

“Loving Better”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
September 16, 2018

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.

All sermons are property of Rev. Joan Javier-Duval and shall not be reproduced.

Readings

selection from Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing by Margaret Farley

“The history of civilization tends to be written in terms of human discoveries and inventions, wars, artistic creations, laws, forms of government, customs, the cultivation of land, and the conquering of seas. At the heart of this history, however, lies a sometimes hidden narrative of promises, pledges, oaths, compacts, committed beliefs, and projected visions. At the heart of any individual’s story, too, lies the tale of her or his commitments: wise or foolish, sustained or broken, fragmented or integrated into one whole.”

“The Great Need” by Hafez

Out
Of a great need
We are all holding hands
And climbing.
Not loving is a letting go.
Listen,
The terrain around here
Is
Far too
Dangerous
For
That.

Sermon

If you read my blog post in this week's e-news, you may be familiar with the story I am about to tell.

The story begins with my just-turned-fiancé and I sitting on the edge of our bed when he turns to me and says, "Let's spit on it."

I had just told my partner of then 4 years that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him.

"Are you saying you want to get married?" he asked me. I nodded, half disbelieving that I was in fact making this proclamation as I was pretty commitment-phobic at the time.

"Let's spit on it."

The "spit handshake" as a form of "sealing the deal" has been around a long time. It is to be invoked only in sacred moments as the Urban Dictionary entry makes clear.

We had no rings to exchange in the moment to signify our commitment, so this seemed like a good option.

We spat into our palms and pressed them together in a moment of solemnity. And then I quickly ran to the bathroom to wash my hand.

The Jewish theologian Martin Buber famously said that we, human beings, are the "promise-making, promise-breaking, promise-renewing" animal.

The promises we make and whether we keep them or break them and how we go about renewing them, largely define who we are and the shape of our lives.

The next three Sundays I will be sharing a sermon series of sorts on the theme of covenant and on these three aspects of being human: promise-making, promise-breaking, and promise-renewing.

Today, I will focus on what it means to be "promise makers" and why this is significant for us as Unitarian Universalists.

Last week, I said that Unitarian Universalism is not a faith of creeds but a faith of covenant. It is not a set of proscribed doctrines that bind us together but it is our shared commitments of how we aspire to be together that hold our communities together.

The origins of this emphasis on covenant go back hundreds and even thousands of years.

The roots of our understanding of our Unitarian Universalist faith as covenantal go back to biblical times. In the ancient Near East, covenant was originally a political term. Many communities had established covenants with the local king or ruler. In these covenants, a king would offer protection in exchange for loyalty and an annual payment. The covenant would be stored in a sacred place and taken out every year to be read aloud to the people.¹

Clearly, this was a very transactional type of covenant. The ancient Jewish people saw how corrupt leaders could become even with these types of agreements and they began to develop an understanding of themselves as having a covenantal relationship with a more powerful force than human rulers. This covenant was not with a human king, but with Yahweh, the Jewish God. The Hebrew Bible recounts the stories of how this covenant became established - from the story of Noah's ark to Abraham and Sarah to Moses and into the messages of the prophets. In this covenant, God promises to the Jewish people that God would protect them and lead them into a land all their own if the people obeyed God's laws and treated one another with care and respect.

Early Christian communities formed out of a splintered Jewish community now in large part under the rule of the Roman empire. When Jesus began to teach, he understood himself as coming from these same roots, and he saw that with people suffering under Roman rule a return to the law of Love was a necessary antidote to the brutality of living under imperial rule. The early Christian communities covenanted to worship together and to follow Jesus' teachings even after his death.

Fast-forwarding to the 17th century, our Puritan forebears established religious communities in New England that would eventually evolve into our original Unitarian congregations. These Puritan ancestors of ours set about creating free religious communities that were held together across differences and disagreements by a

¹ as described in Alice Blair Wesley Minns Lecture, "The Theology and Anthropology of our Liberal Covenant."

covenant to walk together and to hold one another up. Just like Jewish and early Christian ancestors, they developed this idea of what it means to be in covenant as a response to the corruption of power and authority that they experienced. In their view, the authority of religious community came not from a single religious leader (this was one of the main tenets of the Protestant Reformation) but from a shared commitment to upholding the spirit of mutual love. This commitment was one that anyone - lay person or ordained - could make.

Today, we have little in common theologically with our Puritan ancestors as our Unitarian Universalist theology has evolved in ways they probably couldn't have ever imagined. And, we can see that by today's standards, these early religious communities were not entirely democratic or inclusive. But, these religious ancestors of ours did establish the foundations for our way of governing and organizing ourselves as spiritual communities in this free, liberal religious tradition. It is a heritage and a history that has shaped us for hundreds of years and continues to today.

Within this rich, religious history of covenant is a very basic question that shapes the promises we make in this community and also in other aspects of our lives: ***Whose am I?***

Promise-making is not just a natural part of being human, it is a necessary part. To make a promise is to admit that I - or any one of us - cannot make it alone. That we depend upon others to fulfill our needs - material, emotional, and spiritual.

