



Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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“That All Souls Shall Grow into Harmony with the Divine”

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Story:

Adapted from the work of Alice Blair Wesley. It’s the story of a very old congregation, called “First Church of Dedham, Massachusetts.”

Religiously, Unitarians are directly descended from the Puritans and Pilgrims who settled Massachusetts beginning in 1620.

Although those colonists perceived themselves to be settling a wilderness, they were actually displacing the Wampanoag, Pequot, Narragansett, and Mohegan tribes that lived in that area. Colonists gave little thought to accommodating these people, believing that they had a superior style of living and religion. Tensions and violent confrontations arose between the colonists and the native peoples as a result of the increasing number and size of colonial settlements on native lands and from efforts to convert Indian people to Christianity.

When they arrived from England to settle, colonists duplicated the arrangement of English towns, building their houses close together with their fields surrounding the town. Generally, the colonists who settled each town came from the same place in England and knew one another.

By contrast, the settlers of Dedham came from different places in England and were unacquainted. This is the story of how they came to form a church and a town.

By 1637, about 30 English families were newly settled in Dedham. They were not acquainted with one another prior to the founding of Dedham because they had come to New England on different ships from different parts of England and had lived for a while in different towns. They had come to Dedham to form a new township with the permission of the General Court of Massachusetts.

To settle this place, they first had to design a town government, so they could legally allot fields for growing crops and smaller lots in town for building houses. After they had built pens for their animals, planted initial crops, built houses, unpacked or pegged together furniture and so on, they began to think of founding a church. But they had been working so hard they really hadn't had time to get to know one another very well. Most of them were farmers, and other than that they didn't know much about each other.

So, guess what these New Englanders did in 1637 to get to know each other and to approach—gently, slowly—some very profound and personal religious issues? They set up a series of weekly neighborhood meetings, "lovingly to discourse and consult together... and prepare for spiritual communion in a church society, so that we might be further acquainted with the (spiritual) tempers and gifts of one another." In other words, they wanted to talk so they knew what it would be like to worship and work together. Meetings were held every Thursday "at several houses in order," in rotation. Anybody in town who wanted to come was welcome to attend.

The account in the Dedham Church record lists the questions the people in 1637—not yet a church—discussed at their weekly meetings, which continued for a whole year. Several features of this event are intriguing. First, they did not begin to talk about a church by talking about the Bible. Instead, they began by addressing the question of what was required to create a peaceful and just community together.

They knew that one important concern of a free church is the justice, the peace, the laws and regulations of a healthy, free society. Here in what they thought of as wilderness these people, having just come from the anguish of European

society in the 1600s, knew there could be no peaceably functioning free church—in the long term—if it was not set within a larger society wherein concerns for justice, peace and reasonable laws can be freely and effectively voiced, without suppression. People must be able to speak up for justice.

After much general talk about civil society, they began to edge toward talk about a church. Their first question on this subject was: Here we are, not presently members of any church. We don't know each other well, religiously. Are we qualified to "assemble together... [and] confer" like this? Their answer: We are, if, "in the judgment of charity," we seem to be and think we are acting out of (in our terms) genuinely deep, religious love...

Next question: Well, if we can meet like this, just as neighbors, isn't this enough? Maybe we don't need a church. Their answer: No, this is too casual. If we really want to live in the ways of our deepest love, then we must intentionally form a much deeper community of love... And besides, others in the larger society need the example of love which a free church will publicly show forth... They understood the role of the church as filling the needs of both the members and the larger community.

These laypeople's central conclusion, from all these weeks of discussion, was this: Members of their new free church should be joined in a covenant of religious loyalty to the spirit of love. And once members were joined in a covenant, of their own writing and signing, the members' loyalty in the church should be only to the spirit of love, working in their own hearts and minds.

...Then and now and for as long as human history lasts... the integrity of the free church comes down to our loyalty to the spirit of love at work in the hearts and minds of the local members. The laypeople who founded First Church, Dedham knew so and clearly said so, and that is why we still say together, so often in many of our congregations now, "Love is the doctrine of this church..."

Reading:

From the Tapestry of Faith curriculum "Faith Like a River: A History of Covenant"

The free church tradition of which we are a part does not offer up a creed, a certain set of beliefs, that everyone must accept in order to belong to the community. Instead, the boundaries of our community are determined by commitment and participation. Our central question is not "What do we believe?" but rather "What values will we uphold and how will we do this together?" Our covenant, the promises we make to each other in regarding how we will be a community of faith, is at the heart of what it means to be Unitarian Universalist.

The notion of covenant is an ancient one. It is a central theme of both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. When the early Puritans came to America looking to form a new type of church, they chose to gather their churches using the ancient form of covenant. These first churches in America were created by mutual consent for mutual benefit in a time and place where survival depended on mutual cooperation, but they were not formed solely from need. They were also a reaction to a form of church organization that not only required everyone to subscribe to a certain set of beliefs but also put all power and control into the hands of a church hierarchy. It is important to remember that our freedom of belief is closely tied to our practice of self-governance, or congregational polity, guided by our covenants.

