

# Covenanting Together

September 25, 2016

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Rev. Jane Thickstun

We are in the process of creating a congregational covenant. We are meeting after the service today for conversation about what we want to promise to each other; to talk about how we want to be with each other in religious community.

Why do we covenant with each other?

Our chalice lighting words today are spoken every Sunday in Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country. They go back to the 1800's in our Unitarian past, and they speak of our great covenant: "to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another."

This church is anchored in the free faith tradition, descended from congregations established by New England Puritans almost 400 years ago. This free faith tradition was—and is—all about walking together in the ways of our highest principles, or in the presence of God, as it was described in the Salem Covenant of 1629.

A similar covenant was expressed a year later by John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts, addressing a group of Puritan immigrants on their way to New England aboard a ship called "Arabella:"

"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. ...We 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, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace..."

Here is a group of immigrants coming from England to this new world for the sake of religious freedom. They were persecuted in England for trying to reform the church, which they believed had too much structure and hierarchy. They left and came to this wilderness because they believed the church should be a voluntary institution, held together by the covenant they made with each other, not by bishops or kings or any external authority. They believed, as we still do, that people don't need layers of hierarchy between themselves and the divine. But they knew that they were not on their own either. They had each other. And the only way to avoid shipwreck and provide for their future would be to look after each other.

In the words of my colleague, Victoria Safford, "Despite their stone-cold reputation, their caricatured intolerance, these were people who promised to bear each other's burdens as their own, to subvert their separate, private interests, their "superfluities," for the public good of all.

Humbly, gently, patiently, they would serve a vision larger than any single eye could see; they would hold a larger hope. And no one would compel them. They would be a voluntary church.”

As Unitarian Universalists, we are the heirs of the those hard-headed idealists who came to the New World, came to Massachusetts, to set up a new church, a new way of doing church that would be free. Actually, it was a vision of a church that was based in the original Christian churches, before hierarchies, before bishops, before episcopals, before presbyteries, and other forms of church authority that had been developed since. Our religious forebears had a vision of a free church, where all those who belong are there by free association, where all who belong are there because they choose to commit to something greater than themselves that claims their allegiance. A church where there is no hierarchy; no greater authority than the congregation, where congregations themselves relate to each other by free association.

These are our religious ancestors. This is our heritage as Unitarian Universalists. We covenant together because that who we are and what we are. It’s not what you believe, but how. It’s how we carry our bag, not what’s in it.

Why do we covenant with each other?

Because we don’t have a creed—because we won’t, on principle, have a creed—we need a covenant. We are not joined together by common belief; what holds us together is our covenant to walk together in love.

The metaphor of walking together that goes back to our earliest forebears is difficult today, as we want to be inclusive of those who can’t walk for one reason or another. Sometimes I talk of covenant as how we want to BE with each other, but that loses the directional idea that we are going someplace together. And that is an important aspect. As a congregation, we don’t exist for ourselves alone; rather we come together to make a difference in the world.

Covenant is the glue that holds us together. Covenant is the glue of commitment that transforms us from a collection of individuals into one strong body. We are joined together in covenant to each other here in this First Unitarian Society of Ithaca, and our congregation is joined in covenant to all the other congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association. We are joined in the commitment of covenant that expands our small selves into a body that extends across the country, even across the globe. Together we are large and powerful and we can do great things to achieve more justice, more love in this fragile, troubled world we inhabit.

And we are connected not just in the present, but across time as well. Our tradition goes back, not just the 400 years to our Puritan forebears, but through them to the Reformation of Christianity in Europe, to the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, to the early church that formed around the teachings of the man named Jesus of Nazareth, and through him we are connected to the Jewish tradition he belonged to. And just as our tradition goes back, back in time—centuries, millenia—so it will continue into the future as well.

Safford describes the history of our faith as a river, with streams that contribute. And each stream that flows in contributes something. She says, “Whenever someone joins here, signs their name

into the book, it's not as if their story (your story, the little stream that is your story) is washed away in the great current. Rather, the course of the whole river, the direction and flow of our church here and of our whole tradition, changes just a little, simply by your coming. You affect how it will go, how we will go. This history is lively, living water, made holy by your presence. There is a sense here – there is assurance - that the questions you carry, and the answers you've honed over all your years of living, are a kind of sacred text. And in a house like this, they meet and are expanded by the questions and the answers of other people, those present, and those gone before, those whose voices we hear in music and in poetry. You honor them, they honor you, by listening, and thus we are transformed: we become part of something larger than ourselves, a larger story.

Why do we covenant with each other?

Ultimately, we covenant together for love. We gather as a community to learn from each other how to love: how to love the best that is in us, and in others; how to love the earth and to care for it and for each other. We commit ourselves to engaging with each other in this community because we know that it is through our commitments that we find and express our freedom. Only a free human being can truly love, and only in loving can we be truly free.

James Luther Adams, the prominent UU theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, addresses this: “We freely commit ourselves to high and holy aims, aims that transcend us, aims of the Spirit. Not in freedom from obligations to others, but in freedom to enter into common endeavors for the common good. Not in freedom from the nourishing roots of our faith in ancient ages, but in freedom to give fresh interpretation to ancient symbols and stories. Not in freedom from being called to aims that surpass us, but in the freedom that springs from knowing that “we’ve caught a moving train” and, together, we’re on our way.” (Herz, p. 105)

Together, we're on our way. This congregation is doing exciting things and is preparing a structure to allow more visioning, more engagement, more love to be spread to more corners of our world. We are taking a stand for racial justice, educating and transforming perspectives and attitudes. We are asking important questions about how we want to move forward; I'll let the Board tell you more about that next week.

We're on our way.

So why do we covenant with each other?

Because our church is a free church, it is our covenants that bind us together. Because we have no doctrine, no creed, and because we have no ecclesiastical hierarchy, we need to be explicit ourselves about why we gather, what we expect to do together. Liberal religion is not defined by belief; it is a spirit and a process, a way of being, a way of holding our bag. Because of this our faith communities exist only by our free choice – by our promises to walk together, our sacred covenant to commit to each other and to the faith that affirms our freedom.

Let us, as a community, as a congregation in the free church tradition, as the inheritors of the Pilgrim's vision – let us pledge to walk together in the spirit of mutual love. Join us after the service to help create the covenant that will make explicit our implicit commitments as members

of the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca.