



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.

For at least ten years, the congregation I served in Cleveland, OH, could recite from memory what is known as “the Blake Covenant”: *Love is the spirit of this church, and service its law. This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.* Shortly after the covenant was introduced as part of the weekly liturgy, there were a small group who wanted to change “covenant” to “promise,” thus avoiding the overtly religious associations with the word covenant. Yet, after some spirited debate, keeping the word “covenant” intact won the day.

This friendly debate about the word “covenant” belies a deeper struggle that goes back to the founding of what ultimately became the Unitarian Universalist Association. UU identity is founded on the notion that we covenant together, rather than share a single creed. In her six-session 2002-2001 Minns lecture, Alice Blair Wesley centers her lectures around the fact that our ancestors not only created a covenantal faith, which is the basis for how we organize ourselves, but they held love as the central and compelling act that defines everything else we, that is, “the church” does. Wesley writes this:

The covenantal organizational pattern of the free church was the key element of our ancestor’s doctrine of the free church. It is a doctrine grounded in an understanding of how the power of mutual love deepens and works among individuals in free religious groups. That is, in free religious groups loyal, before all else, to the spirit of love.

When new members join the church, we don’t ask them to sign a creedal statement of belief, but to express their sympathy with a covenantal faith. In other words, the church acknowledges that membership in the free church is open to individuals willing to sign a covenant — or promise — to be together, insofar as they are able, as a beloved community. And this is no simple matter.

Indeed. Living in covenant can be *hard*. When there aren’t enough teachers for religious education; when the board can’t find any candidates; when the stewardship campaign falls short or when disappointments pierce us through, we are forced to consider what this word means to us. It carries with it both the opportunity for disappointment and disillusion. How we live out these covenantal expectations in word and deed are baked into the promises we make to one another. Again, quoting Wesley: “Ultimately, the only freedom adequate to human dignity is the freedom to do what love asks of us.”¹

And what does love ask of us? 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.

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 others, a vow to join ourselves to the “marvelous solidarity of life.”

*By Rev. Kathleen Rolenz,
until the theme team resumes
for next month’s theme*

¹Wesley, Alice Blair. Minns Lecture, 2000-2001.

Covenant Theme Resources

For further reflection on this theme please see this month’s Spiritual Practice Packet available online at <https://bit.ly/covenantpractice>.