



October 2, 2022

On Covenant

This month we explore covenant, a foundation of Unitarian Universalism. As we enter into a period of revisiting our OUUC covenant, let's build our covenanting knowledge and muscles.

Sermon - Rev. Mary Gear

Like some of you, I was raised in a family that went to church. My family attended a Lutheran congregation in the midwest, complete with the stereotypic tuna hot dish at suppers in the church basement. And, as some of you experienced on your spiritual path, I left that church as a youth, questioning what I was told to believe, seeking to understand what I did believe.

The Lutheran church, like many others, has a creed that told me what to believe. As I was preparing this sermon, I was surprised to realize how quickly I remembered the words to the Apostle's Creed, words that I recited each Sunday for many years:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,.....

The creed goes on to tell the story of Jesus life, then ends this way:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

I was taught this creed as a child, handed these beliefs before I could understand what they meant. Taught what "we" believed and that it made us different from them, those who didn't believe.

Please don't hear that I am criticizing Christian beliefs. You may very well believe what is contained in the Apostle's creed and its words may hold deep meaning for you. That's great! What is different about this faith community and Unitarian Universalism is that you can believe something different than others who come here, and you can believe something different than me, your minister. I don't tell you what to believe and you don't expect me or others to believe what you do. And we support each other as we seek to understand our own values and beliefs.

Unitarian Universalism is not a creedal faith. What holds us together in community is covenant, our promises, our agreement about how we will be together.

One of the foundations of Unitarian Universalism is that we are interconnected, and because we are an interconnected people with a multitude of beliefs and spiritual experiences, we are bound together, not by a creed, but by the agreements that we make. Our interconnection leads us to covenant. And, because we agree to accompany each other as we explore and define our beliefs, a covenant is a commitment to treat each other in ways that support and encourage shared spiritual growth.

One of the requirements of covenant is to look beyond ourselves to our connection to others and the goals of our community. When we create and enter into a covenant, we are asked to surrender some of our individualism in order to reach the mission or shared goals of the congregation. This can be challenging because it is counter cultural to our American individualistic society which we can briefly describe as: “You are not the boss of me!” The paradox of Unitarian Universalism is that we are free to explore our beliefs and decide them for ourselves, and we surrender some of our individualism in order to be in community. It is the exploration and the surrender that invites us to grow spiritually.

There are many examples of covenants in our lives and communities; wherever there is a relationship, there is a covenant, either explicit or implied. A legal union has long been called the covenant of marriage. You might say that the US Constitution is the covenant for our democracy.

The UUA is an association of Unitarian Universalist congregations, and we covenant to be together. The introduction to Article II of the UUA Bylaws, which contains the 7 principles of Unitarian Universalism, begins this way:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote...

There are covenants between ministers; Rev. Sara and I have a covenant about how we will be colleagues. Rev. Carol McKinley, OUUC’s Affiliated Community minister, and I have a covenant. Rev. Carol and I are also members of the UU Ministers Association, and we have a covenant among UU ministers.

The OUUC staff has a covenant, as do many teams and groups here. The OUUC staff are also bound by an Employee Handbook that describes the usual things about a job and includes expectations about relationships with co-workers and relationships with congregants. All of these set expectations and boundaries about how we behave with each other and how we will be together.

Last June 4, we celebrated the 70th Anniversary of OUUC and you installed me as your minister. On that day, we celebrated that this congregation and I found each other and agreed to share ministry. And, on that day we made promises to each other in a worship service that contained a Covenant of Installation. These were sacred promises that we made to each other for mutual support in our spiritual growth as individuals and as a community. It was a joyous day with music and singing, inspirational words and a renewed sense of community. That is the power of covenant. Now, we’re working together to live out those promises.

Our reading today was taken from the UUA Commission on Appraisal Report on Covenant from June 2021. The Commission is an independent body described and given authority in the UUA Bylaws to study and review the activities of the UU Association. The Commission has released several reports over the years on a variety of topics from membership to power and shared ministry. In 2021 they chose to focus on covenant as a foundation of our faith as we move through a time of change.

