

This year we are using monthly themes in worship and in Religious Education. We picked the seven principles as the overarching theme for the whole year taking one principle for a month. Looking at a year of Sunday's it seemed easier to me to break it down into more manageable bits and so the monthly themes. Also our principles our what help to define us as Unitarian Universalist. They are not our creed but they are our organizing principles. I think it is good for us to have some familiarity with them. They are important enough to spend a year on.

And they are not set out as a creed, or a set of policies, or even rules. The introductory statement for them reads:

"We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote." They are not a promise, or a vow but part of our covenant.

Which leads me to ask What is a covenant and how is it different than a promise or a contract

"With a contract, if one agreeing party does something in violation of the contract then it is considered broken. The whole contract becomes null and void. Basically the signers of a contract agree to hold up their ends as long as the other signatories hold up theirs too." (Chris Cree <http://purposelydifferent.com/contracts-vs-covenants-why-the-difference-matters/>)

We live in a world that is full of contracts. If any of you have ever bought a house then you know that that is a contractual arrangement. And in the time before all the papers are signed if either the seller or the buyer does not hold up their end of the deal the deal is off and either party can walk away *without penalty* There is no expectation of hanging in beyond the terms of the contract

Contracts are tidy and efficient arrangements, they are clean and easy to understand. Contracts can be really really good tools. But they lack something - an understanding that we are all fallible. We make mistakes, each of us at some time in our life will not hold up our end of the bargain.

And this is where a covenant is a beautiful thing.

"With a covenant, both parties agree to hold up their ends regardless of whether the other party keeps their part of the agreement. A violation of a covenant by one party doesn't matter as far as the other party's responsibility to continue to do what they agreed to do." (Chris Cree <http://purposelydifferent.com/contracts-vs-covenants-why-the-difference-matters/>)

The choir sang one of our old time covenant - listen to these words again

Love is the spirit 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 each other in fellowship, to the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the divine. This is our covenant with each other and with God. The words were originally written by J. Griswold Williams and it comes from our (Universalist) family.

There is Another covenant this one from the Unitarian side of the family -  
*Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law.*  
*This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace,*  
*To seek the truth in love, and to help one another. James Vila Blake (Unitarian)*

*I like that in our UU history there are not really creeds as historical documents - instead we have handed down covenants - we are a covenant making people*

Covenants are both more simple and messier than contracts. In a contract, usually it is spelled out what happens when the terms of the contract are not upheld. In a covenant the expectation is that the covenant will live on beyond the missteps we humans will bring to it.

Think about how covenant makes our journey together different - radically different - than other places. In our RE classes our children often make behavior covenants of behavior around how class will happen. And this is not some new UU idea. Our reading this morning showed us that the Pilgrims needed a behavior covenant. Perhaps they were just as human as we are. Implicit, and often explicit, is the what happens if the covenant is broken clause. And it is usually something like we promise to try to work it out. So if part of the covenant is that you will keep your hands to yourself but then one child pinches another child then there is a time when words are used so that an understanding can be reached and the relationship can be repaired.

This is radical. This moves beyond you keep your part of the deal and I will keep mine. We live in a world where right and wrong good and bad are often defined by do I get taken care of. Do I have what I need. I will only participate in something if I get what I want. And if I am not getting what I want then I am gone.

Our commitment to the worth and dignity of each human being leads us to a place that says I will stay in relationship with you, even though you break your vows a thousand times, because because because that is who we are.

And in talking about covenant I have to ask Why do we gather in covenant? in community?

Because you know it is messy. There are days not many but there are days when my husband is gone, and my children are out of the house, and I know that i will have a stretch of several hours alone. I get a lot done. I can set a course and stick to it. No one yells "Mom" no one says hey do you know where ... It is amazing. My plans are my plans. My kids and husband come home - there are hugs and kisses hellos and

how are you but I can tell you the train of todos that has been chugging along comes to a screeching halt. Community is wonderful but it is messy too.

Each of us is on a journey and that is why we are here in this place on this Sunday morning instead of staying home surfing the web and drinking our favorite morning beverage. We are seekers. We don't have the answers we are looking for the answers.

It might be neat and tidier to look for those answers by ourselves. Any one of you could be a wise spiritual person who spends their time alone meditating and being open to the sacred. That might be more efficient.

But we UUs we are not necessarily about efficiency. We are a people who like to be in community. Which is kind of funny because that is not our reputation. We have a reputation as being a bit cantankerous.

There are many jokes about UUs many of them not good, but some carry a germ of truth in them like:

Q: Why can't UUs sing very well in choirs?

A: Because they're always reading ahead to see if they agree with the next verse.

Or

A Unitarian Universalist died, and to his surprise discovered that there was indeed an afterlife. The angel in charge of these things told him, "Because you were an unbeliever and a doubter and a skeptic, you will be sent to Hell for all eternity — which, in your case, consists of a place where no one will disagree with you ever again!"

Or

Visitors on a tour of Heaven noticed a group of Unitarian Universalists, who were arguing about whether or not they were really there.

I don't take these jokes seriously because I know you, I know us, I know the larger denomination. Yes we can be argumentative, but we keep coming back and we keep showing up. If we were really all that argumentative we would stay home. We are drawn to community.

We are the people who stand on the side of love. We show up. We care. We give. We love the hell out of this world. We do this because this is our path and because we know it is good and true and right. We also know that at times it will be hard and scary

and lonely. We know at times that our needs might not be met. But covenant provides a safety net that contract does not.

You all know this you have lived it. This Friday and Saturday David Pyle the District Executive of the Joseph Priestly District was with us to lead the startup event. Friday we started the storytelling. It became clearer to me how much this congregation went through when you all had the years of conflict in the near past. It became clearer to me how much pain you all felt. It also became clear to me that you all get covenant. Those of you who hung in there through the tough times did that because you had covenanted with this community. This was your tribe and you were willing to grow and learn and change and do things differently. Because of that our heart, the heart of this congregation got just a little bit bigger.

When we take the first principle seriously and value the worth and dignity of each individual we find out that it is not about earning our way into this community. We do not need to know the secret handshake, there is not an inner circle. We don't earn our way in. When we take that first principle seriously our side of the covenant is that we will value the inherent worth and dignity of any person who walks through that door. That is hard but What we find out is that it is only within covenant where we can be fully human, where we can be loved and honored by others.

This is our promise to gather in love, to support one another in grace and tolerance, to seek a deeper truth, to have love and service at our center, while being open to awe

In a world without end,  
may it be so