In late May last year, a local activist who attends one of Needham’s synagogues contacted me to see if I’d be interested in working with her on a “Stop the Bans” protest in downtown Needham, part of a nationwide effort to rally for reproductive rights and abortion access in the United States. I was honored to be asked, and she and I and Representative Denise Garlick and about a hundred other Needhamites ended up on the Town Common to chant, share stories, and commit to advocacy for Massachusetts’s ROE Act, which Sally and a team of First Parishioners has continued to work on.

It was a memorable afternoon, but a couple of interactions wholly unrelated to the event stick out in my mind. When I arrived at the event, both that local activist — again, not a member of our congregation — and a member of our congregation approached me just before we began the protest to ask if it really was me who emailed them asking for gift cards.

Now, our administrator Susanna had received scam emails from “me” before, and was able to recognize they weren’t legitimate. That scam was easy to unravel — a scammer would steal my photograph and name from our church website, make a random email account and attach my name and picture to it, and email Susanna, whose contact information was also gleaned from our website. But never had a congregant or community member been contacted by a fake “me” asking for money. I’m still not quite sure how that happened.

But, this email scam for gift cards is happening to Unitarian Universalists all over the country. First Parish’s former intern, Rev. Christian Schmidt, wrote for the UU World magazine last summer that UU congregations across the country were reporting a near identical scam: “A scammer creates an email account similar to the minister’s account, by adding one letter or exchanging the domain of the church ([e.g.,] @church.org) for a different one ([e.g.,] @gmail.com). They then send a sympathetic plea to church members, supposedly from the minister, seeking help for a person, often saying that person has an illness like cancer. The scammers request that the receiver buy Google Play gift cards (or other similar products) and send the code on the back via email. Once that is done, the scammer can access the money and it is difficult, if not impossible, to trace.” As one UU minister said in the article, “This [scammer] was capitalizing on the trust I’ve established with congregants.”
Email scammers can be very convincing, but they are a little easier to suss out than other scammers. We’ve heard in the news about ordinary folks being defrauded through Ponzi and pyramid schemes, and about corruption in major financial and government institutions.

And then, there are the prophetic scammers. I mean the kind of folks who claim they have a unique vision for the future of our local community or the world, and a pathway to get to that vision — but their vision is faulty, exclusive, violent — or, they’re only looking out for their own bottom line, like any other financial scammer.

Perhaps some of you remember the scandal with Christian radio broadcaster Harold Camping, who told listeners that the Rapture would occur in May 2011, and then the end of the world that October. People who believed in him donated thousands upon thousands of dollars to a Rapture advertising campaign, and spent the rest of their life savings on bucket list items and adventures, convinced Camping’s prediction was correct and they wouldn’t need any money after May 2011. It was ruinous for those believers.

If you get an email from me that doesn’t sound like me, you can easily double-check the email address, or you can call the office or my cell phone to confirm the message. But, what is the process of determining who’s a false prophet?

On Martin Luther King Sunday, we are gifted the opportunity to remember Dr. King’s radical vision of a United States divested from what he called our “three major evils”: racism, war, and poverty. But, we must remember that Dr. King and his vision were deeply unpopular during his lifetime. Gallup found that while in 2011, 94 percent of Americans had a favorable opinion of Dr. King, only 45 percent of Americans did in 1965… And his “favorability numbers” went down to 33 percent in 1966, after he gave his first speeches about economic justice and against the Vietnam War.

I’m reminded of this popular quote in our hymnal from twentieth-century Euro-American U/U minister, Rev. Clinton Lee Scott: “Grandchildren of those who stoned the prophet sometimes gather up the stones to build the prophet’s monument. Always it is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision.”

Many Americans thought Dr. King was a false prophet, that his vision of America was self-serving and would lead to the country’s ruin. We know from Dr. King’s biographies and testimony from his closest friends and allies that
while he kept a strong public face for the sake of the Movement, the pressure and threats from those who opposed his vision sometimes did make him despair and question whether he was doing the right thing.

