

What Would UU Do? The Power and Promise of Covenant
Kitsap UU Fellowship, January 13, 2008

Chalice Lighting

The Rev. Jack Mendelsohn

We stand together, with wounds to heal.
We share the pain of life.
We proclaim together the blessings of compassionate community.
We rejoice together in the redemptive possibilities of caring and responding.
We covenant together to share, to proclaim, to rejoice, and to redeem;
And thus to create new life within our common existence.

Meditation

Let us enter together now into a time of meditation or prayer.

The word "religion" comes from the Latin, "re-ligare,"
meaning to re-connect.
So in this time set aside from the rest of the week,
Let us relax into the embrace of this community.
Let us rest in the interdependent web of all existence.

In the quiet, let an awareness of the spirit of life
seep into your body,
sink into your bones.
The lines we draw that separate the Self
from the whole
are real, but they are not the only truth.

We are touched by all of life.
We touch all of life.
Like the moon, love acts on our minds and hearts,
now pushing, now pulling us toward healing and wholeness and joy.
Life ebbs and flows freely not just around us,
but within us.
We are a part of life.
Life is a part of us.

Look over creation,
Let your awareness transcend the boundaries of the self,
and say, "It is good."

Amen and blessed be

Readings

from the book One Hundred Years of Upstart Unitarianism in the Bible Belt by Robert C. Hardy, being an oral history of the Oklahoma City Unitarian Universalist Church written in 1991

The way (the Early American Puritans) knew they were God's people was that God told each of them personally. I am not kidding. Each of them believed that he or she had been called by God, which meant that each of them had an experience in which God told them that they were among the elect.

The church could handle it when a few strangers or even a few of their children were not called to election, but in a couple of generations, the experience of God telling you that you were saved became unusual. Oh, the children were not acting up. They were good enough. But suddenly, God seemed to stop telling teenagers that they were among the elect. He was telling only a few, but when those few, who did not appear any better than anyone else, started to assume authority over the rest of them, suspicion grew about whether God had actually told them anything.

So what did they do? They needed a new basis for membership in the church. So the Puritans wrote the Cambridge Platform. If you agreed to abide by it, you were in the church. *You* decided. Big change! Before, *God* told you that you were in the church, and now *you* decided. That was the covenant, *and if you did agree to it*, they called it "owning the covenant." Coming into the church was like coming into something valuable.

The essence of it was a pledge to walk together in the way of truth and peace. Those were the words they used: "To walk together in the way." Notice they were not talking about sitting down. They were talking about going somewhere. We call that "process" now.

We are their descendents. The idea of walking together, that is, having some kind of unfolding or development, and walking together within a covenant, which means a promise to walk in the same general direction, *is still what our church is*.

One version of our liberal covenant, offered by the Rev. Dr. Alice Blair Wesley in the fourth of her six Minns lectures on Covenant:

Though our knowledge is incomplete,
 our truth partial and our love uneven,
From our own experience and from
 the witness of our faith tradition
We believe
 that new light is ever waiting to break
 through individual hearts and minds
 to illumine the ways of humankind,
 that there is mutual strength
 in willing cooperation,
 and that the bonds of love keep open
 the gates of freedom.
Therefore we pledge
 to walk together in the ways
 of truth and affection
 as best we know them now
 or may learn them in days to come
That we and our children may be fulfilled
And that we may speak to the world
 with words and actions of peace and goodwill.

Sermon: Part I Our History of Covenant

Have any of you seen the movie "Evan Almighty?" In it, God (played by Morgan Freeman) turns freshman republican congressman Evan Baxter (played by Steve Carrell) into a modern day Noah. The movie works because the story of Noah, and the arc, the animals going two by two, the 40 days and 40 nights of rain, lives vividly in the cultural memory.

But do you remember what happens at the end of the story...and I mean the original story in Genesis? God puts a rainbow in the sky as a sign of the covenant. This is so important, the storyteller repeats it five times...The rainbow is a sign of the covenant, the promise, that God makes to the people, the earth, and all the plants and animals that "never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

The movie, Evan Almighty, has God coming back to help demonstrate to the folks in Washington, DC that while he may have promised never to create a flood to destroy the earth, we seem to be rather determined to do it ourselves.

So, the story of the arc introduces this religious concept of covenant, and it becomes a recurring theme throughout the old and new Testaments. The covenants God makes with the people, and the covenants the people make, in turn, with God.

The word, covenant, comes from the Latin "convenire" which meant to come together. The Latin evolved into the old french "convenir" which meant to agree. A covenant is different from a contract, says that great source of wisdom, Wikipedia, in that a contract is a two way agreement. A covenant is one way only. That's why, in its most familiar form—the marriage covenant—both parties getting married must recite their vows individually.

What does all of this have to do with Unitarian Universalists?

