Photo Credit: John Lesser

“Good Trouble”

First Parish in Wayland
September 27, 2026

Rev. Lauren Smith

Sermon: "Good Trouble"
Given at the First Parish in Wayland
On September 27, 2026
Rev. Lauren Smith

Good trouble.

I begin this morning with the wisdom of John Robert Lewis, U.S. Congressman and hero of the Civil Rights Movement.

"Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, or a year—it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to get in good trouble, necessary trouble."[1]

John Lewis' entire life embodied the compassionate courage of those words. And his legacy begs the question: What spiritual risks does a life of integrity require of you? Of us? In a tenuous social and political environment, what good trouble might we embrace as a community?

I remember the look in young eyes peeking at me from the back seat of a car on a little road in New Hampshire. I was standing on the side of the road in my robe and stole holding a sign that read "We <3 U the Way U Are" in bright handwritten letters. I was there with a band of folks from the congregation my husband and I served in Portsmouth and with members of Seacoast Outright, a local group that offered programs for Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth. The car was headed to a small conference center that was hosting a conversion therapy event. Conversion therapy, if you don't know, is a harmful therapeutic practice designed to "convert" LGBT people to heterosexuality and cis-gender identity. We got word from our friends at Seacoast Outright that the conference was coming to our area. We mobilized quickly to line the street, beaming messages of love and acceptance at the children and youth who were entering the grounds. It was one of many times that congregation said yes to showing up on short notice for our values. I believe we made a difference to the child in that car. I believe we made a difference that day. I'm grateful for the habits of the heart that landed us on that road.

John Lewis was born in 1940 to Eddie and Willie Mae Lewis, the third of ten children, a son of poor sharecroppers. He grew up in the deep South in the era of Jim Crow, a child making sense of a confounding world that denied his full humanity.

John asked his parents about the "Colored Only" signs he saw in his town. They responded by encouraging him to accept society's rules. "That's just the way it is," they told him. "Don't get into trouble."[2]

But he did get into trouble. Painful, difficult, transformative trouble that helped usher in a new era of American civic life.

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[1] A tweet from June 2018.
[2] "John Lewis, Towering Figure of the Civil Rights Movement, Dies at 80," *New York Times, July, 2020.*

As a teenager, John listened to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's speeches and sermons. He drew inspiration from the Montgomery Bus Boycotts of 1955 to 1956. One day, he wrote to Dr. King, who *wrote back* with a personal invitation to Birmingham and a round-trip ticket. Before long, John was imbedded in the Civil Rights Movement, participating in lunch counter sit-ins. John Lewis was one of the original thirteen Freedom Riders and was on the front lines of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma on Bloody Sunday. The brutality of that day—John's skull was fractured in the melee—sparked outrage that spurred Congress and President Lyndon Johnson to pass and sign the Voting Rights Act into law within eight days.

John Lewis's acts of courage go on and on. He was simply always in the fray. After the first Freedom Ride, during which many of the Riders sustained terrible injuries—one was paralyzed for the rest of his life—John Lewis wrote, "If there was anything I learned on that long bus ride in 1961, it was this—that we were in for a long, bloody fight here in the American South. And I intended to be in the middle of it."

People like John Lewis, who are willing to risk their lives to advance justice even as they hold fast to the principles of nonviolence, people like John Lewis are special and rare. Lives like theirs inspire us with their moral courage, but they can also freeze us in our tracks. Many of us who see the extreme destructiveness and cruelty of our time, many of us believe that only that extraordinary action can make any difference at all in our current climate.

But here's the truth: You don't need to be John Lewis to turn the tide of society toward love, equity and justice.

Society needs its exceptional figures to thrive, but it doesn't need all of us to be exceptional. Society doesn't need you to be John Lewis, but it does need you to rise to your own level of courage, to take risks on behalf of the world you wish to live in, to get in some "good trouble" of your own.

And that's the beautiful thing about religious community. Especially here, there are so many ways to make a difference, so many ways to stretch. You can be a person who hosts a sign-making party for a protest, or the person who brings music and cookies to the party. You might be the person on the building committee who ensures that the lights work so we can host gatherings in the Meetinghouse, opening the doors of the church as a resource for the wider community. You might organize a bank boycott, a Town Council meeting, or a Girl Scout troop, supporting the next generation as they find their voices and their power. You might volunteer in a Religious Education classroom.

In his wonderful book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy,* Quaker activist Parker Palmer describes habits of the heart he believes are essential for the thriving of people and democracy.

Palmer describes these habits of the heart, these civic capacities, as equal parts chutzpah and humility, then clarifies:

> By chutzpah, I mean knowing that I have a voice that needs to be heard and the right to speak it. By humility, I mean accepting that my truth is always partial and may not be true at all—so I need to listen with openness and respect….

He says:

- We must understand that we're all in this together,
- we must generate a sense of personal voice and agency,
- and we must strengthen our capacity to create community. [3]

As a community, we can become an engine for love and justice. We begin by choosing to act, not knowing what the outcome will be.

My daughter Aliyah, who is eleven, has grown up in Unitarian Universalist congregations surrounded by wonderful, compassionate, engaged people like you—people who show up in big and small ways for each other and the world. I am grateful beyond measure for the gift of these congregations, which have been her curriculum, pointing toward a generous and meaning-filled life.

Aliyah decided recently that she wants to serve on Student Council. Her issue: noise in the stairwells. People yell and scream during transitions between classes and, because the narrow stairwells are made of metal and glass, the racket can be unbearable. It's just too loud and she wants to do something about it. Aliyah turned to my husband Chris the other day, knitted her brows and asked, "Do you think I can actually get people not to yell in the stairwell." Chris looked at her and answered honestly: "Maybe." "And maybe not." "But you won't know until you try. Not every problem can be fixed right away. Sometimes you win. Sometimes you lose. But it's worthwhile to spend your life being the kind of person who tries."

The Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray served the Unitarian Universalist Association as President from 2017 to 2023. For four of those years, I was the UUA's Director of Stewardship and Development and reported to her. How lucky for me that I got to know this brave, big-hearted woman who is now a dear friend.

About a year ago, Susan was a special guest on a podcast called "The Growing Edge," hosted by Parker Palmer and a folk musician named Carrie Newcomer. They got together to discuss the state of American society and politics and how we might find a way forward. Each of them expressed the fear and despair so many of us feel these days, along with our deep desire for something better, and our hope that we can help bring something better into being.

She said, "I think it's easy to look back at movements that have been successful and think, 'How did they do it? And how did they know [what to do]? And to forget that, in fact, maybe there was a lot of movement work before [a success]. Many things were tried and many failed. There's much that happens [in an ongoing way] and you don't always know *when* things are going to come together and actually work."

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[3] From *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*, Palker Palmer, 2011, updated 2024.

Susan is back in the parish now, as the minister of the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Bloomington, Indiana. She offers guidance to her congregation that may be helpful for us, as we sort out how to respond to our time with courage, conviction and compassion.

> Susan says, "Now that I'm back in a congregation, [I tell them] there are three things we have to do. …[T]hree things: We have to be: One) a community of resistance, …pushing back against attacks on individual rights, [attacks] on institutions that are critical to a healthy democracy, [pushing] back against direct threats to our freedoms.
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> And the Second is to be a sanctuary, to be a community of love and care, where we are really nurturing each other. We are finding ways to have networks of protection for communities who are especially under direct attack—trans folks, LGBT folks, immigrants, people who need access to affordable health care… How are we both a community of resistance and a community of sanctuary, care and protection?
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> And then the third thing is: How are we also a community of possibility and imagination? How are we nurturing seeds of what we want to grow? If we're just resisting, if we're just fighting, we can't build from that position…. How are we dreaming the future we need?[4]

Resistance – Sanctuary – Imagination

Such clear guidance about how we might proceed as a community of faith in a devastating time.

There are a lot of ways this could look, a lot of ways we could expand the welcome of First Parish, expand our capacity to shelter and protect each other and those outside our community. On an interpersonal level, we can expand our capacity to know and be known here in the fullness of our livesso that we can welcome the tenderest parts of ourselves, the parts that need refuge and healing to carry on.

And there are so many ways we might resist, so many ways members of this congregation already do: I'm inspired by people at First Parish who engage in thoughtful strategic protests to diminish ICE deportations through Hanscom Field, those of you who gather for standouts on the green to proclaim there will be No Kings in America, reminding our neighbors that they are not alone in their commitment to the rule of law in the United States, inspired by the beekeepers among us, who support the resilience of our local ecology by caring for pollinators, by the gifted cohort of Communications volunteers who get the word out about justice-making opportunities, crafting posters, designing content for the web. I have been a dedicated voter for years—in Presidential election years and mid-term years, in primaries and special election. When I arrive at the polls, there are almost always Unitarian Universalists behind the tables, greeting people and carefully ticking off names. And UUs in this congregation and beyond have written post cards, made calls, and knocked doors, encouraging our neighbors to vote.

In just a few weeks, this congregation will host an Activism That Works workshop, arranged by Kate Holland, our wonderful Director of Lifespan Religious Exploration. The goal of the

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[4] From *The Growing Edge* podcast with Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, Palker Palmer & Carrie Newcomer, June 2025.

workshop is to help skill us all up in the arts of resistance and community-building. I'll be there! I hope you will come, too, or invite your friends. This will be an in-person gathering. If you're unable to come, we'll find a way to share out information. Please be on the lookout for a recap in a future Unitarian. This is one way to make the program accessible to the broader community of First Parish.

The Podcast on which Susan Frederick-Gray was a guest is called *The Growing Edge*, a wonderful and provocative name.

Which of these areas—Resistance, Sanctuary, Imagination—is most comfortable for you? Which represents a growing edge? I encourage you to explore that question for yourself and lean into opportunities to expand your growing edge as you contemplate how to be in the world right now, how to get in some good trouble.

This is how we will claim our power and our voice, make a difference in the world, and hold one another in care.

We hold fast to three purposes in our work for justice: Resistance, Sanctuary, Imagination.

We cultivate habits of the heart, the chutzpah and humility, remembering that we're all in this together, that our personal voice and integrity are powerful intruments of change, and that democracy is birthed and re-birthed in community.

We carry on, knowing the struggle includes wins and losses. It is not the struggle of a day, a week, or a year, but the struggle of a lifetime, even generations

If we do these things, whatever projects we take on will bless the world, and we will leverage our power to build beloved community in which people of all kinds can thrive.

Let's take some risks together, First Parish, on behalf of the world we love. Let's get into some good trouble.

May it be so.

Amen