

“Thus Do We Covenant”

Message delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval (all ages service)

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

September 30, 2018

Video

Unitarian Universalist Covenant: What Do We Promise One Another? (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmZLK2bEh6Q>)

Message

Liza mentioned earlier in our story for all ages that just last week our children took another look at their covenant for their spiritual exploration time together. Together, they decided what promises or commitments they wanted to make to one another and to Liza and the adult volunteers.

This kind of process is likely familiar to most of us here. Whether you’ve been part of a small group with small group ministry or served on a committee or participated in some kind of program here at the church, covenant-making is a very common practice.

That practice of covenant-making as it happens in our small groups of adults and children looks a lot like the covenant-making that those folks did in Dedham three hundred and eighty years ago. We take turns speaking. We listen thoughtfully to one another. We decide together what our commitments are.

Our Executive Team was looking at our covenant again as we began this new church year. We decided that the covenant looked good and we could re-commit to it with just one small change - moving the last item, “have fun and laugh whenever possible,” to the top of the list.

We, human beings, are promise-makers, promise-breakers, and promise-renewers.

Every week as we gather for worship there are promises that we renew when we say the words “thus do we covenant.”

The affirmation included in our order of service that begins, “Love is the doctrine of this church...” states these promises in the form of aspirations, or hopes for our community. It is an adaptation of a covenant published by the Universalist minister L. Griswold Williams in 1933. Williams served congregations in Pennsylvania and New York and just down the road in Barre, Vermont from 1931-1941.

An affirmation like the one that is part of our worship service is said in many Unitarian Universalist congregations all across the country and world.

A very similar covenant was written by James Vila Blake, a Unitarian minister, while he served the Unitarian Church of Evanston, Illinois in the late 19th century. That covenant goes like this: “Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.”

There are a lot of similarities between these two covenants. And, in Unitarian Universalist worship services, you can hear a large variety of adaptations and versions of these two covenants spoken every week.

The way these covenants have been introduced to different congregations also varies. In some congregations, the affirmation was written entirely by and decided upon by the congregation. In some congregations, it was introduced into worship by the minister or a committee.

Here at UCM, the idea to include an affirmation in the worship service was introduced by a former minister who first shared the idea with UCM’s Worship & Arts Committee who thought it was a good idea to give it a try.

Now, several years later, it is a regular part of our worship service. I know that it is a meaningful part of our service for people of all ages. It was very meaningful to me last year when one of our graduating high school youth, Liam Mears, shared in his Bridging Ceremony statement how significant the affirmation is to him and recited it in full. It clearly makes an impression on the young people growing up in this church.

While the exact words of covenant spoken in UU congregations week after week might have some differences, the essence is often very similar.

When we say the affirmation together here at our church, we affirm a set of aspirations and promises for this community that resonates with the hopes and commitments of other Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Our affirmation implicitly reminds us that we are connected and covenanted with other communities in our liberal faith tradition.

We also say nearly every week our mission statement which is also a kind of vow or promise or aspiration. The mission statement doesn't have the word "covenant" in it, but it is similar to a covenant in that it states how we want to be with the understanding that we won't always live out those aspirations, yet the words remind us of a vow to love one another and serve the world.

When we say the words of affirmation and of our mission statement each week, we do so, not to draw lines around belief and who can be part of this community or not - which is how saying a "creed" might work. Instead, we say these words to renew our vows and our hopes as a community.

In the coming weeks, the Covenant of Right Relations Task Force will be reaching out and inviting you to join in conversations about creating a congregational covenant. This covenant will be less about the vows we want to make to the world or to a sense of higher purpose, but it will be more of a behavioral covenant defining how you want to relate to one another and be together within this community.

In one of our Unitarian Universalist faith development programs for adults, they describe building a covenant like building a house. The foundation of the house and a covenant is the most solid part and everything is built on top of that. The foundation contains our most dearly held values and hopes. The walls of the house give it a defining shape. Similarly, a covenant provides boundaries and define the shape of the life we share together in community. A covenant provides a safe space for spiritual exploration and shelters us on our spiritual journeys just like a roof provides safety from the sun and from storms. And, a covenant also allows for freedom and for welcome - like the doors and windows of a house. You choose whether to enter and whether to leave and we are able to see out into the world and welcome others into our house.

The house, the community you all have built here over time is very solid in so many ways and especially in having that firm foundation - a defined sense of purpose - and with many doors and windows for people to come in and for this community to be in partnership with those outside of it. The work of creating a covenant of right relations will really be about giving the house more nuanced definition - shoring up those walls (and maybe even choosing the paint colors) that define how you engage with one another as a community.

We know that even in a community as loving and caring as this one there are sometimes disagreements. Just like in our families or in our classrooms, there is sometimes conflict and tension.

Our shared hope is that within this house we can set ourselves firmly upon those things we hold to be true and find shelter with one another in life's storms so that we can always be a place of welcome, a place of refuge, a place of justice and of peace.

So may it be.