



commUNITY

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Covenant

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community. We explore each theme in worship and in our newsletter; in covenant groups, guided writing sessions and Wednesday evening programming; and in our community outreach ministries, our literary journal and programs, and many other opportunities. The November theme is Covenant.

Covenant begins in longing. There, where the heart calls up our origins and oldest memories of oneness and belonging, we find a taproot that grows into covenant if given the right conditions, including our own willingness to acknowledge and oblige it. When we feel that tug beckoning us from our individual isolation into relationship with others, there is the germ of covenant already taken root.

It is tempting to consider covenant as we would a contract, in which two or more parties agree to specific terms of exchange. Indeed, the political and legal origins of covenant in the bible could point us in this direction. But in a religious context, and even in the larger biblical context, covenant is more akin to the sinewy fiber of relationship, a relationship operating at such a deep level that it affects the very core identities of those participating in it. Philosopher Fritz Kaufman called this quality of covenant “the pith and marrow of being.”

On a personal level, the vows exchanged in an intimate relationship offer one common example of covenant. When two people say “I do” to one another, it is not a contract in which each tries to gain the greatest benefit at the least cost. Rather, it is an aspiration in which both name their greatest hopes

for what can only be created together. The relationship itself becomes a new identity in which each partner summons in the other new possibilities not only of loving but of being. As Margaret Fuller, the 19th century Transcendentalist and early feminist, said, “Two persons love in one another the future good which they aid another to unfold.”

Embedded in covenant, then, is this creative inclination toward the future. As a response to the heart’s longing, it is a movement toward possibilities not present in our most basic human state of isolation.

Historically, sociologically, psychologically and physiologically, we know that human beings need one another. Our survival depends on our ability to cooperate, which neuroscience has now shown to be hardwired within us. But theologically, our willingness to enter covenantal relationship is something more. As the basis for congregational life, covenant only thrives when we know and name the deeper taproot of love and being that feeds it. The 20th century theologian James Luther Adams called this “the community-forming power of God.” Noting that this can be understood theistically, non-theistically or humanistically, Adams described it as “the orientation to something we cannot control but something upon which

we depend, even for our freedom.” In different words, we might say it acknowledges the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

In Unitarian Universalism, where no bond of creed unites us, this essential bond of being not only calls and holds us together in faith communities; it also calls us individually and institutionally into the world in ever widening relationships of inclusion. The democratic institutions we build as we follow this call embody our longing for justice and wholeness, bringing them into being (albeit imperfectly) in history and in the world. So the covenant we enter into in congregational life both draws from and opens into a much larger covenant with all that lives and with all of time – past, present and especially future.

Who could possibly live up to that? Of course, none of us can. But the humility in that confession and the forgiveness found in covenantal relations together make it possible to keep trying. This give and take of committed relationship becomes the breath and blood of the larger body which we create in covenant, what Adams called an “ecology of grace.” We are, in the words of John Bunyan, “like the several flowers in the garden that have upon each of them the dew of heaven, which, being shaken with the wind, they let fall their dew at each other’s roots, whereby they are jointly nourished and become nourished of one another.”

So may it be in this garden we are growing together.

~ Karen Hering,
Consulting Literary Minister

Worship Theme Resources

BOOKS

The Essential James Luther Adams, selected essays of Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams, edited by George Kimmich Beach

A House for Hope, The Promise of Progressive Religion for the 21st Century, by John Buehrens and Rebecca Parker