The First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City, as I knew it 30-some years ago—it’s quite different, mostly larger, now— but the building I remember is a New England style church, plain, white, with large windows on either side of the sanctuary where you could see the changing colors of the trees in autumn. We sat in two sections of pews—long white, wooden benches, with an aisle between them. The choir had a loft above and behind those of us seated in the pews. We looked forward to the altar area—there were a couple of red-carpeted steps up to the platform in front where the minister or guest speaker sat. The organist, who played from that platform too, I remember as also being the organist for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir,—he was fabulous. There were two pulpits—one up high, which our minister called “the God box” which I think, since he didn’t fancy himself God, he never preached from, and a lower pulpit where he always took his place for the readings and sermons alike.

But what I remember most, were the little cards and the tiny pencils in the rack on the back of the pews which held the hymnals—the old, blue hymnals. Among other things, the pencils were used to cross out gendered words in those hymnals, like Lord and replace them with words like God, or to replace mankind with humankind. Every time we sang a hymn, it was “turn to hymn number 266, and in the middle verse cross out the word ‘his’ and write in “their,” then you were asked to stand and sing. Morning Has Broken, where their feet pass. This was before “their” had become a singular pronoun for some individuals. But I remember the little cards and tiny pencils on the back of the pew in front of me.

The little cards had words on them by Ed Schempp and I would study them throughout many a service. Not that the services were boring! Far from it; I had left my high school youth group which met during worship because I preferred the sermons, but you know how there is always that time before the service starts, and some announcements necessary to church life, which would hold little interest for a high schooler, well, and you know, those times you drift off, even during the sermon, when the preacher is talking about something you don’t quite understand, and don’t quite care about that particular morning...I know, I know, some of you, even now, have let your minds wander, and you’re trying not to let me see, but your eyes are focused not on me, but on the words inside the order of service...and right now, instead of listening to me, you’re reading, like I used to do, these words:
- Ed Schempp

My meditation usually centered around the particular phrase: it is a sense of humor about absolutes. I pondered those words throughout many a service. I wonder now, if it was because of my age – I don’t know about you, but when I was in high school, I was a bit of an absolutist when it came to matters of politics. I kind of had the world figured out and if I was right, and you held a different opinion, then you were clearly wrong, and there was very little room for negotiating a wider truth. Or maybe it was because I was in high school in Utah, where many of my classmates had genuine confidence in a theological system that I couldn’t even wrap myself around, couldn’t begin to understand, and they were so absolutely positive that they held the truth, it put those of us in the minority on constant defensive. As any minority knows, it gets to be a quite a drag to ALWAYS have to be the one to remind the group that there is another perspective they haven’t considered.

But it was also the sense of humor part of that phrase, which concerned me. Because I have never thought of myself as having a good sense of humor. I am not good at word-play – many of you surely have noticed when you’ve approached me with a funny line, I’ve taken you quite seriously and missed the joke completely. “That’s a joke”, is something I’ve heard often in my life. I always wished I had more of a sense of humor. So I would fixate on those words, it is a sense of humor about absolutes, and ponder the deeper meaning. How can a religion be a sense of humor about absolutes? Well, I’m almost sure back then, that at least one thought I had was that we weren’t like the Mormons. We weren’t sure of the truth, and we liked it just that way. now, of course, I realize that the phrase was never about what we weren’t, but what we are. and the pencil, which sat next to the card in the pew in front of me, became a part of my meditation. We were re-writing scripture every Sunday. and what a powerful sensation, to be a young woman in that congregation, in a state which still practiced a rigid form of separation of the sexes, it was a powerful message, that we could change our language to reflect our views, and that women could be written back into the sacred texts and hymns we sang on Sunday morning. There were times, no doubt, that we went too far. Where their feet pass, really, didn’t make a lot of sense back then, before gender neutral pronouns were popularized – I suppose you could justify it in a pagan way, several gods, but the problem which caused us to cross out the word “his” was the male god, not the single god.....

But that’s what having a sense of humor about absolutes is like – this swinging pendulum, we swing one way, try to make a correction, and go overboard in the other direction until we catch our mistakes, and set back about the other way, and hopefully, at some point we find a perfect balance point in the middle where gravity grounds us. Of course, then, that’s when the earthquake hits, the ground shifts again, and the balance is upset. We swing one direction, and the other again, seeking that perfectly balanced dance position in the middle and rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives, but then we tumble into movement again, into the next moment and
swing this way and then that, in the never-ending dance that is life. We are a movement, in addition to being a religion, a movement because we dance, we move, we unstick ourselves from even our own absolutist positions.

One way to unstick ourselves is with humor. When our beliefs get rigid and unreasonable, when we’ve swung the pendulum too far one way and we are in need of a corrective, humor can serve to remind us of our error.

Humor as in Thomas Starr King’s quip about the difference between Unitarians and Universalists. Starr King was a son of a Universalist minister and he became a Unitarian missionary in California, 19th Century. Starr King explained that while both Unitarians and Universalists believed in universal salvation, Universalists believed so because “God is too good to condemn man to hell,” while Unitarians believe that “Man is too good for God to condemn him to hell.”

I always take that line as a reminder to not get too arrogant about a belief in our own power. Another reminder I enjoy, usually on Fridays which is the day I dedicate to writing my sermons, is this line, reported to be an actual sentence in an actual, albeit now anonymous, church newsletter. “Barbara remains in the hospital and needs blood donors for more transfusions. She is also having trouble sleeping and requests tapes of Pastor Jack’s sermons.”

