

COVENANT: BLESSED BE THE TIE THE BINDS

In the past few months we have been considering the elements of a community. Using the story of Nehemiah from the Hebrew Bible we talked about walls marking the boundaries of a community. We acknowledged that boundary-defining walls were important in helping us feel safe and identified with a particular group. But we also talked about the importance of having gates in those walls so they don't become a prison. Next we examined the concept of hospitality. Using the example of Disney we learned ways in which we could make people who came through our gates feel welcome and included into our community. Today let's assume that our community is so well-defined and hospitable that most of the people who come through our gates want to stay. There's an old hymn that goes, "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in human love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above." What is the tie – the mechanism -- that binds all us individuals into a beloved communities? How do we achieve the 'fellowship of kindred minds'? Today I would like to talk about the tie that binds – the Covenant -- the promise we made when we freely and responsibly made a decision to stay in this – or any - community.

This word, covenant, makes some Unitarian Universalists very nervous. Somehow they interpret it in the same vein as the words "creed", "dogma", "faith", or "belief". The response is usually, "I didn't join this church/congregation/fellowship/society to have someone tell me what to do." I think the confusion arises from the distinction between agreement on *what to believe* – a creed – and *how to behave* – a covenant. Referencing the Hebrew Bible's account of Moses' Covenant with God found in the book of Exodus, they will point out that horrible things have been done by communities who believe themselves to be the unique people of God, bound in a special, covenanted relationship with the Lord. The Jews are not the only people who have this understanding of themselves as 'chosen'. Several other world religions – Islam, Christianity, Shinto, and Sikhism, among them – have understood themselves to be 'chosen' by God and uniquely qualified to establish a godly society. In Buddhism the Sangha is a special community, distinguished by its discipline and devotion to the Dhamma and blessed by people who have attained the highest goal. "Happy is the unity of the Sangha. Happy is the discipline of the united ones.", exclaims the Dhammapada 194. So if the word, 'covenant' is understood to be an agreement between a supernatural being and 'chosen' people we can see that sometimes a covenant -- the tie that binds -- can be construed as a noose, strangling freedom of thought and tolerance for other seekers of truth and justice. And I will be the first to join the chorus of those who wish to have nothing to do with a covenant that pits one group of people over and above another.

But I want to emphasize the word "discipline" used in the Dhammapada. This is another unpopular word in these ill-mannered times. But discipline used in that context implies a statement of behavioral norms – a covenant. If you had just walked through a gate into a new community and been invited to stay wouldn't you want to know how you were expected to behave? This is what a Unitarian Universalist covenant statement is. It is a statement telling people how they want to be with one another. It set out the qualities that will sustain life together, and it contains the promises people make to one another.

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Unitarian Universalist covenants have a proud history. In fact, it's our history – more than anything else – that informs our covenants. The strands of the biblical covenant and the work of the Enlightenment thinkers were combined in our North American immigrant ancestors. Coming from a European context where people were not always allowed religious freedom, congregation founders wanted to create a way of living that was different and respectful of others. The early Unitarians and Universalists based their new congregations not on specified creeds but on means of covenants reminiscent of those of the biblical days. The organizing principle of such covenants was to make churches out of collections of individuals -- to establish community. So the Pilgrims in 1620 and the 20,000 or so Puritans who came here in the Great Migration of the 1630s were primarily concerned with a theology – not of beliefs, but of organization. They were reacting against being told what to believe and how to believe it just as Unitarian Universalists react today. But they did want to establish a way in which to develop a religious community of 'kindred minds'. The result was congregational polity. Congregational polity is that doctrine of the church that insists that each congregation is to be governed by its own members. But congregational polity is NOT the sole possession of any one congregation; Congregational polity is itself a shared understanding, agreement, and commitment – in a word, a covenant-- among various congregations; it presupposed their being in community and it furthers and sustains the actuality of that community.

How that was to be accomplished was laid out in a document called The Cambridge Platform of 1648. This is the foundational document of the way in which Unitarian Universalists are called to be together, so I think it's important that we have a look at it. And I'll move from delineating how congregations associate with each other to the Platform's specificity of how individuals behave within those associations.

The Cambridge Platform was a paradigm shift – a change from one way of being with each other to a different one, where the rules and regulations that governed interaction were substantially changed. This shift in behavior and consciousness was done with reliance upon what the framers -- ministers from Massachusetts and Connecticut -- understood to be God. Remember this was 1648. But these ministers also based their underlying assumptions in light of reason and the value of human life; a radical concept back in those days. I think it's instructive for us to hear their thoughts on the ways in which congregations are to be associated with each other. There are seven of them, and they may be found in their original language by consulting www.cambridgeplatform.com. In the interests of time – and mercy -- I'm going to paraphrase them.

First, all congregations are equal. Second, congregations consult with each other in matters relating to the health and welfare of the each congregation and by sharing experiences and the knowledge gained from those experiences. Does this sound like our clusters and districts and regions? Third, congregations are to help each other in resolving conflicts. The Platform even provides a procedure to help restore order and equilibrium. The fourth and fifth way we associate with each other is by recognizing that we are all members of the same tribe, regardless

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of our physical location, and that we can participate in tribal activities wherever we happen to be. Our snowbird population attests to the reality of this association.

