

## **To Affirm and Reaffirm Our Covenant**

A sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist

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Today is day nine of the 30 days of love campaign. What's that? you ask. Well, it isn't like thirty days of Frilly hearts and high fructose corn syrup (though it doesn't rule out frilly hearts and sweets). This is a time dedicated to loving through acts of commitment, service, solidarity, and witness. Martin Luther King said "In the final analysis, love is not this sentimental something that we talk about. We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that we will be able to make of this old world a new world. Love is the only way."

So said Dr King and just so at the core of Unitarian Universalism is this power of love – a love that recognizes the precious worth and dignity in every person, a love that seeks to welcome those who have lived on, dreamt and stood at, been exiled to the margins, a love that seek to hear all voices, to bring justice and compassion to the farthest reaches of the world, a love for the truth, a love that seeks the spirit in the commonplace, and a love that sees in the roaring river, whispering leaf, and the movement of every creature our kin and our own joy. The power of love is the power of relationship – of connection – of belonging – and for us it is a belonging that is as large as the cosmos. And, in truth, we all want to belong and to matter. In the embrace of love and a knowledge of belonging we stand taller, stronger, firmer – like the oaks of righteousness in the hymn that we will sing later.

Perhaps it's just one of those hard-to-explain-away coincidences that this is the very time we, here at Countryside, have set aside for renewing our covenant here.

Back in September I preached a sermon on covenant – the meaning of the word and the meaning of the reality of covenant. I invite you to go on line and read it sometime. But, as a refresher – simply put – the word itself comes from the French *covenir* – which comes from the Latin *convenire* – to bind together, to come together. Our faith is a one of covenant rather than creed – which means that we are together not because we all believe the identical things – but because we have recognized something profoundly kindred in one another – something worthy of our faithfulness – something worthy of our commitment.

Oh – we know that people make all kinds of vows of faith and commitment all the time. These commitments can be tepid and weak, lacking vitality and breaking apart at the slightest stress – like the stereotyped young bride who runs out of the house after the first lover's quarrel and says she is going home to mother. The kind that wither from lack of care and attention – like the couple who fall out of love with one another. Or they can be alive, strong, deep, and unbreakable – which takes patience, firmness, time, attention, work.

We've been blessed this past year, because the state of Illinois going to allow same sex couples to enter into the legally sanctioned covenant of marriage. But I know that this has only come to pass because of the deeper covenants of love in couples who were together for close to 40 years, or more than 50, or 10, couples – who, in spite of the failure of the state to recognize their marriage – made and

remade their covenant every day – and every year. It came to pass because of the profound covenant of thousands of activists with those who love – a covenant made manifest in spite of derision, threats, hatred, and violence.

Covenant is powerful – meeting on a soul deep level is powerful. I remember the feeling of that promise the first time I looked into my daughter's face – I knew that I would be with her in heart and spirit for as long as I lived. When, as an infant she wouldn't stop crying when we were in the car, or when it became clear that her little infant ears hated the sound of my piano playing, I learned that even so strong a covenant as that one needed to be remade day after day.

And so it is that we have a need to look sometimes at our covenant together here – not simply the words – but the covenant beyond words. There is a need for us to revisit our being together, look into our hearts and minds, look at how we are engaged in this covenant. We all want to belong – not simply as one would belong to a club – but as you might belong to deep friends or the best of family. We want to matter to others and we want to have others who matter to us. Back in theological school we all had to read Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*. In conversation this week on another topic – the reverend Scot Giles reminded me of an idea from that book -- Sheilism – it's a term taken from the name of a young woman named Sheila whose religion was – well – this is how she put it. "My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilism. Just my own little voice. It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other." Sheila wasn't a church goer – not that it much matters. The key is that her faith was one lived and experienced in isolation and, largely, self-directed and self serving.

But we're here – each one of us – no matter how intrepidly individualistic we are – we're here because we want something more than Lois-ism or Dan-ism – or Bev-ism or Hilary-ism. We're here for meaning, affirmation, purpose, and growth in the embrace of beloved community. To belong.

Dr King made that expression popular – but it was first coined by Josiah Royce – the founder of The Fellowship of Reconciliation – an organization dedicated to peacemaking on all levels. King, himself, was a member of the Fellowship of reconciliation. Anyhow, Royce's idea was that the beloved community was the one in which – no matter differences of faith tradition, nationality, race, or idiosyncrasy – the people were united by common striving for truth, reality, and faithfulness to one another. He thought of it as a community that creates heaven here, a community that lives reconciled to one another, and to the highest expression of love. The creed of the beloved community is *simply* faithfulness to the largest and most active expression of love.

We yearn to belong.

We yearn to belong to something larger than our own private sphere

We yearn to belong to something larger than our own private sphere that can give us grounding in an uncertain world – something than can give us hope.

In fact, Royce called the beloved community a community of hope. It is not a community that looks and hopes for some reward nor hopes for a better life handed to them in this world or the next. It is a community of hope because it is the members of the community who take action to make hopes real, who are themselves the hope. Here we are the community of hope when we visit or feed one another in

times of sorrow or crisis, when we bring food for Journeys, pack meals at Feed my Starving Children, walk in the crop walk, when we sponsor an inclusive scouting troop, support Two L'il Fishes, when we reach out to and are inclusive of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people, when we provided the Making the Most of Our Money program, and sponsored the Immigrant Rights forum, the Marriage Equality forum, the play Defamation, when we traveled to Springfield to witness for marriage equality, hosted a box city to raise money to help the homeless, witnessed for affordable health care, when we became a Green Sanctuary.

In a community of hope – because you aren't waiting passively for some great hand to reach out and save you – you are, yourselves, the hands.