Perhaps you’ve heard these, also supposedly from church newsletters: “don’t let worry kill you off, let the church help!” or “Low Self Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 7pm. Please use the back door.”

Humor can remind us that all our good attempts at helping others can backfire and have quite the opposite effect. That’s a painful reality, and humor can help us digest information that might cause pain in tolerable doses. Otherwise, we might continue on in denial, because accepting it all at once is too painful.

We make fun of our human shortcomings, and that can be why laughter can be uncomfortable – when it points out our infallibility, or that of another. And we ardent reformers tend to tread very carefully on comic ground – not wanting to offend anyone or make fun of the less powerful. This is a good thing. However, as in all things, we need to seek balance. And, we should probably make a little more fun of ourselves and treat others a little more seriously.

I think the sense of humor about absolutes addresses the difficult reality that not only are we not in absolute control in ways that we sometimes wish we were, but that our knowledge, though important, is never absolute, always imperfect, and there are some things which all the thinking in the world can’t help. Our finitude, for example, and suffering.

_God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change_

_the courage to change the things I can_

_and the wisdom to know the difference,_

goes that prayer made famous by AA.

So often, we don’t have that wisdom to know the difference, but a different perspective, a different attitude on a problem, can make it all clear. Just as a good sleep can provide the answer to a troubling issue, a good laugh can put a whole new spin on your life.
But there’s even more to it than that, according to Norman Cousin’s Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient: Reflections on Healing and Regeneration, published in 1979. In that now famous book, he chronicles his experience with healing using vitamin C and daily doses of laughter.

Laughter, he discovered, is a deeply physical response which alters our physiology. Like exercise, it produces endorphins in the brain. We are physically altered by the experience, and a change in physiology, as we know, can change our attitude, and we what power we can harness when our attitude is changed.

Norman Cousins engaged deeply in the anti-war movement, following WW II in Japan, opposing nuclear testing in this country and abroad, speaking out against the war in Vietnam. This detail is often, sadly, overlooked. He did not think that laughter alone would save individuals, but that we must go on to develop the power to change society at the same time. In these times, his is a message we must heed.

And I do want to raise a caution here – about the healing laughter part. The laugh has to be genuine. I have to say, I never quite understood Cousins’ recovery, because I don’t really find the Marx brothers (this is what he watched in the hospital to make himself laugh) funny. I know! It’s sacrilege to those of you who love the Marx brother movies. In my defense, I am sure I simply haven’t watched them enough to get it. But my point is, the laughter has to be genuine. That kind of uncomfortable laughter that erupts when we’re in a socially awkward situation does not count. Nor does polite laughter, when others are enjoying a joke that you don’t quite get or don’t find funny.

My grandfather had a great sense of humor. I always thought it contributed to his long life. I also think his long life contributed to his sense of humor – he had lived so long as to have seen many, many changes, from the horse and buggy days to space travel, and had learned, long ago, that flexibility was necessary, and that variety helped provide for that flexibility. He was an athlete, and when he could not longer play baseball, he played golf. When his golf game went bad, he could still bowl. When he could no longer bowl regularly on a team, he was a frequent substitute to a bowling team. In fact, it is reported that my grandmother, though understandably grief-stricken at his death, remarked, when he died at home in his sleep, “Hal would be so mad to know that he had died, for he was really looking forward to bowling tonight!”

We use humor to get through the tough times. My grandfather was not the only one in the family with a sense of humor about absolutes.

Comedy is a particularly good way to respond to the tragic when we can’t change it any other way. There has been a resurgence of comedy in these times. Don’t get me wrong: There is plenty we can and should do and then there is some tragedy we cannot change. And this is where humor is a naturally healthy response – as long as it accompanies the necessary grief.

A sense of humor about absolutes. I believe it is also how we keep humble without a common belief in God. My internship supervisor, the Rev. Dr. Ruppert Lovely, would often say to me, unequivocally, that the purpose of the church is to worship God period. That was that.

And though I would struggle with his meaning, it couldn’t be that simple, over time, I began to understand that position as so helpful to keep us humble. the church is not about me. It is not about you. Yes, needs hopefully are getting met, we find some of what we seek when we get together, but it is not about buying services from the church with your pledge check. There is more to it than that. And the “more to it”, for Ruppert, was clearly named God. It is about something bigger. And having a sense of humor about absolutes keeps us
humble, keeps us aware that just when we’ve figured it all out, something throws off our paradigm and we have to re-work our system again.

I had this great drawing in my bedroom in Utah – back when I was attending the First Unitarian Church of SLC – the cartoon is of an artist carefully drawing, or maybe it was woodcutting, an elaborate set of railroad tracks. They are intricate and beautiful and he is bowed down over his work with such care. Down the tracks, of course, comes a train which is erasing his beautiful work as it moves. That is a sense of humor about absolutes. We work so hard to get it right, and even so, there is that which we can’t control, we can’t predict, and we can’t fix.

A sense of humor about absolutes is the flexibility necessary to respond when our absolutist positions no longer serve us, when our world view shifts, when our experiences in the world are different than what we expected, or what we wanted. We could close our eyes to the changes around us, or the pain in our lives, and the world, we could close our eyes and pretend we didn’t see the sign “Danger, laser activity, do not look at these holes!”

But, painful as it is, in my life outside the scanner, I’d prefer to live with my eyes wide open, and laugh about it.

**Benediction**

In a world of inequity and instability, we seek balance. Though we take our charge to turn the world around seriously, we do not take ourselves too seriously, but with agility and humor to face new challenges with grace and perspective and love, above all, love.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.