Sixth, we associate in tangible support of time, talent, and treasure. If one congregation – or one individual -- is having difficulties, it's up to us to provide relief. Finally, Unitarian Universalists associate with each other in propagation. The 1648 language is poetic: *“as bees, when the hive is too full, issue forth by swarms, and are gathered into other hives, so the churches of Christ may do the same upon the like necessity and therein hold forth to them the right hand of fellowship, both in their gathering into a church and in the ordination of their officers.”* In twenty-first century language, if we get too big it's perfectly okay to go form another Unitarian Universalist community. I don't think our ancestors ever envisioned mega-churches.

These seven ways in Chapter 15 of the Cambridge Platform are clear on how groups – congregations – are to be in covenantal relationships. As for individual relationships, chapter four in the Platform asserts that the proper “form” of a church follows from loving your neighbor. That's it. So to join a church/fellowship/congregation/society is to enter into a covenant to walk with other members in the spirit of neighborly love. The goal of everything these gathered members do is mutual learning and teaching concerning the many and complex ways of love.

Please notice that there's nothing in the Cambridge Platform about WHAT to believe or HOW to express that belief. And nothing has changed in 350 or so years. Like the Cambridge Platform, a modern Unitarian Universalist covenant is a statement that tells people how they – how WE -- want to be with one another. The current phrase is Covenant of Right Relations and it sets out the qualities that will sustain our life together. This Covenant contains the promises we make to one another in religious community. This covenant can be found in our seven principles (is the number seven coincidental?) when “we covenant to affirm and promote...”

Covenants refer to promises – not rules. While we currently live in a world of rules that are often found in legal or assumed contracts, the language of covenant speaks of promises. Promises are vows made with the intention of keeping them. When a legal rule is broken, we seek compensation. We want a wrist to be slapped, a price to be paid. When a covenant is broken we seek understanding and recommitment. We want to know what went wrong. What are we having trouble with? How do we try again? (Next week I'll be talking about how to say I'm Sorry and we'll cover how to try again then.)

A covenant of right relations seeks to identify and, if necessary, negotiate changes in our behavior, not in our personalities or our values. It centers on the values that are held dear in community, and articulates those values and expectations so that people can feel safe. Back to the walls and the necessity for feeling safe. The covenant can also acknowledge the fact that our congregations generally are not something that we create but rather are something that we receive from those who have gone before, and something that we will leave for those who will follow. As the Reverend Rebecca Parker, president of our Starr King School for the Ministry,

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said, “We receive who we are before we choose who we will become. We inherit covenant before we create covenant. Covenant is, first-most, not a verbal agreement but a practice.” It is also not meant to sanction individuals or to force changed behavior on the people who annoy us. Rather, a covenant of right relations seeks behavior agreements to be shared and practiced by the whole group, or the whole congregation, which will help people live together, in and through their inevitable differences.

It is important to note that all congregations have covenants – ways in which it is acceptable to interact with one another. But not every congregation has an explicit written covenant. Making it explicit – have the statement created and written – makes the implied real. It then becomes a touchstone that people can refer to when times get testy in congregational life. I know that would never happen here. But in some other Unitarian Universalist congregations tempers get frayed or people get impatient with one another. In those times the covenant can be recalled to remind people of what they promised one another.

I’ve been reading a book by Alban Institute consultant Gilbert Rendle, called “Behavioral Covenants in Congregations.” Rendle quotes Dorothy Bass, the Director of the Valparaiso Project on Education and Formation of People in Faith. Bass said, “Part of the genius of congregations lie in their ability to express the particularity of a people.” The particularity of a people. But it’s not just congregations that express the particularity of a people – or to express it differently, to express the tribal norms. Most of us live our lives within the boundaries of those norms -- covenants – whether we call them that or not. If we drive a car we stop at stop lights. How cautiously we stop depends on our tribal norms. If we go to the grocery store we stand in line to pay for our purchases. How patiently we stand in line depends on our particularity. If we move into a private community we agree to abide by the norms of that community. If we don’t agree, we will find ourselves unwelcome. If we marry we covenant – we make certain promises about how we will regard each other. How we live in that covenant depends on tribal norms. In short, people or institutions have told us what to do – how to behave in a particular community – since birth. It’s called manners. And we’ve been passing along those manners – either implicitly or explicitly – to people who we allow to come through our boundary walls and to whom we offer a place at our table.

We have to have behavioral norms. How else would we know how to be together? Without manners how else will we feel safe? The religious community functions, among other things, to be a safe place. To be a sanctuary. If there are any antidotes to the meanness and selfishness in our current environment, we would expect to find them in congregations where people follow and share their faith. But the fact is that some congregations – and the people in them -- seem to have defaulted to the standards and the behaviors of the culture rather than claimed and followed the standards and behaviors of their own religious community. Covenants are ways in which we can reset the default.

Unitarian Universalism is post-graduate religion. It’s hard work. Lacking a central set of beliefs by which our community is defined, we – each of us individually and each congregation –

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needs to articulate the tie that binds us together. And we have a choice. The tie that binds can be a constricting – as death-making – as the traps and line rope wrapped around the whale. Or it can be as liberating – as life giving -- as the covenantal tie of understanding, agreement and commitment that bound the whale's rescue team.

Without the articulation of a covenant particular to this beloved UUFMC community, we default to our uncivil, intolerant culture. What will it be? What are we going to tell the people who have accepted our invitation to join this particular community? When they ask about expectations, what are we going to say?