

Covenant and Community
Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley
Neighborhood UU Church
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Invocation

By Monica Jacobson-Tennessen

What is it
That calls you here
That calls you onward
That calls you inward
That leads you homeward?

What is it
That gives you the power
To make that change
To ask that question
To take that journey?

What is it
That says you have done well
That asks you to learn more
That brings you to stillness
That holds you up in hard times?

It is relationship
The beating heart of our faith.

It begins when we share
This hour
Our truths
This air
Our hearts. Come, let us worship together.

Prayer

Elizabeth Tarbox

Spirit of Life, I give thank for the opportunities to love that present themselves in the turmoil of life.

Where the light catches the tears in another's eyes, where hands are held and there are moments without words, let us be present then, and alive to the possibility of changing. Let us seek to make another's well-being the object of our concern. Let us seek to be present to another's pain, to bathe another's wounds, hear another's sadness, celebrate another's success, and allow the other's story, to change our own.

Let us stand in the morning on damp grass, hear the syllables of bird song, and fill up on sweet air that rolls over oceans and continents. Let us look up at the stars and the planets that will the night sky with majesty. Let us witness the fresh buds of spring, the bright leaves of fall, and the brown sticks of winter. And for all this, let us be grateful.

Let us not defend ourselves against the discomfort of unruly emotion, nor seek to close down our hearts for fear a new love will come to shake our foundations. Let us instead be open to discovering a new way of seeing an old problem, or appreciating the perfection of a seashell, or the possibility of friendship. For, in giving ourselves to what we do not understand, we receive life's blessing, and, in taking care of another, we are cared for.

Amen.

Sermon

I did my ministerial internship at the First Parish in Duxbury, Massachusetts. This congregation has a long and noble lineage. It was the second settled congregation by the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock just across the bay from Duxbury. Whatever we may think about the colonization of America (and I have plenty of opinions about that) I was in awe when I thought of how that congregation had continued for four centuries. They had box pews and a pulpit that soared 15 feet above the congregation. There was a pair of plaques on either side of the chancel which featured various biblical verses. For someone who came from a humanist congregation founded in the 1950's in Houston Texas I didn't quite know what to make of this bastion of traditionalism.

Every Sunday they recited what is known as the Ames Covenant, written sometime in the 1880s by Charles Gordon Ames for the Unitarian Society in Philadelphia which he founded. It read, "In the love of truth and in the spirit of Jesus Christ, we unite for the worship of God and the service of man." You can imagine that some of those words stuck in my throat. I didn't mind mentioning Jesus as a role model, but Jesus Christ? And I was beginning to think that God wasn't such a bad word, but was worshipping God my purpose? And of course, the service of *man*. Need I say more.

It must be said that there was probably not a single person in that congregation that actually agreed with that covenant in this manner, but good New Englanders that they were, they were reluctant to change a tradition of such long standing. And what would it be replaced by? Shouldn't we be able to say why we gather? Who gets to write those words? My supervisor, Robbie Walsh, was a very deliberate man. He started a process in which we looked at covenants from many UU churches, and studied what this covenant meant in Unitarian Universalist history. And I have to say I was a bit frustrated with the slowness of this process. Then Robbie went away on a six month sabbatical leaving me in charge. In charge! I quickly set about putting a committee together that brainstormed many different words and phrases and came up with something I thought was quite satisfactory! Job done!

When Robbie returned from sabbatical, to say he was disappointed in me for pushing this through was an understatement. At first I thought this was just because he didn't like something that he didn't have a hand in building. And then he explained: "Terasa, a covenant isn't just a few fine phrases strung together. It represents a sacred agreement, something the whole congregation needs to wrestle with and come to understand as a promise they make, not just a pretty phrase they repeat each Sunday. A small committee just can't do that." Oomph. I began to get it.

We often say that Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal religion, rather than a creedal one. What we mean by that, is that we do not organize ourselves around one

common theological belief. People can have many different theological perspectives and still come together in community. What holds us together is not our belief, but what we promise to do and be together. That is why we have principles rather than belief statements. It's a hard shift to understand if you're used to creedal churches. I can't tell you how many times I've been asked, What do UUs believe about Jesus? What do UUs believe happens when you die? What do UUs believe about God? And the best answer I can ever come up with is, it depends! It depends on which UU you are talking to! And, by the way, if I knew what happens to us after we die, I would be out on the lecture circuit making much more money!

One concept that goes far back in our history is that we consider ourselves to be a "priesthood of all believers." In other words, we don't need a priest to interpret things for us, we all have the ability to come to our own understandings ourselves. So that means my job is not to tell you what to believe.

This way we have had of de-emphasizing belief has led to the unfortunate misconception that Unitarian Universalists believe nothing! Or that we define ourselves by what we don't believe. It has been helpful to me to be introduced to the process theologian Henry Nelson Wieman who talks about the difference between *belief* and *faith*. Beliefs are those explanations about how life works, that grow and evolve over time, that can change as new evidence and new experiences make us view things differently.

