

“People of Promise”

Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

September 26, 2021

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, the author Anne Lamott tells why she makes her son Sam go to church.

The main reason is to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want, which is to say purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy...They are people in community, who pray or practice their faith, they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians, people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle, they are part of something beautiful.¹

It sounds a lot like what we have here, doesn't it: a flock of beautiful souls doing our best; to make sense of life, care for one another, and respond to the inequities in this world, locally and beyond. We freely come together as one congregation, united in love, with service as our prayer.

Each week we affirm our covenant, or promise, to one another... *Love is the doctrine of this church.* Go ahead, say it with me if you know it and allow yourself to soak in the beauty of these words if you don't.

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

We say those words each week, yet, what do they mean? How do they guide us, helping us make decisions, set priorities, or settle disputes?

We have no creeds as Unitarian Universalists. A creed is a set of beliefs used in religious contexts, generally believed to have come from God. Love

¹ Buehrens, John A. and Parker, Rebecca Ann. *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 2010, p. 58.

is our doctrine. A doctrine is a set of beliefs created by a person or group, also used by political parties or other civic groups in addition to religious settings.

A covenant is a promise made with free and mutual agreement. It is a living example of the democratic process, foundational to Unitarian Universalism, historically and to the present day. A covenant can be between two people as in a marriage or a group of people as in our congregation. Covenant is often created by the same people who then agree to it. The word covenant has its origins from Latin *con venire*, meaning "to go with." Covenant is how those who have chosen to come together journey together. Living in covenant is a privilege and a responsibility.

As Unitarian Universalists we use covenant in all areas of our religious life. In addition to the congregation, we use them in small groups, including staff teams, between ministers, congregations, and the larger Unitarian Universalist Association. We also covenant to affirm and promote the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism, listed on the back of your Order of Service and in the hymnals.

Our mission and covenant are interdependent. Our mission - *Come as you are. Journey together in love. Act with courage. Transform our world.* - explains why we are here, while covenant states how we do what we do.

The history of covenant in religious settings goes back to the Old Testament and Judaism. The first covenant was between Adonai, or God, and Noah when after the flood God promises the world will not be destroyed in that way again. In the second covenant, between Adonai and Abraham, the father of the Israelites, God reveals to Abraham that his seed will spawn a great nation. Circumcision in the Jewish tradition is a symbol of this covenant. The third great covenant was the revelation of God's many laws including the ten commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Covenant in Unitarian Universalism is horizontal, rather than vertical, meaning it is a promise made between people who are accountable to one

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another. Such use of covenant evolved from the Cambridge Platform, signed in 1648 by newly forming churches in colonial America. These churches were concerned with civil organization more than theology. They believed “the church would reflect the ethic of the larger society, and what they longed for was sincere religious association based in love and founded in freedom.”² Twenty-one of the sixty-five congregations who voted to approve the Cambridge Platform in 1648 are Unitarian Congregations today.

The Cambridge Platform outlined in detail how the newly organized churches should function in terms of leadership, ministry, and embership, placing authority in the congregation and its members. Conrad Wright writes about this in his book, *Walking Together*. “What is the difference between a collection of religiously concerned individuals and a church?”³ “Covenants still serve their essential function: to make churches out of collections of individuals; to establish community.”⁴

Though it may sound obsolete, the principles laid out in the Cambridge Platform laid out the foundation for our nation’s founding and still influence religious and political thinking today. Much of this is good, although not all. Covenants have been used as weapons to ensure power over others, most often to maintain the power of the dominant group. It is something for us to be aware of and sensitive to in our own workings and discernment. For example, we need to be aware of cultural norms, recognizing the differences in how cultures deal with conflict, express affection, or engage in worship.

In addition to historic interest, covenants have real and lasting value in our day-to-day lives. We have covenants in marriages and other committed relationships, as well as other groups we join. These covenants create boundaries, serve as tools for decision making, and provide

2 <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/river/workshop8/175948.shtml>

3 Wright, Conrad. *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches*, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, MA, 1989, pp. 7-8.

4 Ibid, p. 8.

inspiration over the long haul and during challenging times. Covenants remind us that we are for more than ourselves alone and that we must balance individual needs with those of the larger good, something we can too easily forget on our own.

“We become better people and often much more intelligent when we make the intentional choice to create connections and stand in a collaborative community with another,” write the members of a Commission on Appraisal, a peer-review body of the Unitarian Universalist Association.⁵

Carl Scoval, Minister Emeritus of Boston’s Kings Chapel, the oldest Unitarian Church in the United States, describes covenant as a remedy in a world where self-interest has gone too far at the expense of others and the Earth. He says we live in a world of “now and wow” without context, “a world of shattered meanings.”⁶

Covenant is what calls us back to the values we hold most important and to the promises we make to one another. Ministers Rebecca Parker and John Buehrens write, “Covenant...Because of its connection to hope, it is also about a community’s commitment to a vision without which we all perish.”⁷

The issue of covenant was raised last church year both as a point of clarification as we voted on our values, mission and ends and in relation to conflict that arose during our annual meeting. I hope it has become clear that our newly adopted mission statement does not replace our long-held covenant, rather the mission statement guides us in how we can actualize our covenant in our priorities, ministries, and programs of the church. So too can our covenant guide us in our relations with one another, including how we make space for differences of opinion and understand conflict as a source of creative tension and greater

5 *Unlocking the Power of Covenant*, Report of the UUA Commission on Appraisal, June 2021, p. xi.

6 Minns Lectureship 2019, Special lecture by Rev. Carol Scoval, <https://fb.watch/8b7t3IrVPp/>

7 Buehrens, John A. and Parker, Rebecca Ann. *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-First Century*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 2010, p. 54.

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wisdom, when handled within the loving arms of our covenant.

Our Parish Board will be holding discussion groups this fall, inviting us all to discuss our covenant in greater detail. I hope you will participate.

Covenant is particularly important during liminal times, when things are in transition, as they are now when we are emerging from the pandemic. During such times we are at risk of exhaustion, loss of perspective, and turning against ourselves or others. Our emotions are more on the surface, raw and variable day to day. One of the many benefits of church during such times is that we call ourselves back to our best selves. Our covenant reminds us of what we are *for* in this world, not just against.

We feed our souls by being connected and choosing to be part of something larger than ourselves, like this beloved congregation.

I close today with words from Reverends Rebecca Parker and John Buehrens.

*This is what we do in progressive religion.
In the midst of an economic system
that increasingly treats human beings as
expendable "deadwood,"
we insist on restoring heartwood.
We offer a framework of covenantal
commitment.
We live by shared hope.
We make a path by walking it –
not alone, together.
And we pray that along the way,
those who walk with us will be converted
and will make a deep personal commitment
to its radical form of hope –
not for themselves alone, but for everyone.⁸*

Amen and blessed be.

⁸ Buehrens, John A. and Parker, Rebecca Ann. *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-First Century*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 2010, p. 58.