We are a community of hope because we do these things out of love – and it is love that casts out fear – as Dr King so often quoted. In a world in which rapid change has become the norm and storms of all kinds toss and threaten – a world of uncertainty – here, where we work, sometimes with steady and sometimes with trembling hands – we strive to create the certainty that only love can create – the certainty of love itself.

We unite to strengthen the bonds of kinship among all persons – that is an expression of the beloved community we say aloud each week. Our covenant reminds us. Just as it reminds us that our spiritual lives are deepened, our feelings of awe and reverence are increased – our tenderness toward all life is strengthened and we pursue the expression and expansion of the beloved community through worship, study, and service.

And we do this not because of the covenant on the wall – that's just the visible and spoken confession of the deeper covenant – the one we honor, live out, and remake day by day. We affirm and renew the covenant when we do modest yet essential things – like making coffee, greeting one another, setting up for a worship service, rearranging chairs, ushering people to seats and so many more small and yet essential things. We renew the covenant in visible and essential ways when we teach religious education classes, sing in the choir, play music for worship, help in the office, drag yet another gong to sound meditation, chair a working group, serve on the board or ministry council, or do committee work or so many other essential things that require gifts of your time, talent, and treasure.

The point is that everything we do here affirms, abandons, or violates our deep covenant. It has no existence without each person here. And though we each remake it every day – as every covenant is remade every day – today, in this time, in this season we take time to reflect, to reckon, to remember, to revisit, to rekindle, to refresh and to re-covenant with one another – to re-co-venant.

A key piece of this is to revisit what we give here – of our time, talent, and our treasure. Now this is by no means easy. People get queasy when we set about to talk of money, filthy lucre – but there is nothing filthy about it – nor should it be something so awkward to think about. Rem Stokes, member of this congregation put it this way in his newly published book, cultivating generosity, “We urgently need a better language that conveys the non-material aspects of money. Today, the market has usurped the language of money. It is characterized as materialistic, grubby, dirty, filthy, and the root of all evil. In its singularity, it is portrayed as a means of purchase, an agent of pleasure. But that doesn't capture the

bigger spirit. Shouldn't there be a leavening influence that broadens the concept of money into a means of help, an agent of goodness? Why should money be viewed primarily as a measure of wealth instead of a measure of generosity? How can we learn to project money onto a wider screen and see it in a broader context?"

I believe in this larger context – day to day – as I work with our assistant Minister of Lifelong Religious Education, the Reverend Colleen Vahey, as I plan worship with our music director Jeffrey Hamrick, when I turn to our Administrator, Laurie Lantz, I see clear ways that, rather than being lifeless and dangerous – money transforms into learning and growth for all ages, support in times of crisis, into music that creates community and lifts the spirit, into signs of inclusiveness, into the message of love, into the staff and ministerial guidance and support needed to make our programs come alive. Through our programs we transform money into food for the hungry, books for children, health care for homeless young people in Chicago, shelter from the cold, we transform money into hope. In our world money can be the root of all evil, but it can be the seed of all hope as well.

Yet money does carry some heavy baggage. Frankly – some of us are wealthy, some of us are poor, some of us eat out often and have fancy meals, some of us get our food from food banks, some of us live in large and beautiful houses and some of us live in small apartments in subsidized housing. We welcome that diversity. But it also means that when it's time to look at your pledge and your sense of commitment to this community and this faith it may bring some discomfort. For some it is the discomfort of wishing they could give more when they are already genuinely giving almost beyond their means. For others it may be the fear of being thought ungenerous when in fact, their generosity has outsized their resources. For others the discomfort may be that they are giving a small sum when they know they could give far more. For others the discomfort may be that they give a large sum – that still doesn't come close to what they might give if they were really giving according to their hopes and not their fears. Each year when you ask yourself about your pledge – you are reckoning again with your own means, your generosity, and commitment, and you are recovenanting with this faith and this congregation. It shouldn't be too easy – no relationship worth having is – but at the same time this is when you are giving your deepest hopes and yearnings wings to fly – for that, ultimately, is what we should be about here – making real the beloved community.

We do so much here that is worth sustaining and carrying forward – and yet I know that here in this room are even greater hopes and nobler dreams. I can name a few – but you can dream even more. We could be a center for intercultural connection and the building of a stronger and more welcoming northwest suburbs, we could host interfaith programs to build understanding and firmer common ground, provide a meaningful place for young people to gather and freely explore questions of meaning and faith after school without the pressure to convert or feel ashamed of their questions, we could have a weekly service in Spanish, partner with new local organizations to empower immigrants with the tools they need to settle in this diverse nation, take our Green Sanctuary to the next level and be a voice for sustainable business practice, for more local gardens, we could provide shelter with Pads, innovate new religious education programs that could give our children more skills for a changing world and a deeper sense of their own place in the shifting

cultural and spiritual landscape of our times, we could partner with one of the centuries old Unitarian Churches in Transylvania. Some of what we do here seems so ordinary – but it’s good to remember that here we believe that miracles are found in ordinary places. Hope is found in the ordinary and day to day. That is where the covenant is remade – where we recovenant. The covenant is that we will come together, stand together, stay together, work together in love. You know that when you stand with a friend you stand taller, stronger, firmer. When we covenant – come together it is just so and we become together – oaks of righteousness, pillars of a faith that can more and more powerfully transform lives. When we re-covenant we come together again and with more intention in the spirit of love that is the ground of our faith so that we do, as King said, discover “the redemptive power of love. And... discover that we will be able to make of this old world a new world.”

So I ask you think about this deep covenant and to make it again more fully than ever – so that your own heart and life, our shared heart and life, and our world are made new.