, ancient soil, or an official state religion. In many places, you can hold citizenship, but you remain distinct from the dominant heritage.

America was framed differently: as a **creedal nation**. Our identity is anchored in **The American Creed**: that individual dignity is inherent, that governance requires consent, and that rights belong to the person, not the state.

Crucial to that creed is the motto stamped on our currency: *E pluribus unum*. Out of many, one.

That is both a political principle and a spiritual statement. It aligns directly with our Seventh Principle: **the interdependent web of all existence**. It asserts that pluralism isn't a threat to unity; it is the foundation of it.

Because our identity rests on an open covenant rather than shared blood or origin, America has a structural resilience built for a changing world. Rigid, closed systems crack under the pressure of human movement and global complexity. An open covenant is built to adapt, absorb noise, and self-correct.

When we reduce public life to tribal warfare, treating neighbors as permanent enemies, we abandon that creed out of fear, much like those early Americans clinging to Parson Weems's fables.

We don't need to view our history with the uncritical eyes of a seven-year-old child in 1976. We don't need a sanitized past to build a meaningful, beloved community today.

An adult love for this country, a liberal religious patriotism, is harder, but it is far more durable. It looks directly at the dark parts of our history, looks at the real polarization of our present, and says: *I choose to engage anyway. I choose to stand with my neighbors, hold power accountable to justice, and do the ongoing work of democracy.*

The future doesn't belong to authoritarianism or rigid dogmas. Those structures fail the human desire for freedom. The future belongs to a living covenant, a framework that can adapt, self-correct, and broaden its circle of inclusion.

As we move through the rest of this 250th year, let's not fear debate, historical re-examination, or self-correction. Let's recognize them as signs of a healthy, living society. Let's bring our values into the public square to advocate for dignity, equality, and freedom of conscience for everyone.

The work is right here in front of us, in our own community. Let's carry it forward with purpose.

Amen.