

Covenant

A sermon offered by
The Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia
at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
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Just before the sound meditation this past Tuesday, I was talking with one of the folks who'd come for the event. She was exploring Atherton Hall and come across our poster of 100 historical Unitarians and Universalists. She said to me and E.V. that she'd thought that Unitarianism Universalism was a fairly new religion and she had no idea that we had been around for a while – centuries, in fact. The people on the poster impressed her and made her curious. Emerson, Thoreau, well – you check out the poster – it's an amazing catalogue of some of the famous people who have shaped the core and the history of our faith.

Now each one of you here is part of that inheritance and shaping our legacy. It's a spiritual legacy – beyond the remarkable accomplishments of the people on the poster – a legacy of the spirit – beyond beloved books, cool tv shows, famous essays, amazing medical discoveries, and even great edifices – our spiritual legacy is what we work on every day of our lives, when we're together and even when we are apart.

Over the next six weeks we're going to look closely at the architecture of our faith tradition and explore ways to strengthen it and our congregation as well. As we look together, you are going to get a better understanding of the foundation of our faith and how important every one of you really is to this ever-evolving faith.

I've been saying the word covenant often recently because of its profound importance to our faith. Today I'll reach back into history and then forward into contemporary science to uncover both its meaning and potential power in our lives.

In ancient scripture, covenant was at the heart of the religious experience. In those stories, which, for me are more symbolic than literal or historical, there was a God – whose name translates for me as “evolution, creation, catastrophe, the awesome reality of life and death, love and war, joy and suffering.” And this God had placed upon earth human beings so like unto that God that it made the other divine beings anxious – heck – human beings made God anxious. So God kept trying to set rules and discipline people when they broken the rules. God would get angry and demolish high towers, turn people to salt, and rain down upon humanity with such intensity that life had to begin anew. No matter how God tried, God would find that human beings were imperfect – would loose their way every way they could. Now, this God shouldn't have been surprised, much less irritated, by this – because God, Godself, was imperfect -- prone to moods, loneliness, insecurity. But still, God was irritated -- until one man, Abraham, came along and taught God some important lessons – some intentionally and some unintentionally.

When God wanted to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham argued passionately and got God's promise not to destroy those cities. When that promise was broken, God learned that the utter destruction of a group of people does not eradicate evil – only good can eradicate evil and God learned that argument and dialogue of some kind, should be a part of any good relationship – and it's particularly helpful when you listen to it.

When Abraham unquestioningly went to sacrifice his son Isaac because God had asked, God learned that there were more important things than unquestioning obedience. Finally, seeing that Abraham was both very good and honorable, and cruel and dishonest, God realized that deep relationship has to endure differences, foibles, learn to forgive, and repair itself.

The first great recorded covenant is between God and Abraham – a promise of loyalty, faithfulness, no matter what. The next few thousand years proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that humanity is not perfect.

If we jump forward quite a bit through time we can find a critical chapter in our history of covenant as we meet up with some of our spiritual ancestors at Plymouth. As the Reverend Alice Blair Wesley wrote: “it was those pilgrims who established the free church, its directions belonging to its own members. They didn’t join the church as consumers of a certain amount of “fellowship and intellectual stimulation” for which they paid a token 1% of their income! Rather, they bound themselves as individuals who understood their free fidelity to each other to be the means of nurturing the integrity of each and of realizing the promise of the peaceable Kingdom fulfilled among them.”

We have inherited no easy gift – but certainly one of the most meaningful. The gift of spiritual accountability in partnership with the gift of the free mind and spirit.

And from the time of the Pilgrim church to the present, our covenant has been and it to the faith community of companion explorers – a covenant to one another in the ongoing discovery and living out of the truth.

We are not a creedal faith – that is, we do not outline the precise vision of the transcendent, the sacred that you must hold to be part of this faith. But you must covenant to be faithful – we covenant to a firm foundation – that was aptly put by the Reverend James Vila Blake in the 19th century.

