

Reading - 1 Corinthians 13:10 (NRSV)

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

“A Community of Covenant”

As I understand Unitarian Universalism, covenant is one of two things that ties us together as a tradition. The other is a commitment to seeking truth in love, but I'll get to that another day. Covenant is a core of who we are as a tradition. In the absence of a creed, a common belief to which we all subscribe, covenant is what bonds Unitarian Universalist congregations as communities.

That line comes almost directly out of my elevator speech. That is a speech you should have handy to explain Unitarian Universalism to a stranger in the time it takes to ride an elevator. My speech starts with explaining the words “Unitarian” and “Universalist.” Then I always mention that we are a covenantal rather than a creedal tradition. We are a very different kind of religious organization because it is not a set of shared beliefs that brings us together, but a commitment to be in community. We commit to supporting one another as we each search for what brings truth and meaning to each of our lives. You're welcome to borrow this for your own elevator opportunities.

Today's sermon will explore just what a covenant is. It is a sort of relationship, similar to some of the relationships that most of us already have in our lives. As I talk

about covenants, it may be helpful for you to keep in mind your most deeply held two or three commitments. They may be to your partner or your children, or even a career or long time friend. Just keep these relationships in the back of your mind for now.

This idea of covenant, or freely joining a community sounds somewhat liberal and modern. In many ways it is. We freely join organizations as individuals, and in so doing, we commit to following a few rules. It depends on the free and conscious choice of the individual, a very modern concept. But like so many building blocks of modern thought, the idea of covenant is actually quite old. It is the root of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish theology as I understand it. It should be no surprise then that solid advice about covenant comes to us from the Bible.

I'm sure many of you recognized the reading I just gave. No, no one is getting married here today. That reading from 1 Corinthians is perhaps the most overused wedding reading known on Earth. The real kicker is that this great New Testament passage was never intended for weddings. In fact 1 Corinthians 13 has nothing to do with romantic love at all. Like most of Paul's writing, 1 Corinthians is an epistle or a letter. It's a letter to an early Christian congregation that found it difficult to come together across class lines, a congregation where some thought they are more important than others, where some talked more than others. It was a congregation that cared deeply about its mission but finds a challenge in being together in community. Does that sound familiar to anyone?

We don't hear from the Bible much in our UU churches here on the West Coast. But as I was thinking about the idea of covenant, the best advice I could find was in Paul's Epistles in the New Testament. Over and over Paul tells different congregations to

do their best to get along. He always mentions love and encourages them to focus on their highest ideals. Sure there is some specific problem shooting that he offers, but that is always underscored with a focus on love and faith. After all, what are we as a church if we don't have love. He was trying to get them to think about why they came together in religious community. Why they made this promise.

I want to take a moment to talk about the traditional use of covenant and the way it is understood in the Bible. Before embracing an idea and claiming it as the foundation of this faith tradition, it's worth understanding covenant in a historical context.

We often think of a covenant like a contract, and they are similar. But, in the Biblical use, covenant differs from a contract in three important ways.¹ First, a covenant has no termination date, whereas a contract usually does. The initial covenant, between the Israelites and God was a sort of metaphysical statement. It was an understanding that there exists one God in the universe, and that the Hebrew people would be in relationship with that God for eternity. We rarely talk about FOREVER anymore.

Later, when covenant was used to talk about membership in congregational churches, it meant that those entering a covenant or joining a congregation were doing so for the foreseeable future. As we are much more mobile today, the foreseeable future may be only a few years. Who knows when a career change or retirement may take us half way across the country? In the fifteenth century, when Puritan joined a congregation, they did so for the rest of their life, and probably the next couple of generations.

The second way that a covenant is different from a contract is that a covenant applies to the whole of a person, whereas a contract involves only a part, especially a

¹ T.A. Bryant, Today's Bible Dictionary, (Guideposts: 1982, New York), 150.

skill, possessed by a person. For example one may contract to have a house built. However, in a marriage, two people make a covenant with each other, and perhaps with God. They commit their whole selves to each other. While the identity of the individual persists, even prevails over the institution, covenants are concerned with an entire person, not parts of a person, or moments of their lives.

The third and perhaps most significant difference between a covenant and a contract is accountability. Contracts exist as a sort of quid pro quo. You do X for me and I'll do Y for you. But you have to do X, or I won't do Y. Covenants are very different in that they assume best intentions. Each party of a covenant assumes that the intentions of the other are good, that he or she is doing their best. The breach of the covenant by one party does not automatically nullify the other party's obligation. This sounds burdensome, right?

“You mean I have to follow through, even if no one else does. Well that's just not fair.”