But faith is something different. Faith is an orientation of the spirit, that essential need to affirm the creative good in the universe, a commitment to a humble recognition that our beliefs are partial, but that they help lead us toward the best within the reach of our human experience. Wieman put it this way: "I am committed to what I believe can bring human life to the best it can attain ... I am not committed to my belief. My belief is merely the means by which I give my life's devotion to what transforms life toward the greatest good."

Which takes us back to the concept of covenant. For how can we have faith in the good in the universe and in humankind without it first manifesting in our small communities? I sometimes find it hard to hold onto a faith in humankind. But if I think about it in this more localized way, do I have faith in this community? The answer is unequivocally yes. That doesn't mean that we are perfect with each other all the time. Far from it. But that what we do together is a promise to try to bring out the best in ourselves and one another.

So how do we do that? We can't automatically know what we need from one another. And so in the last few decades, many churches have tried to articulate that, this one included, by developing a covenant of right relations. Every Sunday one of our Board members repeats a part of that covenant so that we keep it foremost in our minds. Covenants such as this try to help us avoid harmful behavior, by asking for our promises to listen to and respect one another, for example. But they also ask us to do

something that can be even more important and that is easily overlooked. They ask us to show up. To show up for our whole community. To show up for one another.

My colleague Marcus Liefert offers a useful metaphor for what I am trying to get at. He says: "Unitarian Universalists are mosaic makers. We are a people who bring together the broken pieces of our histories and the shining pieces of our seeking and, piece by piece create a mosaic religion. ...But our mosaic making tells another story too, one that is often more difficult to see. One that is essential to the purpose of religious community. One that lies not in the beautiful and broken bits and pieces but in the grout. Grout. The chalky, gritty stuff that is squeezed between the cracks of tiles. The grout of a community takes years to lay and settle. Grout happens in board meetings and committee meetings and endless emails and slow-moving institutions. ... We help to make the grout when we learn each other's names and when we reach out across generational divides. We help to make the grout when we show up on Sunday morning without having first checked to see if we're interested in the sermon topic. When a newborn arrives to be blessed by the community, it is the grout that enables us to welcome them. And it is in the grout that we rest when we gather to grieve and memorialize a beloved one who dies."

I can't say that grout is the most appealing way of thinking about community. But I'm coming to think grout is pretty important right now. We can't always be the shiny piece in the mosaic. I think we're at this really strange inflection point culturally. For months we have had to subsist on our own, in isolation from others. While that was really traumatic in the beginning, many of us became rather accustomed to it. I've been talking about this a lot lately. We almost have to force ourselves out into the open to engage again. But we've also learned how much we need one another. We need one another to be vaccinated. We need one another to help rebuild this world in a way that is more just and connected in a healthy way. It starts with us. It starts here.

My colleague Gretchen Haley says: "What our faith asks of us, what our faith imagines for us, is that somehow, right at that moment when our hearts break, we will find our way to see through that heartbreak. We will stay put – not close off, not run away, not hurt back – but keep on being in relationship, doing what we can to repair the world and each other." Our hearts have been broken over and over again in the last few years. Here is where we can begin to piece things together again.

When I think about where I want to put my energy at this point, it is here, with you. Building this community together. When I think about where I want to devote my resources it is here, with you, to help sustain this congregation so that it may grow and thrive into the future. I just decided to double my pledge to the church. I could use those resources to buy something new, but I really don't need anything new. I need you, and this community.

George Eliot said, "What do we live for if it is not to make life less difficult for each other?" I would put it even more positively: What do we live for, if not to give and receive and receive and give all over again. I know well this experience of being tended to in this congregation. When I had my hand surgery last March, 10 wonderful folks showed up at my door every other evening with delicious food. And two more met me at the dog park to help me walk my dogs. I would venture to say that they did not do this out of duty. The joy of giving to another was apparent in their faces. They expected nothing back. But I hope my gratitude was its own gift. Building this web of reciprocity builds the web of life. Or, to return to our earlier metaphor, we stir and mix the grout and lay the foundation for the next generation to come.

What binds us together is not a common set of beliefs. What binds us together is that we willingly enter into a covenant that affirms a faith in one another, that is brought to life only by our living and acting on that faith. So may it be.

Benediction

- [Kristen L. Harper](#)

I do not wish to breathe another breath if it is not shared with others. The breath of life is not mine alone.

I brought myself to be with you, hoping that by inhaling the compassion, the courage, the hope found here, I can exhale the fear, the selfishness, the separateness I keep so close to my skin.

I cannot live another moment, at least not one of joy, unless you and I find our oneness somewhere among each other, somewhere between the noise, somewhere within the silence of the next breath.