Love is the doctrine of this faith
 And service is its prayer
 To Dwell together in peace,
 To seek the truth in love
 And to help one another.

It was early in the nineteenth century, that the churches of what they called the standing order – the really old churches -- lost ground and the liberal Christians, who soon came to proudly call themselves Unitarians, won the historic Parish buildings. They were keeping covenant with one another and the truth; the religious conservatives had declared the revelation sealed and given up the covenant in favor of dogma. I believe that the parish churches went to those faithful to the first covenant.

For many years after this, our American society grew in the framework of covenant which was far beyond churches – it was in the bone and muscle of the new country itself. It was a covenant, which applied, tragically, only to white men who owned land. Through American History, the limits of the covenant have been challenged, tested, and stretched. By freed slaves and women and waves of immigrants. And these have been good changes that have helped that earliest covenant to fulfill its deeper and more consistent purpose.

But Covenants are held by people and only have the strength and truth that we give them. And Americans have had another deep story that has been wrestling with covenant – the story of the rugged frontier and the man to tame it – so the real fulfillment

of freedom and mutual support at the heart of the American covenant, has also been consistently threatened and weakened, sometimes in small ways and sometimes in large.

Here's a small way -- I remember back when people were proud of all kinds of work -- and they took pleasure and pride in the good quality of one another's work. At the same time, employers felt a keen sense of responsibility to their employees and to the quality of their lives. Now, the pressure is on to get everything as quickly and cheaply as possible and to have fewer workers to do more work at the lowest pay possible.

I believe that when the supreme court granted personhood to corporations it fully undermined the covenant meant to exist between free, seeking, and living souls -- working to live in partnership with all other seekers upon common ground.

Our once covenantal nation, has become, instead, contractual -- more easily broken -- a society of people looking for the loophole. Among neighbors, with craftspeople, certainly with politicians, there is a decreasing sense that we -- with all our differences -- are joined in common cause: a great society, that transcends or even honors differences of race, ethnicity, language, money, a shared project in democracy.

We have few covenants left. Marriage is one. Certainly it is a longing for the sacred ground of covenant that has pressed the national movement for equal marriage rights for same sex couples. There are countless numbers and centuries of couples of who have kept their covenants together in spite of bigotry and violence. The longing to have the courage of covenant recognized is a noble longing and, perhaps, one that could help lift up our whole society.

Anyway, as a minister, when I marry people, I ask them about their spiritual lives, what is sacred to each of them, and what values they share. I want to see what common ground they stand on that, along with their love and commitment, is what binds the two together -- what makes the covenant strong. There are three parties in the marriage covenant -- two hearts and one shared ground -- a deep good.

In any covenant, there are more than two parties --sometimes far more (look around this room) -- because, always, there is shared ground -- deep principle, abiding love, common purpose. Good covenant honors all parties -- lifts them from isolation to the remembrance of interdependence, from despair back to faith, makes all stronger.

But, even in marriage, the forgotten carton of milk to the forgotten anniversary, and worse -- even though a covenant is deep -- it will be broken at times. Because we are imperfect -- human -- our covenants are broken. It takes strength, faithfulness, and practice to keep a covenant -- It takes strength, faithfulness, and practice to repair a broken covenant -- but it's in the nature of covenant to call us back -- to repair the break -- heal the covenant -- to come back.

Because it is beyond doctrine, covenant is a spiritual practice. Being good humans and living our covenants of love and value takes practice. We have to strengthen our hearts, hold out our hands, keep our minds open and return again and again. We forgive and we may feel discourage -- but we do not despair. We simply come yet and again.

(sing Come, Come Whoever You Are)

Because they are broken and need repair, covenants take practice. We repeat ours each week but that's not the practice I mean. And you can't do covenant alone, so practice takes place in relationship.

We live in a contractual society that is always waiting and assessing the way that others – above and below us in hierarchies of power – fulfill or have violated and nullified their contract terms. It asks us to be there for ourselves – our families – if they're lucky – our friends – if they're luckier – or those who agree with us. It is small and tribal.