The point is covenants are not about obligation. They are about compulsion. The best example of this sort of motivation, misunderstood as it is, is the covenant between the Israelites or modern Jewish people and their God. We know that there are a great many rules that our Jewish brothers and sisters live by. Some of them may seem antiquated and harsh to us as outsiders. It is difficult to understand why God would require the people follow such strict rules. But that is the point of misunderstanding. Jewish people do not follow these rules out of obligation, because they have to. They follow these sacred rules because they feel compelled to by their love of God. They are compelled to joyfully uphold a covenant, even when life is difficult.

So covenant is Biblical, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it has a bearing on modern Unitarian Universalism. There are some far more distinct historical links to covenanting for Unitarian Universalism here in the United States.

If you can imagine North America in the mid 1600s with colonial governments and small religious groups popping up all over the place. There were some orderly Anglican churches, but also a slough of small Puritan and Congregational churches. Each had their own slightly different theology and way of governing themselves. In 1648 the government of Mass. called for some sense of order amongst these churches. As a response, the Cambridge Platform was writing.²

This document, the Cambridge Platform became the blue print for congregational polity that we still largely follow today. It included the right of each parish to call its own minister, to control its own property and funds, and to determine criteria for church membership.³

Outside of the strictures of patriarchal religious institutions, these new American religious communities used covenants as a simple document for members to agree on how they would treat each other. They were written and signed by all the members of each congregation and they reflected the simple promises that members made to one another and to God. What I want to point out here is that the covenant was understood consistently as a promise involving God. Like the Biblical notion of covenant, members of the Puritan churches committed themselves to one another, but God was the foundation of that commitment.

²David E. Bumbaugh, Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History, (Meadevill Lombard Press: 2000, Chicago), 98.

³Mark W. Harris, Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism, (The Scarecrow Press, inc.: Maryland, 2004), 86.

It is precarious to talk much about Unitarian Universalist history because the theology seems so removed from who we are as a tradition today. Some of us are comfortable with invoking God in our promises to one another. But just as many of us have no understanding or interest in recognizing God, much less grounding our commitments in God. Our beliefs today are just too varied to be summed up with the “G word”, and that’s okay.

That’s because the rest of Unitarian Universalist history, the portion most obviously produced the congregations we know today, is, a continually widening search for truth and meaning. Starting with Transcendentalism, we have accepted broader and broader sources of truth and wisdom. This ever-expanding theological spectrum has made us who we are. We maintain vastly different beliefs and share a religious community. It’s quite an odd project if you think about it. What we end up with is Unitarian Universalism as I described in my elevator speech. We are a covenantal, rather than a creedal religious tradition.

But as we heard in the historical context, covenant is not simply a promise or a contract between people. Historically a covenant is a promise that is based on a faith in and relationship with God. For some of us, bringing God into our relationship with church makes a lot of sense. For others of us, it simply doesn’t fit. I’m concerned that in a wonderful expansion of theological diversity, we have forgotten to deal with the “God” component of covenant.

But don’t fear. I believe we can work around this.

Earlier I asked you to keep in mind your top two or three commitments in life. Although you may not recognize them as such, these probably function sort of like

covenants. They are commitments that involve your entire person and you keep them not out of obligation or because it's profitable. You keep them because of something greater.

Perhaps we can rethink what it means to involve God in a covenant as our forbearers did. Think with me again about those top two commitments that you hold dear. They may be to your family, you children, or a career. What is the great loving compulsion that keeps you in these commitments. It is likely to be different for different people, but we each have something that drives our deepest commitment. You may not even be able to describe it; maybe you can feel it. But I want you to identify that thought or feeling that grounds your most profound relationships.

Now imagine with me what it might look like to infuse your relationship with this congregation with that same loving compulsion. What would it look like to reaffirm the role of God, or your highest ideals in your covenant with this faith-community.

Please don't get me wrong. I don't mean this sermon to be accusatory. For many of us our relationship with this church is founded clearly on our faith and our highest ideals. For others, and I suspect all of us fall into this category at one time or another, we are a part of this community as a part of a contract. We expect to get out of it as much or more than we put into it. It's a break from our real lives. It's a religious home for now.

I just want to take a moment to imagine what it would look like, what it would feel like to reinfuse our covenants with our faith and our highest ideals. What would it feel like to be compelled by our faith to be here?

We throw the word covenant around like it is a simple agreement. This is a dangerous way to treat the primary thing that holds us together as a tradition. A Covenant involves a whole person for an undetermined length of time and is based not on

obligation, but on compulsion, on love. Covenants are founded in faith or in our highest ideals. This founding of covenant in God or ideals depends on each person, and may be different for each person, but it cannot be forgotten as the foundation of covenant.

If we are a covenantal rather than a creedal tradition, it is time to reexamine our covenants and where they are grounded.

-Amen and Blessed Be-

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