

Resources for Communities of Ongoing Religious Exploration

V. 2 Unit 5

Covenant

Suggested Chalice Lighting

To dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge in freedom, to serve human need, to the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine - thus do we covenant with each other and with God.

L.Griswold Williams

Introduction

We UU's frequently refer to ourselves as a covenantal, rather than creedal, tradition. It is easily understood that our core principles are not bound to theological belief (creed). Further, we understand that locating covenant as central to our identity means that being UU has something to do with mutual agreement to abide together in love. Equating covenant with contract or promise diminishes the religious power of our practice of covenant, and the religious meaning of membership as life in covenant. The idea has been weakened in part by the various ways the word is used in our current lexicon; homeowners association covenants are one clear example of the word taking on legalistic and restrictive meaning that lacks any of the liberative, community-building and love-affirming meaning that covenant has in UU tradition. The ancient scriptural use of the term is another possible reason that we often associate covenantal relationship with enforced uniformity or legalistic restrictions.

When Puritan immigrants arrived in North America, covenant was essential to the order and discipline -- even the survival -- of their community. However, it was not just a practical matter. Covenant was a way of voluntarily, faithfully, and wholeheartedly binding themselves to each other as a profoundly religious practice. It recognized their mutual dependence as a reality, but it also elevated mutual dependence as a bond of sacred connection and an expression of their dependence upon God. As each congregation was formed, it began with the act of covenant. It was, and is, a sacramental act of trust and fidelity.

Readings

Now the only way to avoid . . . shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. . . . [W]e must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our

eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

John Winthrop, 1630

The Five Major Ingredients of Covenant

1. Human beings, individually and collectively, become human by making commitment, by making promise... The human being is the promise maker, the commitment maker.
2. The covenant is a covenant of being. It is a covenant with the creative, sustaining, commanding judging transforming powers which may be interpreted theistically or humanistically. In a religious covenant the orientation is to something we cannot control but something upon which we depend – even for our freedom.
3. The covenant is for the individual as well as the collective. The individual is brought out of separateness into covenant. We are responsible for individual behavior but also for the character of society.
4. The covenant responsibility is especially directed toward the deprived, whether these be people suffering from neglect and injustice or those who are caught in the system that suppresses them – that suppresses their own self-determination.
5. The covenant includes a rule of law, but it is not fundamentally a legal covenant. It depends upon faithfulness, and faithfulness is nerved by loyalty, by love. Violation of the covenant is a violation of trust. Ultimately the ground of faithfulness is the divine or human love that will not let us go. Here we see the theological basis for accountability, by persons and by the church. This may be the fundamental intellectual agenda for today: a doctrine of the covenant whether it be given that name or not.

James Luther Adams, 1986

[JLA's] classes always had one paramount theme, which I summarize: Strong, effective, lively liberal churches, capable of altering positively sometimes 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**. Note: **Not** what are their beliefs, as in a creedal church. Rather, what are their shared, mutual **loyalties in a covenantal church...**

Show me the patterns of your church organization, and I'll show you what the people of the church find worthiest of their loyalty as churchpeople. Organization and theology are not two different things. Our organization **is a function of** our actual theology.

To join a free church is to sign a promise that may sound simple - it should sound simple - **but which, if you "keep covenant," brings you into intimate companionship with others who have promised to live with all the integrity you and they can together muster, in all the years of your lives.**

Alice Blair Wesley, 2000 (emphasis is author's)

In orthodox understanding of religious community, creeds like the Apostle's Creed define the center of the church. Theology "begins" with the nature of God because human nature is known (it is essentially depraved or sinful)...

In the Free Church understanding of religion, covenant is prominent. Theology "begins" with the question of human nature, because the nature of God is unknown, each individual having a different and uniquely direct relationship with God. The most important question is, "How do I treat my neighbor, that is, others?" When someone asks, "What does your church do for and in the world?" they are asking a question from a free religious, or liberal religious, view. It looks ahead to a future because truth unfolds. Its emphasis is on personal integrity and an individual's understanding of the religious, and on the development of an individual's faith. Consent is always operative and always shaping the individual because the freedom to explore and understand one's unique and direct relationship with God is the purpose and aim of spiritual community, of giving one's consent to walk with others. Therefore, the basis of a community is an individual's faithfulness to and with others during life, conceived of as a spiritual walk with others.