Dr. King was extremely well-educated in theology at our local Boston University — he got deep enough into the subject to be acquainted even with nineteenth-century Unitarians like Theodore Parker and Universalists like Adin Ballou — and his day-to-day and week-to-week inspiration and courage came from the Christian Bible, as one would expect from a Baptist preacher. So, I found it very interesting to refresh a bit on what the Bible itself has to say about identifying false prophets, given that the Jewish scriptures contain whole books attributed to prophets and the Christian scriptures center on the prophet Jesus, who was denounced as a fraud and troublemaker by much of his local community in Roman-occupied Palestine.

In the Book of Deuteronomy [13 and 18], the Israelites are warned against any self-proclaimed prophet who can practice magical signs, but entices them to abandon the basic commandments of their faith.

In the Book of Jeremiah [23], God says to the eponymous prophet:

“In the prophets of Samaria
    I saw a disgusting thing:
they prophesied by Baal
     and led my people Israel astray.
But in the prophets of Jerusalem
    I have seen a more shocking thing:
they commit adultery and walk in lies.”

Even Jesus himself had guidance about how to determine if someone was a false prophet. In his Sermon on the Mount, he said, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit… Thus you will know them by their fruits” [Matthew 7].

This ancient scriptural wisdom gives us pretty good advice: You might suspect that someone is a false prophet if they tell you to do something that goes against your basic morals, or if they themselves are doing something that’s against their proclaimed morals. You might suspect that someone is a false
prophet “by their fruits” — by what results from their words and vision. One
of our prominent twentieth-century Unitarian/Universalist theologians, James
Luther Adams, expanded this concept that we can know people by their
“groups” — with whom does a person choose to affiliate? Are we encouraged
by the fruits of their work, are we encouraged by the groups with which they
partner?

In the secular world, this is similar to how experts say that you can spot a con
artist. In one list published by the Better Business Bureau, it reminds us that
con artists are often trying to sell us something they can’t fully explain, but will
take a lot of money and urgent action from us to get; that con artists make
themselves hard for us to find, so we can’t investigate their fruits or their
groups; that they draw out of us our worst qualities of “greed, fear, and
insecurity,” leading us away from our convictions and values in pursuit of their
big, and fake, promises.

So we know what flaws a false prophet and con artist demonstrate: dishonesty,
selfishness, and unreliability. How might we know a true prophet, someone
worthy of our attention and commitment?

Of course, we can look for the opposite traits of a false prophet: true prophets
are compassionate, generous, honest, and consistent; they challenge us to
become our best selves, most aligned with our highest values; they bear good
fruits and affiliate with like-hearted groups; and, when they speak of their
vision for a better world, we can see that their vision is full of genuine love,
peace, and equality for all beings, as our Unitarian Universalist values tell us is
our hope for the future. While we must take some caution with who we choose
to follow, at least avoiding making idols or saints out of our leaders and
neighbors — we also ought not let distrust prevent us from following an
visionary and participating together in collective action for justice.

And, while Dr. King was affiliated with secular community organizations, his
leadership and passion remained in the church and in ecumenical and interfaith
groups. As we heard in our reading, Dr. King believed that the church was the
conscience of the nation — not its master or its servant. In that sermon, he was
directly comparing the American church to churches in other countries that are
part of the national government’s structure. He saw an opportunity for
religious people in the United States to be bold and follow the prophets of our
time, in a way that state-funded and –run churches cannot. Dr. King saw us
individually and collectively like the prophets of the Jewish scriptures —
speaking to the nation and its leaders, but not bound to the political world ourselves.

I want to return to the words of Dr. King we heard in our reading: “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause [people] everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of [hu]mankind and fire the souls of [humanity], imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace.” And then, Dr. King went on to say that the faith communities receive visitors “knocking at midnight,” desperate for the real prophetic power a faith community can have, if we can follow our collective conscience against the “deadening status quo.”

One of the purposes of progressive faith traditions such as our own is to provide immediate comfort to those struggling and suffering, and to shore up our courage and conviction to advocate for big changes in the “status quo” — to curb future struggles and suffering for ourselves and in the wider community. Our Commonwealth, country, and world need dedicated and principled leaders and followers to engage in the larger work of “bending the moral arc of the universe,” as Dr. King would say, quoting that 1800’s Unitarian preacher, Theodore Parker, he learned about at Boston University. May we be wise to wolves in sheep’s clothing in all aspects in our lives, yet generous in joining in body and spirit with modern day prophets who help us imagine the world that could be. Blessed be, and amen.