

“The Power of Covenant”

October 10th, 2021

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“We talk a lot about covenants, but I’m never quite sure what we mean” - it’s a comment, a question, I’ve heard far more than once - it’s why I planned to do this service. Like atonement, covenant is a big lofty idea - a GRE type word that gets thrown around without necessarily clarifying the definition.

I put this service on the calendar in August as a placeholder to help address the covenantal wondering I’d been hearing. I was mid-move during General Assembly, our national UU conference, last June, so I didn’t know that our denomination had just released a four year long study on the topic of covenants. It wasn’t until I was clearing off my desk and trying to get organized for the new year that I realized someone had put this book on my desk. Thank you, whoever you were.

It’s the commission on appraisal report. They come out every few years - I have a stack of them on my bookshelf. The commission on appraisal is a group put together by our Unitarian Universalist Association that is tasked with studying issues key to Unitarian Universalism. Past reports have covered topics like theological diversity, class, membership, and now covenant.

As the commission on appraisal report states: “No single concept is more central to our faith understanding than being in covenant. It is at the core of our identity. It is how we try to build and sustain the Beloved Community. It is the foundation of our governance structures at all levels.”

No pressure - covenant is just the core of everything we are and do as Unitarian Universalist communities. So what is it?

Here’s how the commission defines it:

“A covenant is a mutual sacred promise between individuals or groups, to stay in relationship, care about each other, and work together in good faith.

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, we seek to raise the “we” above the “I” — the community above the individual.

As seekers, we willingly choose to love each other and stay in relationship over

and over, again and again. In this way, although we may break promises, by leaning into the transformational power of our faith, we can begin again in covenant to love.”

The word “covenant” originates in the Latin phrase “con venire” meaning “to go with.” As the commission writes, “it presupposes two or more parties who come together to make a contract or binding agreement, including promises, stipulations, privileges, and responsibilities.” Unlike a contract, which is made for a limited period of time, covenants endure across time.

The commission continues:

“Covenants typically are grounded in gifts, entrustments, events, or actions whereby persons become vulnerable to each other in a caring community. Covenantal responsibilities cannot be explicitly listed as contractual duties.” Unlike contracts, which are broken after one side violates the terms, “with a covenant, all parties agree to hold up their ends regardless of whether another keeps theirs. A violation of a covenant by one party breaks the covenant, but does not destroy it. The remaining covenantal parties have a responsibility to continue to do what was agreed to and to seek out a healing of the covenant.” (p. 19)

It is because of this that covenant is a powerful tool in transitions and in conflicts. It is the steady compass, that north star that keeps us on course when the tides begin to change and pull.

The commission points out that this is because covenants provide guidance in “distinguishing between behavior and individual worth. When we are all assumed to be of equal worth, it becomes possible to address behavior that appears to be out of covenant without attacking or compromising any individual’s worth. The power of accountability is that we are given the space to be more honest with each other.” (p. 8)

As we reflected a few weeks ago in our service on Yom Kippur, this accountability and honesty is what allows broken relationships to mend and heal.

And, as it is with forcing “so-called” forgiveness, the idea of covenant can be weaponized. We would be remiss if we didn’t acknowledge, especially as we look towards Indigenous People’s Day tomorrow, we would be remiss if we overlooked the fact that “European Christians used biblical covenant to justify slaughtering Indigenous peoples and stealing their land.” (p. 35)

True covenants “have accountability at their core” - it is the power of individuals coming together, accountable to the same promise, which makes us capable of being more together than we are on our own. It is a commitment to the fact of our interconnectedness, an acknowledgement that our interconnectedness is something sacred.

It is also an antidote to so many of our societal troubles, this enduring promise of mutual care. Can you imagine how our lives would be now if our country hadn’t been overtaken by the idea that wearing a mask somehow limits individual freedom?

The commission notes that, in April of 2016 there was a New York Times article titled “How Covenants Make Us,” which references the work of theologian Marcia Pally. The editorial said that “modern forces, including mass migration and the Internet, are encouraging individualism. The opportunities for greater individual choice are undermining the fabric of community and social bonds...This tendency toward greater individuality and autonomy can lead to a breakdown of society in the form of excessive competition, resource grabbing, political corruption and the like.” (4)

That sounds familiar, no?

There’s a lot of hand-wringing going on in the world of religion that Covid will be the end of churches, that no one will come back after all this time on zoom. And we as Unitarian Universalists can be so averse to even inviting people to church with us, because we fear they might think we’re forcing some creed on them.

But what if what we do here and what we are together is actually the antidote, the way we mend the social fabric. What if this community, bound in covenant, is where we practice being human together, where we recall our connectedness. What if our collective leap of faith is believing that how we live into our promises here helps with the great mending of the world.

A covenant is a mutual sacred promise between individuals or groups, to stay in relationship, care about each other, and work together in good faith. It is a mutual sacred promise that endures across time.

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