The Commission offers this definition of covenant:

A covenant is a mutual sacred promise between individuals or groups, to stay in relationship, care about each other, and work together in good faith. (repeat)

The Commission goes on to say:

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, we seek to raise the “WE” above the “I” --the community above the individual. As seekers, we willingly CHOOSE to love each other and stay in relationship over and over, again and again. In this way we may break promises, but by leaning into the transformational power of our faith, we can begin again in love.

There are a few things I notice about covenants.

First, a covenant isn't rules or a legal agreement, but is made up of compromises and promises. A covenant is a framework of expectations, and is about behavior, not personality. It's a declaration of love and faithfulness that makes us accountable to each other for how we behave.

Second, a covenant is aspirational and sometimes covenants are broken. As much as we try, we are human, and we break our promises. As philosopher Martin Buber said, humans are promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creatures. The promise is that when a breach of covenant occurs, we all choose to work together to repair and recommit to our shared covenant, beginning again in love.

Third, covenants can change. Because we are a living tradition, we know that our values, beliefs, and behavior will change as we change and grow, as people and as a faith.

I mentioned that Article II of the UUA Bylaws contains the covenant that UU congregations make to each other. For the past few years, a different Commission (because we like to form commissions!) has been reviewing Article II and they are expected to recommend significant changes to this part of the Bylaws, likely changing the principles. We'll be seeing and sharing more information about this work in the months to come.

A fourth thing that I notice about covenants is that they are sacred, the heart of our spiritual community. The Commission on Appraisal wrote this about covenant:

Many of our leaders believe that without a covenant, a congregation would not have a spiritual center and might be nothing more than a social club with a forum for ideas. So, it is a covenant,

either implicit or explicit, / that shared understanding that we honor diversity, promote social justice and seek to enhance our mutual spiritual growth that really identifies us as communities of faith.

I count myself among those who believe that covenant is our spiritual heart. There are many social groups we could join, many activist organizations, many ideas to be found on the world wide web. A faith community can be social, activist, and informational. A faith community is also a place where we commit to be together, to grow together, and to work together for justice, all in covenant. A covenant offers us the chance to explore and deepen our spirituality as we practice together in community.

Our spiritual theme for this month is covenant. As part of our exploration of the theme, we will revisit the OUUC covenant. It's been several years since this congregation created the current covenant, and it's time for a revisit to make sure it aligns with who we are now. We also want to add a behavioral covenant to the aspirational language of the current OUUC covenant. The behavioral covenant will be concrete statements about what we each will and won't do.

On October 30, we will welcome two representatives of the UUA Pacific Western Region to help us with this process, Rev. Summer Albayati and our own Rev. Carol McKinley. They will offer the worship service that day, followed by a workshop on covenant. After that, we will offer several opportunities to come together in small groups to discuss and co-create a behavioral covenant. I am grateful to those congregants who have so far agreed to facilitate these groups and to help with the writing: Ryan Baye, Helen Henry, Martha Nicoloff, Linda Selsor, and James Trujillo. If you are interested in helping guide this process, please reach out to me. And I hope you each will offer your input.

The final thing that I notice about covenants is that they connect the past and the future. Our Unitarian ancestors were the Puritans of Dedham, Massachusetts, who met every week for a year to craft an agreement about how to be together. Historian Victor Ashear writes:

Around 1640 a small group [of Puritans] decided to build a faith community free from the authoritarian constraints of the Church of England. It was a radically lay-led church gathered by mutual consent rather than by mutual belief, founded in covenant rather than creed, and governed by the congregation itself rather than a political hierarchy. What they longed for was sincere religious association based in love and founded in freedom.

As we revisit the OUUC covenant this Fall, we continue an almost 400-year old tradition of making compromises and promises about how we will be together, staying in relationship, caring for each other and working together in good faith.

Covenants are made real with reflection and contemplation as well as action. They must be taken to heart in order to manifest our love and care for each other and for our world. They need to be made explicit and agreed upon so we can all know what the agreements are. This is sacred work that we do together. I look forward to doing this work with you.

Let's hold a moment of silence together as we take these words into our hearts.