All graduates of our seminary in Chicago – Meadville Lombard Theological School – are given, or at least were given when I graduated – five smooth stones. This ritual of the five smooth stones can be directly traced back to James Luther Adams who taught there – there being the University of Chicago, of which the school was affiliated - from 1936-1946. As I have heard it told, he was a fabulous teacher. His effectiveness is harder to gauge from his writing, but that's not his fault. Most of the books by him are actually compilations of essays and remarks and speeches and editorials, later compiled by other people. Any of you who have ever worked on a mission statement for the church know how difficult it is to write by committee. His writings are hard for me to digest. Nevertheless, I have been intrigued by the strong reputation he had as a brilliant teacher. He had a 'presence' and a compassion for students, and is fondly remembered in our movement and particularly in Chicago.

Like Clara, I grew up in this tradition. My parents were Unitarians before the merger of the two churches in 1961. And over the years, I have heard countless sermons based upon the Five Smooth Stones of Religious Liberalism – this is the title of the composite works written by James Luther Adams between 1939 and 1955. It was made into a pamphlet which was published by the Unitarian Universalist Association's press, Skinner House, and through that pamphlet, I believe, was made widely popular. Properly treated, this would probably be five sermons, one for each stone. But here we are, with all five stones in front of me, and now it's my turn to preach the sermon and tell you why I think these smooth stones are important.

Stones are solid. They are made smooth by friction, through contact with other solid bodies, but slowly. Stones change slowly over a great deal of time, and centuries after their creation, they continue on, weighty and solid, imperceptibly changing in form and yet constant.

I'll get back to these again and again, but here are the five smooth stones in shorthand, first JLA (that's James Luther Adams), first in the words of JLA and then in my own:

1) "Revelation is continuous." We do not know the ending to the story. Or as the United Church of Christ puts it, “God is still speaking.”

2) "All relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual free consent and not on coercion." We should treat each other openly and honestly.

3) "Moral obligation to direct one's effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community." Our faith requires us to try to make the world a better place.

4) "We deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation." There are no good guys and bad guys; rather we create those categories. We must work together - that is, organize ourselves - in order to make entire world community better.

5) "The resources that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism." Rather than my words, I'll use other famous words: The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.
These five smooth stones are the basic principles of religious liberalism, according to Adams. These are the cornerstones of our faith. Let me take them one by one:

1.) "Revelation is continuous." We do not know the ending to the story.

I never asked in all those years of sermons I heard based on five smooth stones, why five... why smooth.... and why stones. It wasn't until I first sat down to write my own sermon on this topic 12 years ago, that I learned it was based upon the five smooth stones that David puts in his shepherd's bag as he goes to kill the Philistine known as Goliath. I don't really know the significance of five, since David kills Goliath with the very first stone. However, "meaning has not been finally captured" says JLA and the significance of this first stone is that we can now tell a different story about the meaning of these stones. I am not writing as Adams did upon the wake of WWII where, it seems to me, the enemy seemed clearer. Instead, I am writing at the beginning of the next century, when the complicated web of our existence and intricate patterns of relationship all too clearly connect me to the terrorist who murders innocents, and to the store I shop in with their employment practices, to the goods I buy and the exploited workers and environments that produce these goods but will never reap the benefits. I am writing in a time when I'm not even sure Hollywood still believes in the storybook version of David and Goliath, and when the rest of us live in the painful knowledge of our complicity with evil, and the difficult work of sorting through layers and layers of complicated information to try to make one healthy decision in a single day, or what may seem like a lifetime.

Therefore, let this stone not be the one that killed a singular giant beast, but rather the stone placed on ground to re-build again after the terrible battle was over. We do not know the ending to the story, but we can create a beginning.

It’s important to be open to new experiences, as Clara reminds us this morning. Keep an eye out for opportunities that one might not think of trying at first can lead to amazing experiences. Revelation is continuous.

This stone is the first block in our foundation, the first step in rebuilding a future in which revelation is not sealed, but is ongoing, and that truth is ever waiting to break forth into new understandings. We need not be as we were before, indeed we cannot be as we were before, so let us see new visions, incorporate new truths and, as JLA writes, "We cannot properly place our confidence in our own creations; we must depend upon a transforming reality that breaks through encrusted forms of life and thought to create new forms. We put our faith in a creative reality that is re-creative. Revelation is continuous."

2.) "All relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual free consent and not on coercion." We should treat each other openly and honestly.
This is why we have no creed for membership in this church. This stone says we need to treat each other openly and honestly. If you were told what you had to believe to belong to this church, face it, you would not be free to choose this community as you are. You would have to either change your beliefs to conform to the group, or lie to the group about what you really believed. Sure, there might be a lucky few who happened to line up exactly with the stated belief system of the church, but I happen to believe there is far more diversity among us than we generally know and can see on the surface. We have to get to know each other to uncover our layer of differences. We each have been born to a different body, with different life experiences, in a slightly different time frame. Open and honest. Sometimes its hard, sometimes it's even dangerous. Just to be of Middle Eastern descent in this time in this place, can feel – and often is – dangerous. To be transgender or non-binary in this world can feel – and often is – dangerous. To speak up with our friends, or our families of origin, when we disagree with their assumptions can feel – and often is – dangerous. We have to be vigilant with ourselves and others about this openness and honesty. What truth hurts and why? How honest is it safe to be right now? "Free inquiry", says James Luther Adams, "is the method for achieving peace and justice and for the preservation of human dignity." Free inquiry means speaking our truth and asking questions honestly.