So, to acknowledge the covenants in our lives is to acknowledge that we are bound to others. That the question "who am I?" alone does not suffice, but instead, we must also ask "whose am I?" To whom do I belong. With whom am I bound?

The Quaker teacher Douglas Steer says it this way, "To ask 'Whose am I' is to extend the question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?"

The Jewish people answered, and continue to answer the question, Whose am I?, and more broadly, Whose are we? with, We are God's people. Christians answered, and continue to answer the question, Whose am I? with, I am bound to my neighbor who I

should treat as kin. And, in our tradition, we have continued to expand our understanding of Whose am I? with honoring our relationship with the Earth and all its creatures in addition to other human beings and, for some of us, a divine force.

On a personal level, each of us could answer the question, Whose am I? in very particular ways. If you were to make a diagram of all of the relationships you have, placing yourself in the middle and then extending those relationships out, I bet you could come up with dozens, maybe more. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, children, chosen family members, friends, mentors, mentees, neighbors, students, classmates, former classmates, members of your yoga class, or AA group, or writing workshop, people you run with or play bridge with...the list could go on and on.

Most, if not all, of these relationships hold in them a promise or commitment - whether implicit or explicit, assumed or acknowledged. With many people, these promises and commitments change over time. Like when my partner and I “spit on it” to mark the transition into a new phase of commitment in our relationship.

Or, the same could be said of a parenting relationship. If we think of the parent-child relationship, it is full of promise and commitment. Some of this is made explicit as in Unitarian Universalist child dedication ceremonies, but much of the covenantal relationship of a parent and child is left unspoken. Our common understanding is that from the moment a child is brought into a parent’s life, whether by birth or adoption or fostering, a parent makes a pledge to provide for the child as best the parent can - to provide the basic necessities for living as best one can - food and shelter - and to above all else provide the child love, nurturing, and support. This is a covenant that is hardly ever spoken aloud.

We also enter into explicit covenants - agreements that are spelled out clearly, perhaps even written out or spoken. For example, as part of my professional affiliation as a Unitarian Universalist minister who has received Fellowship from the Unitarian Universalist Association, I am a member of the UU Ministers Association. All members of that association agree to abide by a shared covenant. This covenant is written out. It is read aloud at ministerial gatherings. The covenant begins...

“United in our call to serve the spirit of love and justice through the vocation of ministry in the liberal religious tradition, we, the members of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, covenant with one another...”

I won't share all of the agreements, but these are just a few:

“To conduct ourselves with integrity, honoring the trust placed in us;
To seek justice and right relations according to our evolving collective wisdom, and to refrain from all abuse or exploitation;
To cultivate practices of deepening awareness, understanding, humility, and commitment to our ideals...”

Our covenant ends with:

“Through fidelity to this covenant and our Code of Professional Conduct, we aspire to grow in wholeness, and bring hope and healing to the world.”

It was an incredibly powerful moment when I first attended a collegial gathering and shared in saying this covenant aloud with hundreds of my colleagues.

It enlivened for me our shared calling and purpose as ministers and reminded me that I am never alone in fulfilling that call.

To covenant is to make alive a common purpose and mutual trust. When we covenant, we let the love we feel for others and for the guiding values of our lives become expressed in tangible ways.

To covenant is a solemn and serious act and yet, as Unitarian Universalist minister Victoria Stafford writes, “A covenant is not a contract. It is not made and signed and sealed once and for all...A covenant is not a static artifact and it is not a sworn oath: Whereas, whereas, whereas...Therefore, I will do this, or I'll die, so help me God. A covenant is a living, breathing aspiration, made new every day. It can't be enforced by consequences but it may be reinforced by forgiveness and by grace, when we stumble, when we forget, when we mess up.”²

A covenant is a living, breathing aspiration made new every day.

Returning to this aspiration requires our faithfulness. A faithful return to the questions of “who am I?” and “whose am I?”

² Victoria Safford, “Bound in covenant,” UU World, Summer 2013.

The power of covenant is the power of being called back into relationship over and over again.

Of setting an aspiration of how you want to be with your spouse, or your house mates, or with your colleagues, or with members of this church community. And then, when you fail, which as human beings, we can count on, our covenants call upon us to mend and renew.

Since ancient times, human beings have needed covenants. And, we still need them today. I believe that we especially need them today in a time when our systems and institutions are falling apart. In this time, we have to remind ourselves of what it means to be promise-makers.

Hafez writes, "Not loving is letting go."

Or, to say this in the affirmative, to love is to hold on. To love is to covenant. To know ourselves bound together, inextricably, sometimes invisibly.

May this love hold us to one another,
when the terrain is dangerous,
when the way is rocky,
May we know ourselves held by the covenants, the commitments, the promises that we make and that we renew together.