Well...in the aftermath of the Reformation, in England, a bunch of Protestants came to the realization that their religious and spiritual needs were not being well served by the priests chosen by the bishops who were in the pocket of the King. The King wanted docile and obedient subjects, and he made his desires known to the bishops, who passed the message on down. But a large group of people, many of them part of the growing middle class, didn't particularly want to be docile and obedient anymore. What's more, this wonderful invention, the printing press, made it possible for people to afford a copy of the bible.

Once folks began to read the bible on their own, they discovered that the message preached so faithfully by the establishment...of blind obedience and hierarchy...of sinful people who needed to do as they were told and pay large sums of money to the church in order to avoid burning in hell...well, it wasn't really in there quite that way.

Hmmm...interesting.

So a group of these people formed the Massachusetts Bay Company and set sail for the New World to create a Utopian society that was based in religious piety, but also religious freedom. We are the direct descendants of these intrepid souls.

We're not their only descendants. The Congregationalists, the Quakers, the Shakers and several theologically conservative faiths also sprung out of this free church tradition. The seeds of these wildly divergent faiths are in a document called "The Cambridge Platform," written in 1648.

It is 23 pages of old-fashioned, somewhat (in my opinion) overblown legalese, resembling, say, church by-laws, but the heart of the Cambridge platform is this:

Saints by calling must have a visible political union among themselves, or else they are not yet a particular church...as a body, a building, house, hands, eyes, feet and other members must be united or else (remaining separate) are not a body. Stones, timber, though squared, hewn and polished, are not a house until they are compacted and united: so saints or believers...are not a church unless orderly knit together...

This form is the visible covenant, agreement; or consent...

it is not faith in the heart, nor the profession of that faith, nor cohabitation, nor baptism....

yet we conceive the substance of it is kept where there is real agreement and consent of a company of faithful persons to meet constantly together in one congregation, for the public worship of God and their mutual edification.

Real agreement and consent. A choice to come together. A promise. Covenant.

It requires movement toward, and engagement with one another. It demands of us our presence and our patience. Most of all, it requires faithfulness to the spirit of love.

In a creedal church, it is the commonality of belief that provides the structure, the container, if you will. In our non-creedal tradition, without that commonality of belief, we rely on something else to hold us together, to set boundaries and limits that keep us safe and together but that don't shut anyone out.

We don't need to agree on what we believe if we promise to treat one another with care and respect. We don't need to agree on what we should do if we have promised that whatever we do, we will do it together.

The question to ask is not "what" but "how"...how do we practice our faith, practice being a diverse community, in ways that are life affirming and bring us peace and joy?

The first song in our hymnal puts it beautifully:

May nothing evil cross this door, and may ill fortune never pry about these windows;
may the roar and rain go by.

Peace shall walk softly through these rooms, touching our lips with holy wine,
till every casual corner blooms into a shrine...

and though these sheltering walls are thin, may they be strong to keep hate out
and hold love in.

Though we often have different answers to the same question, there is a commonality, a unity that underlies our diversity, that is sometime difficult to articulate...and that lives most often in the products of our conversations, the agreements that are thoughtfully and heart-fully negotiated.

This is from a sermon on Covenant by Marc Belletini

To make a covenant with each other, to pledge some specific commitment of behavior and shared approach, however brief, is to...take ourselves seriously as a community...as a powerful and rooted religious contribution to Western thought and practice; it's to point out that the reason that the ball whirling around at the end of the string does not go flying off into space *is because of the string connected to the center*, the centripetal force that makes for beloved community which is shelter and solace for our individual spiritual ways.

...It is a caricature...a very sad and pathetic caricature...to describe our religious way of life (as some of our critics do, I am afraid) as embracing anything and everything....Our martyrs did not burn in the fire...just so anyone could say that anything and everything is equally wonderful. James Reeb was shot, not because he thought racism was the same as anti-racism but rather, he thought that racism was wrong, and anti-racism was right. Susan B. Anthony did not go to Seneca Falls believing that misogyny was equal to gender equality.

No, our religious approach, despite its very real metaphysical ambiguities, has a center rooted in passionate reason, disciplined tolerance, responsible freedom, and unconditional love.

At the center of this community lives our shared hopes, our shared values, the loyalties we have to one another, the commitments we make in the quest for peace and justice and love.

The more clearly we understand and articulate those shared hopes, values, loyalties and commitments, the stronger the ties that keep us together--the stronger the walls that hold hate out and hold love in.

Responsive Reading # 591

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence;

That sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands.

It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority.

This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death as well as life.

I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship,

That protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom; that yearns to belong to the church universal.

It is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship.

It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.

The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing.

It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit 'that bloweth where it listeth...and maketh all things new.'

Sermon: Part II The Power and Promise of Covenant

The Rev. Dr. Alice Blaire Wesley asserts, "Strong, effective, lively liberal churches, capable of altering positively the direction of their whole society will be those liberal churches whose lay members can say clearly, individually and collectively, what are their own most important loyalties as church members."

What are your most important loyalties? What are our most important loyalties?

