

When I was in seminary I was required to participate in some kind of cross-cultural experience. I chose a three-week trip, with other United Church of Christ folks, to Germany to visit three different congregations in the Evangelische Kirche a sibling denomination of the UCC. I was young 24. There was one other 20 something on that trip and all the other folks were 60 years old or above. We were a group of people gathered in a shared endeavor to learn more about this sibling church and how their church was the same and different than our church. But I don't remember us really talking about what it would mean to travel together, how would we get along and what would we do if there were conflicts. I would not call that group I was part of covenanted even though we chose to travel together and even for that short time we were beholden to one another. Most days we had a schedule that had been set for us but one day we were on our own. Several of us decided to go on a hike. I, as I am wont to do took the lead. Some of you will recognize how foolish this was because some of you know that I do not have a good sense of direction. But I was a seminarian and the folks I was with imbued me with a certain amount of respect because of that and I kind of took to it. So off we went on a hike and lost we got. Not terribly lost but lost enough that some of the folks who were older and perhaps could not hike as fast as I struggled. I will admit that I was not a good leader. I did not pay attention to the larger group; I did not pace myself so that all could participate. We found our way back; I don't remember how I have vague memories of one of the older men gently stepping in and steering us in the right direction. What I do remember about that experience was how badly I felt after ward that I had not cared for the people around me better.

And really covenants are about us taking care of one another

I'll wait for you, and if I should fall behind, wait for me

Covenant – is a bit of a two edged sword for us Unitarian Universalists. We are a people defined by our covenant – we have no central creed – really we have this central promise to one another. We have a congregational covenant here at First UU and our national Unitarian Universalist Association has a covenant that contain our beloved seven principles and it begins with these words “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote.” We do not even ask people to believe the seven principles but rather to affirm and promote.

We define ourselves by our relationships and we talk about being “in” relationship. But here is that other edge of the sword – if some are in relationship then some must be not in – or out of relationship. By defining ourselves as a covenanted community it means that some are out of covenant – that is a bit exclusionary and generally speaking we UUs do not like to admit to our exclusive behaviors.

Our history is that the Puritans came over from England seeking religious freedom, or at least freedom from the dominant religion in England. The Puritans saw themselves as creating a city on a hill – a place of godliness that would shine out to all the world. And in their Calvinist theology God had predestined the godly folks to prosper – and so failure was a not simply a not attaining ones goals – it was an indicator that God was not going to save you and send you to eternal damnation – the stakes were high for the

Puritans. So if you were not following the covenant possible outcome was death.

We can think that the religiosity of the Puritans is the cause of their rigidity and violent reactions to people breaking covenant. But they were not the only group at the time to live in covenanted communities.

Pirates – ah pirates they had their own covenants – called codes. Not many of them have survived. If the authorities captured a pirate ship the written codes would often be destroyed so that it could not be used against them in a court of law. Here for example is a code - abbreviated - from Henry Morgan

1. Every man has a vote in affairs of moment; has equal title to the fresh provisions, or strong liquors, at any time seized, and may use them at pleasure, unless a scarcity (not an uncommon thing among them) makes it necessary, for the good of all, to vote a retrenchment.
2. No person to game at cards or dice for money.
3. The lights and candles to be put out at eight o'clock at night: if any of the crew, after that hour still remained inclined for drinking, they were to do it on the open deck. [Evidently pirates had a bedtime]
4. To keep their piece, pistols, and cutlass clean and fit for service.
5. No boy or woman to be allowed amongst them.

6. To desert the ship or their quarters in battle, was punished with death or marooning.

7. No striking one another on board, but every man's quarrels to be ended on shore, at sword and pistol.

8. No man to talk of breaking up their way of living, till each had shared one thousand pounds. If in order to this, any man should lose a limb, or become a cripple in their service, he was to have eight hundred dollars, out of the public stock, and for lesser hurts, proportionately.

9. The musicians to have rest on the Sabbath Day, but the other six days and nights, none without special favour.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pirate_code

Pirates are not to be romanticized - They were violent predators of the sea. But among themselves they had a code a covenant. They had a bedtime, they were to treat each other well while on the ship, and if one was hurt he was taken care of financially. Susan Ritchie, UU historian, tells us "when you think about it, in some weird ways, the pirates and the puritans have quite a bit in common, right, because they're both groups of people who hated hierarchy, who associated hierarchy with oppression, and who longed to find some kind of space where their personal practice wasn't dictated by others"

<http://alturl.com/pdmww>

I'll wait for you, and if I should fall behind, wait for me

The world is different now than it was in the 15 and 16 hundreds. A pretty obvious statement I know. But consider only some of the differences. When the Puritans arrived here They thought they were establishing this city on a hill – they would create the kingdom of God here on earth and there was the doctrine of discovery that idea that this land was put here precisely for the benefit of the white man. And there were seemingly unlimited resources. The country was so big the land looked limitless.

But we are not there now. We know that our land is limited. The population of the world is too large. We know that we are using the earth resources at a rate that means we need like 2.5 earths to be sustainable.

Maybe we need to be doing covenant differently. Maybe it should not be that you are part of the covenant in order to be in the saved group – maybe it should be that you are in the covenant in order to be in the group that is fighting the powers that are shortening our future.

--

Maybe we need to recognize that our old concept of covenant was based on either or thinking – your in or your out your saved or your damned and we now understand that relationships and communities are much more complex than that.

Maybe we need to learn that there is a different way to covenant

I'll wait for you, and if I should fall behind, wait for me

So we know now that if you are outside the covenant you can't just move down the road, or adventure out and start your own utopian society. The growth of population, our 21st century understanding of science, the fact of climate change tells us nothing else that there is no other table.

As UUs we can show the world what it means now to be a community in covenant.

Sue Phillips said last spring at our last District Assembly "If we walk alone every which way charting our own course it is not possible to be religious people we may be able to practice spirituality by ourselves but it is only by walking with others that personal spirituality transmits into religious. ... I would propose we cannot be Unitarian Universalist by ourselves" Living a covenant is a way of living the interdependent web and the world needs that message now. And there is no way we can get outside of that interdependent web.

Sue Phillips also said:

UU-ism tells us that we are called to create Beloved community within community.

She went on to describe our theological history and how in the midst of some radical diversity of beliefs we have been able to hold together because we have followed the thread of covenant. The act of covenanting and re-covenanting has allowed us to stay together deepen our faith work for justice create a better world. She called us theological badasses

All of my remarks about our history, about our struggle with who is UU and who is not, come down to this – a covenant is a promise not a statement – it is an aspiration not a achieved state of being. It is changing not fixed. Each of us will, in our behaviors will move in and out of covenant, closer and further away to that table.

If we make a covenant it will be broken – we humans are the promise makers and promise breakers. We often cannot understand what is sacred until we desecrate it. The beauty of covenant is not that it is anti-establishment; the beauty is not that we are some sort of rebel separate from the rest of American Society – thumbing our nose at it like Puritans or Pirates. The beauty of covenant is that we are intentional and transparent about our relationship with one another unlike that trip of mine in seminary we promise to stay in relationship to stay at the table to come back again and again to the relationship to care for one another.

So we UUs are we Puritans or Pirates I think we are neither we are not defined by our history but rather by our aspirations. I would like to think that we aspire to be more like the Zen teacher in our story this morning - seeking to keep all at the table.

The great American storyteller, parable maker, minstrel, rock musician Bruce Springsteen set out a covenant in one of the most succinct ways I have heard.

I'll wait for you, and if I should fall behind, wait for me."

In a world without end may this be so.