By today's definitions, neither the Pilgrims of the Plymouth Colony nor the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony would be understood as either democratically governed or theologically diverse. They did, however, lay the basis for the values of congregational polity and theological diversity which ground our contemporary faith communities.

The Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline, written by the New England Puritans in 1648 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, describes the form this new church governance was to take. In The American Creed, Forrest Church paraphrases the Puritans' essential covenant as this:

We pledge to walk together
In the ways of truth and affection,
As best we know them now
Or may learn them in the days to come,
That we and our children may be fulfilled
And that we may speak to the world
In words and actions
Of peace and goodwill.

The Cambridge Platform goes on to define, in some detail, just what constitutes a church. Yet, this, a simple promise to walk together in the ways of truth and affection, remains the basis of the document.

Sermon:

Our theological heritage, on our Unitarian side, comes from the groups named in our reading: the Puritans and the Pilgrims. It's a complicated heritage: today, it can be hard to understand just how radical it was for the Pilgrims and the Puritans to form covenanting communities, where individuals chose to be part of the congregation and the group chose a preacher and a teacher from among them.

We are and always have been a deeply relational faith. A people of covenant.

Our covenants are a way of saying that we need each other: that in our relationships we learn, and grow, and deepen. That we make mistakes and help each other to understand how to do better next time.

And there is a tension between the Unitarian Universalist optimism about each person's potential for good that we know today and the Puritan pessimism about each person's potential for sin.

For three years I served a congregation in Plymouth County, Massachusetts. The town of Plymouth calls itself "America's Hometown," because the Pilgrim

settlement there was one of the first permanent settlements of white people in what's now the United States. There's lots to say about that history and how it still echoes today, there and in our wider culture. But for now, let's look at one facet: the pessimism about human nature. The Pilgrims were, like the Puritans who followed later, a dissenting splinter group from the Church of England. They landed in what's now Massachusetts just in time for a harsh winter, during which almost half of the colonists died, out of 102. They'd landed in a part of Massachusetts that had been home to an estimated 70,000 Wampanoag people in about 70 villages. But four years earlier, a plague had swept through and killed somewhere between 50 and 90% of the population, so the Pilgrims found what seemed to be abandoned villages in the place they hoped to colonize.

The Pilgrims, and the Puritans who would follow them, believed in a system of predestination: an all-knowing God, who disapproved of most things humans did, already knew who was too sinful to be redeemed and would therefore go to hell, and who would be in the small group of people allowed to go to heaven after death. Both Pilgrims and Puritans thought they were the most likely folks to be in that small group of the Elect, or the good ones. But this was a pretty anxious theology to live with, this belief that because God already knew everything that had not yet happened, everyone's fate was already sealed. So the Pilgrims and the Puritans watched each other's behavior closely, looking for signs that someone might NOT be saved.

You can imagine how confusing it would be for such people to experience making it to America! And finding some pretty great land for settlement that's mysteriously unoccupied! But also it's December, and the winter is harsh and half of your community dies. DOES GOD FAVOR YOU OR NOT?

And this element of anxious observation, planted in white American culture a little more than 400 years ago, echoes today. From the Pilgrims and their Puritan neighbors, there is a thread of heightened concern about making sure the people around you are Doing It Right, because if they're not it could be a sign that the whole community – the whole family, the whole town, all of you who covenanted together to form a church, etc – is doomed. And the habit is still around.

If you grew up in the United States, I am fairly certain that at some point, at least once, someone put you in a box. I'm talking about a metaphorical box of shoulds and shouldn'ts. The boxes that were supposed to make us safe and acceptable and therefore suggested that anything outside the box was unsafe, unacceptable, unlovable. And we know from child development studies that feeling safe, accepted, connected, and loved are vital to survival in childhood. These are core needs for children. And really, they are still core needs for adults.

Maybe you heard comments that told you that Boys don't cry, or It's not ladylike to whistle. Maybe you were told not to be so bossy, that no one would like you for being too assertive; or maybe you were told to speak up and not be such a wimp. Maybe you made a new friend and then learned, directly or indirectly, that something about your new friend was somehow not appropriate.

Almost certainly, someone important in your life – a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, someone whose opinion of you you valued – someone at some point probably told you that something about you was wrong.

That line about not being too bossy, because no one likes a girl who is too assertive? I heard that one. Now I can talk about how girls are scolded for being bossy and boys are praised for being leaders, but when I was young I just knew that someone was telling me I'd done something wrong.

Maybe you got these messages around gender. How to present properly in terms of clothing, haircut, make-up and jewelry. Or around race: who to be friends with, and who wasn't appropriate. Or around potential partners: often an assumption that people of the opposite sex would be pursuing us and/or be heartbroken by not having us.

Those messages didn't leave a lot of space for dressing in ways that make you happy, wearing your hair the way you want it. They may have planted seeds of worry: if I befriend the wrong person, if I fall in love with the wrong person, if I express too much of who I am, I might jeopardize my relationship with my family.

