



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 create covenants. We covenant with each other. As a noun, a covenant signals how we want to be with one another, setting out values and actions that sustain us in community. As a verb, covenant is a practice, a promise, a vow. Perhaps the fact that covenant acts as a noun *and* a verb is a telling indication of the vibrancy of the term. Or maybe we just can't make up our minds whether the act or the result is more important.

Unitarian Universalist identity is founded on the notion that we covenant together, rather than share a single creed. UU religious educator Thandeka writes that "as Unitarian Universalists, we affirm right relationship as a reverential act." This reverence binds us — each to each and each to all — by what Rev. Rebecca Parker, former president of Starr King School for the Ministry, calls "freely chosen and life-sustaining interdependence." It is our promises to each other, not our beliefs, that brings us into the presence of the holy.

Given that we are UUs, not everyone finds this compelling. Some UUs chafe at the structure of covenant because it seems to contradict the premise of free thinking and personal decision-making that are also critical to our faith. The notion that everyone can believe what they want, that we "need not think alike to love alike" (which sixteenth-century Transylvanian Unitarian Francis Dávid evidently never said) resonates with us. Often, we place a greater value on our own ideas than on communal understandings and shared commitments. This focus on self and personal decision-making can make building and sustaining covenantal communities a challenge.

Yet still we come together, however ticklish we remain about our own needs and however forcefully we assert our own beliefs. We understand

that working only for our personal improvement and individual salvation can never be enough. Instead, like Clarence Skinner, a Unitarian theologian of the early twentieth century, we accept that we are "enmeshed in a world of humanity" from which we cannot disentangle ourselves. We are "part of the marvelous solidarity of life" and "must work out the salvation of the world" as well as our own. In community, we are saved and we can begin to save each other. Despite our mistrust and fears, we know we need each other, and that the world needs our community.

None of this is easy. Poet Wendell Berry warns that making a promise is always a leap into uncertainty. "We cannot join ourselves to one another without giving our word," he says. "And this must be an unconditional giving, for in joining ourselves to another we join ourselves to the unknown." He adds that "you do not know the road; you have committed your life to a way." By leaping into the unknown, something more than the sum of our parts gets created. A covenantal relationship creates its own unexpected force in the world, what poet Robert Bly calls a "third body" that draws power from the promises that created it.

Joining together in covenant demands perseverance. The lines in marriage vows where people promise to remain together in good times and in bad, in sickness and health, for better and for worse reflect this inherent aspect of covenant. This is true for church too. Some of you have probably stayed with this church even as you strongly disagreed with something preached from the pulpit or a decision made by the Board. Or you were hurt here, but you forgave, and stayed in conversation. Covenant is a synonym for fidelity, for sticking around when some might walk away, for working for reconciliation in

the face of strife. Covenanting reveals our humanity in all its broken beauty, resting on the notion that we will keep trying, that we will remain engaged, that we will "come, yet again come" to the people and places that sustain us and draw out our best selves.

Like so much of Unitarian Universalism, covenant is an aspirational goal, with perfection always out of reach. We will fail, make mistakes, need forgiveness. Yet how can we not try? Binding ourselves to a covenant keeps us awake to the values and qualities that sustain our lives. Covenanting with others is a sacred practice, a promise written on the hearts of other, a vow to join ourselves to the "marvelous solidarity of life."

Hallman Ministerial Intern

Kathryn Jay with this month's theme team: Janne Eller-Isaacs, Ken Ford, Lisa Friedman, Karen Hering, KP Hong, and Ruth Palmer

Covenant Theme Resources

BOOKS

More Together than Alone: Discovering the Power and Spirit of Community in Our Lives and in the World by Mark Nepo (2018)

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Miss Rumphius by Barbara Cooney (1985)

Mother Bruce by Ryan T. Higgins (2015)

MOVIES

In America (2002)

The Incredibles (2004)

Another Year (2010)

ONLINE

Brittany Packnett, The UUA 2018 Ware Lecture: <https://www.uua.org/ga/off-site/2018/ware>