Covenant asks us into deeper relationship -- to have a clearer awareness of our impact on one another, on our need for one another.

The covenant, which we have inherited in this faith – an expanding, evolving covenant, can only be practiced in relationship. It is practiced in acts of generosity and sacrifice more than charity. The practice of covenant happens when you have a strong opinion, but you can, will, and do see beyond your opinion to the wisdom of the other person and let go. It happens when you prove your trustworthiness at the expense of your pride. Covenant takes practice because it takes you into risk –relationship is always a risk. Covenant takes practice because it's hard.

We need practice because, while deep connection and mutual dependence are native to us as human beings, after all the training and reinforcement into contractual living and rugged individualism it's changed our responses – rewired our neural patterns -- changed our brains. We are thinking animals -- absolutely -- but we also think along familiar mental channels. Old science told us that our brains become old dogs who can't learn new tricks -- a static set of circuits in the head – but it turns out that it's capable of change in response to a wide range of experience. This change happens in our synaptic gaps. In the firing of a new pattern that enable a new synaptic connection to begin to form that, at the same time, begins to enable a new connection of lives, hearts, spirits. Our brains are alive – they are changing all the time. What we hear can change us – when we hear the yearnings, suffering, voices of those around us – it can change our minds. What we see can change us – they say that a picture is worth a thousand words – we can be moved and transformed by what we see in such a way that we are never the same again. We can be changed by movement – through movement – dance, hugging, running, holding hands – we can be changed and connected to other people and therefore in new ways to ourselves. What we imagine can change us – because in the darkness of the night and dreams, in the ability we may have to imagine – to vision a future different from the present we can be changed. We can be changed by feeling – the first time we wept after loss, the moment of care laughter that interrupts and transforms depression into hope. We can be changed by almost every experience. And this change isn't a mental gymnastic – it happens also in the synapses of the nervous system.

I want to thank my colleague the Reverend Renee Ruchotzke for this picture and this perspective. I was inspired at General Assembly, by her presentations on Covenant. What I appreciate in this model of the brain is that, it reflects that, as we practice new habits, particularly very new ways of relating to the world – they cause new synapses to open and begin firing so that new habits begin to form, new associations, new strengths. So the brain changes, responses change – we change.

At the heart of this religious community is the legacy of a truly world-moving covenant: to venture together ... in the ways of the Spirit, with entire integrity. If we practice it – and it should be what we are here to do – it will fulfill our spirits, it will change our very beings and make us more and more capable of living the principles of this faith rather than merely moving in the isolating ideas of the commercial world. This

practice, will bring us closer together in a kinship we can hardly imagine – and it will give us the strength and vision to take that kinship into a world spinning out of control like a machine with a slipped gear, into conflict and isolation. Yes – we have to survive in that world – but, ultimately, it must be made more humane, and that will only happen when those bound in a spirit prophecy rather than profit are equipped to change it.

I was reminded of our covenant at an intensive with the Center for Courage and Renewal, started by the Quaker teacher Parker Palmer, this summer. They taught of Five Habits – for healthy spiritual and democratic communities with a focus on congregational life – but applying to our society as a whole. And it fit us to a T – so over the five weeks we are going to study these together. I believe that they will help us practice to make our covenant stronger than ever.

I'll share them with you here briefly.

Habit 1: An understanding that we're all in this together

Habit 2: An appreciation for the value of "otherness"

Habit 3: An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways

Habit 4: A sense of personal voice and agency

Habit 5: A capacity to create community

We'll explore and practice them together this fall and we will rise in spirit, in kinship, in solidarity, in compassion – we will grow personally and as a people together. We will live out more fully the legacy we have been given and we will become the next generation – the next poster of important Unitarian Universalists – the next generation of those precious souls who will pass the legacy on to the future – and, in the meantime, change the world around us.