Even if you didn't hear messages like this from your family of origin, you for sure encountered them in the world. In pop culture, in conversations with others, in expectations at school. That old Puritan anxiety about making sure everyone else is doing the right things, and NOT doing the wrong things.

And the weight of these messages makes it hard to be your fullest self.

And yet, while the dominant American culture inherited this hypervigilance from the Pilgrims and the Puritans, WE, Unitarian Universalists, some of their direct institutional descendants, also inherited the practice of covenant. The idea that we are responsible to and for each other can be life-giving.

We have a few covenants that are widespread in Unitarian Universalism today, written in the late nineteenth century and so inspiring that they're still used by many congregations. One was written by L. Griswold Williams. It says,

“Love is the doctrine of this church,
The quest for truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.
To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve human need,
To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine-
Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.”

This is a beautiful evolution of theology and of covenant. From worrying about who might need to be cast out, to recognizing that we can make agreements that focus our behavior together on helping each of us grow into our whole self. The self we are meant to be, the self that is in harmony with the Divine, which we might translate as “being perfectly yourself.”

And it's not easy, right? Maybe you've heard the expression, "What we dislike in others is often what we fear in ourselves." It can be a helpful filter to run our thoughts through, in those times when strong feelings arise and we're trying to get down to where they're anchored. Sometimes what makes you mad at another person comes from the part of you that doesn't feel safe, and it feels easier to be angry than to notice a place in you that needs healing. I don't know about you, but sometimes I've noticed that under the anger in me I can find some jealousy – how come THAT person doesn't feel afraid to be their full self? Not fair!

In our relationships, we're called to notice what needs healing in US, as well as to offer compassion to others. We've come a long way, theologically, from the strict disapproval of the Puritans! These days, when we remember that as individuals and as congregations we are asked, in our tradition, to counsel each other, we know that means to speak and act in love and with self-awareness. To counsel with love means saying both, "I believe in you!" and "Hey, I care about you a lot, and so I think it's important that I let you know I think you're making a mistake right now. Can we talk?" To counsel with self-awareness means to notice when that feeling of "You're making a mistake!" might be rooted in an inside wound that needs healing, and it means bringing curiosity to our conversations because we don't know what we don't know.

And then we extend our thinking to what it means to be a congregation, together. Again, we've come a long way from the Puritans, from that strong need to make everyone be the same to keep the whole community safe from damnation. We're called now to be communities that are something more than "like-minded."

The other day I was remembering a hot debate from my seminary days. Seminarians tend to have strong opinions and a lot of time for debating them and thinking metaphorically about them – seminarians are grad students, you know? This particular hot debate was about what metaphor we should use to understand congregations. At the time there were two major metaphors in use. One was the refuge: the safe place, where we come in out of the harsh world to feel comforted and accepted. The other metaphor was the base camp: where we

come in out of the harsh world, sure, but to equip ourselves to go out there and climb the mountain! HOT DEBATE. Is your congregation a refuge or a base camp?

This kind of dualistic thinking, of course, cannot answer this kind of metaphorical question. A congregation is both. It's a refuge AND it's a base camp. It's a place to be loved into being because the world needs your gifts.

More and more, though, I've come to see that these metaphors are not sufficient. They don't cover ALL the things a congregation is. It's a little too passive to be a refuge and a base camp and stop there, and UUs are not known for being passive. So what else is a congregation? Not a classroom, exactly, although we certainly learn with and from each other. Not a coffee shop, exactly, although we certainly have lively conversations and consume many hot beverages.

I asked my family and they suggested that a congregation is a team. Now, let me confess that I don't know much about sports, but I have the idea that a sports team – of any sport – is made up of individuals who bring different skills, and between them all they can rise to meet most occasions. And a sports team is a group of people who are committed to keep learning together, to keep expanding their skills, and to try different strategies that help the team to meet new occasions. A soccer team doesn't just have one set of plays that stay static for ten years, right? They keep developing and practicing new moves. At least, I think this is what I learned from watching "Ted Lasso."

When I told my family that I liked this idea, a congregation being a sports team, they added: not just sports! Could be a team of inventors, or a team of scientists. The point is that it's a collaborative group, addressing challenges, and learning both individually and collectively as they do. On a team not only do we recognize and celebrate differences, but we also say to each other, "Let's try a new thing! Here's what I'm trying to learn – I think it will help us all. Want to learn it with me?"

A refuge, a base camp, and a team. A place to come in for shelter, for comfort – sometimes that’s what we need. A place to learn how to make a difference in the world, which surely needs people working for a just and peaceful society. And a place to bring different ideas and skills and ways of being, a place to experiment and learn, a place that challenges us.

And why do we need such a place? Why would we belong to a congregation in which we are sometimes comfortable and sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes sure we know what’s going on and other times trying new things and making mistakes? Wouldn’t it be better to go back to the anxious conformity of many of the Puritans instead of being challenged to grow and heal?

Spoilers: it would not. Instead, we gather in the spirit of the people of First Church of Dedham, to follow the call of love. We do this “To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine.” It’s a worthy goal, both within our congregation and in what we can offer the wider world. Let us follow it together.