3.) "Moral obligation to direct one’s effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community." Our faith requires us to try to make the world a better place.

This is not a moral obligation to succeed, or always do the right thing, but rather to try to make the world a better place. This stone seems like it is pretty straight forward, but perhaps not. How often do we wonder what is the action which would best help establish a just and loving community? I don't know about you, but I often wonder if I'm doing the right thing, if I've framed the question well, and if my actions are really contributing to a just and loving community. It is so hard to be sure. We cannot be sure. But it is our obligation, says Adams, to try.

And sometimes we 'over-think' the problem, well at least I do. Sometimes the opportunity just presents itself and we act on good bodily instinct.

There is a planning story that my husband tells, of a scenario in transportation planning. It goes like this: a mattress has fallen off of a truck onto the highway. Cars have to swerve and slow to get around the mattress and in no time there is a 10-minute traffic delay. Cars and cars, slow and swerve, navigate around the mattress, until finally a single car pulls over, holds up his hand to stop the traffic, pulls the mattress to the side, gets back in the car and drives off. In five minutes, the congestion has been freed and the traffic moves on.

This moral obligation to direct ones efforts toward the establishment of a just and loving community does not have to be a grand gesture of sacrifice, or really even very hard most of the time. Certainly, there are times that call for great courage. But quite often, it can just mean to pay attention to the flow, and remove the obstacles. Pay attention to the flow of justice and love, and get the obstacles out of the way. Stop, direct the traffic for a moment, drag the baggage to the side, and continue on your way.

4.) "We deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation." There are no good guys and bad guys; rather we create those categories of understanding. We must work together - that is, organize ourselves - in order to make entire world community better.

Like the stone we are born into this world neither good nor bad. This stone represents that fact of our existence coupled with our need to make it better. Thanks to his contemporary, Kenneth Patton, we speak of the interdependent web of which we are a part. And this smooth stone refers to our interconnectedness and social relatedness – our need to make society better for all, because we are social by nature and live in society.
Church is kind of all about social incarnation. We come together as individuals, which different beliefs and experiences, but we come together out of a need – a need of comfort and solace, or of challenge and interest – or our of an unarticulated need to just be a part of something bigger. To spend some time working on creating something not for our individual selves or smaller family groupings – but to be a part of something bigger.

We form groups and alliances to advocate for changes in society. Some of us are lucky enough to have careers that allow us to work for society in the ways in which we think are improvements. Others of us do it in our volunteer work. And sometimes it takes others to point out that what we are doing simply to survive – also contributes to the well-being of society.

Our faith must result in reformatations of society. We must challenge the status quo – Because none of us are happy with the way the world is at present. It can always be better.

5.) “The resources that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism.” In the words of Theodore Parker, more than a generation before him, “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.” Or as Martin Luther King said, more succinctly, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

I get the impression from reading his words, that Adams shared my sometimes tragic view of life. He lived through WWII – which in a way stands as a symbol for all the horrible things people can do to people. We've been doing these horrible things for a very long time and the tragedy continues, but I think the grand scale of the Holocaust of WWII woke up members of his generation – shook up the liberal optimism that the world is simply getting better over time and that history will take care of our problems. My generation, perhaps, never even had the luxury of an illusion that the world is getting better over time....

So Adams is not telling us that good will conquer all and that things indeed are better now than yesterday. The smoothness of this enduring, solid, weighty stone symbolizes the indisputable fact that changes happen, change happens, and the possibility that beauty can be created over time. It's up to us. We really have to make it happen. It matters what we do, what we say, and that we are.

These five cornerstones of our liberal religious faith must never be taken for granted. This is why upon graduation from one of our two Unitarian Universalist seminaries, graduating ministers are presented with five, smooth stones. Not as a weapon to kill a Philistine named Goliath, but rather as the substance with which to build a foundation - to slowly and surely construct a beautiful future.

We do not know the ending to the story, therefore:

We should treat each other openly and honestly.

Our faith requires us to try to make the world a better place.

There are no good guys and bad guys. We must organize ourselves in order to make entire world community better.

The arc of the moral universe is very, very long, but ultimately it bends toward justice. May it be so.
Benediction

We raise our voices for the blue green hills of earth. We begin with five smooth stones, the ones we use to re-build society after the devastation that is in our midst. Because we do not know the ending to the story, and freedom matters. We have to make an effort to build the beloved community and we have all we need to make it so.

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