Human beings have complex networks of competing loyalties. When you encounter a wide variety of opinions and perspective on any given issue, it's a pretty good sign that you're touching on something that matters.

The work of sifting through those opinions and perspectives to discern common threads and recurring themes is an exercise in patience and openness. It requires that you take a learning stance...that you embody patience and curiosity and that you don't set your feet and stake your claim when the ground is still shifting. It's hard, because when we're uncertain, there's a tendency to want to cling to something stable. Unfortunately, more often than not,

what we grab on to turns out to be an illusion, or a symbol that, in our desperation, we mistake for the underlying truth.

This is what is wrong with our political system. Party loyalties, big donors, deal brokering and media consultants are short-circuiting the deliberative process that rests at the heart of democracy. Votes are bought and sold, traded, when what is meant to happen on the floor of the legislature, both state and national, is a process of debate and discernment.

That process...of debate and discernment...leads to the evolution of ideas. The responsibility for ensuring that the process continues belongs to us all...as do the insights we gain as individuals and as a group.

Let me tell you a story of conflicting loyalties, complexity, and the eventual gifts that come from patient engagement with an issue.

When the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged in 1961, the new Unitarian Universalist Association included in its bylaws this statement:

In accordance with these corporate purposes, the members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, dedicated to the principles of a free faith, unite in seeking:

1. To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of our religious fellowship;
2. To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man;
3. To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships;
4. To implement our vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice and peace;
5. To serve the needs of member churches and fellowships, to organize new churches and fellowships, and to extend and strengthen liberal religion;
6. To encourage cooperation with men of good will in every land.

In 1977, the first rumblings about the necessity for updating the principles began. Guess who started the conversation? (Women).

So, the language was updated, slightly. They substituted "humankind" for man, and encouraged cooperation with all people.

But the women, the female leaders, both lay, and clergy, decided...no, that's not really enough. They initiated a re-writing of the principles and brought before the General Assembly...our big national meeting...a revised version that changed "foundation of our religious fellowship" to "center of our religious community." More controversially, they removed the language about "Love to God and love to man...or humankind" and de-emphasized our Judeo-Christian heritage.

The uproar that followed was considerable. "The Unitarians are taking God out of the Principles!" UU Christians felt marginalized and disenfranchised. Denny Davidoff, who at that point was the president of the UU Women's Federation, controversially withdrew her support of the amendment and the assembly voted, instead to engage in a three year, grass-roots process to rework our principles.

It was painful and complicated. There were false starts and miscommunications. But the committee responsible for the re-write, ably led by the Rev. Walter Royal Jones, Jr., kept at it. The committee was formed to represent as much diversity as possible, with seven positions to fill. Lay and clergy, male and female, Christian and atheist and humanist and womanist, they solicited input from congregations and individuals nationwide, and then sifted through, and drafted, and edited, and proposed, and accepted feedback, and edited some more, and brought their work to the assembly, where additional changes and additions were made, and where, finally, the Principles and Purposes as we now know them were adopted by the people not as a creed, but as a confession of this new Unitarian Universalist faith, as a statement of the common values UU's share, as an articulation of our covenant...our loyalties...the things we value most.

Out of that clarity, out of that evolution of our ideas, our faith, came many of you. How many of you recognized you had found a spiritual home when you read the principles and purposes?

You see, we need to name what we stand for so that people can choose to stand with us. Our strength comes from our relationships, our connection, our commitment to common goals and values—even when our ways of living out that commitment vary dramatically.

On the national level, the Commission on Appraisal is embarking, again, on a process of debate and discernment around our principles and purposes. The chief complaint the se days is that in the 21st century we are used to sound bites, and professions of faith that we have to carry around on wallet cards aren't persuasive enough.

I'm not sure I agree. I think we lose a great deal if we try to oversimplify...but the beauty is that I don't have to agree. I have to commit to the conversation, in the spirit of love and with hope for the eventual realization of our dream of beloved community.

Here in this congregation, we are also embarking on a process of debate and discernment around the behavioral norms and the ways we choose to be together. The particulars of how the process will work are still to be fleshed out, but the motivation—the reason we need to do this work—is so that our congregation will become a stronger container.

We'll covenant to walk together with patience, forbearance, and in the spirit of love...or something like that. As individuals, we will brush up our skills for talking about things that matter, and reduce the feelings of anxiety that can grow when change and conflict are in the air. Change and conflict are both natural parts of healthy community, necessary prerequisites not just of growth, but of life. The covenant we make will define HOW we are together, so that we can be confident and secure, knowing that no matter what we do, say, think, discover, the spirit of love will carry us through.

We need to do this work before we can venture into the next stage of our own evolution, where we discuss and discern our priorities, our vision, and our particular identity as part of this local community. Once we have done that, once we can answer, clearly, both individually and collectively, what comprises our most important loyalties as church members, as human beings, as members and as creators of the beloved community, we will know what to do...and we will do it together.

So be it, and so may it be.