Brent Smith, 2000

Uniting in the common bonds of relationship rather than in obedience to a religious dogma is a distinguishing feature of Unitarian Universalism. Most Unitarian Universalists have experienced and know about the level of theological diversity engendered from the absence of creed and dogma—it can be breathtaking... Yet for some, theological free thinking, religious progressivism, and spiritual seeking are translated as acceptance, tolerance, or ignorance of behavior that can undermine, even harm, the religious and spiritual life of others and the well being of our institutions. While we can take pride in the theological differences that unite us, these differences aren't always the best foundation for building a strong institution; there must be something more...

When there are questions of professional misconduct, codes of professional practice and other guidelines are clear about how conduct unbecoming a professional should be addressed, and most of our church schools have safety policies that protect our children and youth and safeguard all participants. But when adult members, friends, and visitors act in ways that are inappropriate, disrespectful, or hurtful, what can we do? Most congregations have no clear context from which to respond to uncivil, inappropriate behavior or disagreements.

A covenant

- is a statement of agreement about how congregants choose to be in relationship with each other. When they live by these statements, they are modeling their Unitarian Universalist values for each other, their children, and the wider community.
- comprises promises, not rules. Unlike rules, promises are discussed, lived, broken, and renewed. Promises and commitments describe how we wish to live

together as a faith community, knowing that if these promises don't work, the congregation may choose to rewrite them.

- is a framework of expectations. Virtually every context we enter has behavior expectations. Our congregations should be no different; in fact, given the reason that we come together—to create a Beloved Community—clear expectations are vital.
- is about behavior, not personality. Behavior that encourages, nurtures, and supports our “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” is important to the life of the faith community, not the qualities that have shaped and show a person's character.
- offers an opportunity to explore and deepen our spirituality. Promises made to others in a faith community and the relationships that can form from such a practice can strengthen and broaden commitment in deliberate, intentional, and disciplined ways.

Fredric Muir, 2005

Questions for consideration and discussion

1. Do you think of covenant as a religious practice? Does it have a spiritual quality, or some spiritual aspect, for you? If not, can you imagine how it might?
2. What, if any, adjustments would you make to our existing congregational covenant to increase its meaning to your individual practice and/or the life of the congregation?
3. Does -- or can -- the practice of keeping covenant with others create or foster intimate connection as Wesley asserts? If you think that is possible, what conditions are necessary for that to happen?
4. Do the covenants you have encountered demonstrate the five characteristics that Adams says are necessary? If not, what has been missing? How is the character of the covenant altered if one of these criteria is not present?
5. Muir also lists five characteristics, but they are quite different. Muir's description was part of a handbook for creating covenants, and are intended as prescriptive rather than just descriptive. Does it seem like the covenants you have encountered were created with these principles in mind? What about our congregational covenant?
5. Muir sees covenants as a defense against, and a response to, unhealthy behaviors in congregational life. Are such disruptions inevitable? Do you think a covenant can help solve such a situation? What would that covenant entail -- and does our existing covenant meet those conditions?

Taking it home

As you travel through the interactions of your daily life, notice how all of your social encounters are built on covenants, spoken and unspoken. How do people know when to be silent or speak, when to avoid or make eye contact, where to stand in a waiting group or how to wait their turn? Consider what might happen if someone you encountered was unaware of, or unwilling to comply with, the behavioral boundaries of those covenants.

How much of these mutual understandings actually make practical sense, and how much is dictated by tradition or habit?

Notice your reaction when you encounter others who disregard the expected norms of behavior (turn signal or lane change etiquette, talking loudly in quiet settings, staring or not making eye contact in conversations, etc.).

In various situations, consider: Is there a reasonable expectation that you will have help available if you need it? If you see another in need of help you can offer safely, do you? Who created the covenant governing this situation, and what happens if it is broken?

Conclusion

Was the discussion interesting? Or did it get bogged down or off track? Did it feel relevant to your life and religious journey? How might you have approached the topic differently? Were there moments in which you felt uncomfortable? Confused? Anxious? Affirmed? Eager? Hopeful? Surprised? What other feelings did you encounter?

If people in the group would like, allow them to share these things, without interrogation or challenge.

Suggested Closing Words

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.

Alice Blair Wesley