

The Unitarian Church of Montpelier
December 13, 2009
Rev. Mara J. Dowdall

“Thus Do We Covenant”

Our reading this morning comes from Mari Evans. Evans is an African-American poet and writer who lives in Indianapolis. This poem is called “Celebration” and it is written in dialect. It was included in a UUA youth curriculum on spirituality and poetry. I first heard it last year when a colleague of mine at the UUA read it aloud at a conference.¹

I will bring you a whole person
and you will bring me a whole person
and we will have us twice as much
of love and everything

I be bringing a whole heart
and while it do have nicks and
dents and scars,
that only make me lay it down
more careful-like
An' you be bringing a whole heart
a little chipped and rusty an'
sometime skip a beat but
still an' all you bringing polish too
and look like you intend
to make it shine

we be bringing, each of us
the music of ourselves to wrap
the other in

Forgiving clarities
soft as a choir's last
lingering note our
personal blend

I will be bringing you someone whole
and you will be bringing me someone whole
and we be twice as strong
and we be twice as sure
and we will have twice as much
of love and everything

¹Mari Evans, “Celebration,” See:
<http://uua.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/tapestryfaith/exploringour/workshop6/workshopplan/handouts/113730.shtml>

Back in my first fall of divinity school, one of the four courses I enrolled in was Introduction to the Hebrew Bible. As you can imagine, surveying the entire Hebrew scriptures from “Let There Be Light” all the way through the psalms in one short semester was nothing short of biblical whirlwind – so of course, not everything we studied during that semester stayed with me.

But one thing I do remember clearly was that the Hebrew Bible contains a lot of covenants. Every week presented a new covenant, it seemed. First, after the flood, God made a covenant with Noah on behalf of all humankind – then a few chapters later in Genesis, he made one with Abraham. And of course, who could forget the covenant with Moses which gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments. Per God’s instructions, that last set of promises between him and his people got carried around in a special vessel – the Ark of the Covenant. There are others, too.

Strangely enough, this fall at the Unitarian church of Montpelier has reminded me a lot of that Hebrew Bible survey course. Not because I am studying the Prophets or cramming to learn the names of important biblical characters. But rather, and here you can probably guess from our service theme this morning, I have been reminded of my Hebrew Bible adventures, because like the pages of the Pentateuch, the past few months have also contained a lot of covenants.

In fact, the idea to have a service around the theme of covenant arose last month when I realized that, as part of my start-up here in Montpelier, I was in the midst of creating not one – but three distinct covenants to give shape and clarity to all of the new relationships being formed– relationships with the Minister Emerita and all of you, relationships with and among the staff, and relationships with your governing body, the Executive Committee. It seemed important to share these covenants with all of you.

It also seemed apt morning for this topic when we were partaking in a ritual that is in of itself a form of covenanting. As Sherri noted in her Time for All Ages, Will’s dedication this morning offered all of us a chance to make promises to a new life among us. In our dedication ceremonies, we affirm our intention to live in supportive relationship with a child and her or his parents.

We say: Through this ceremony, we commit ourselves to the nurture of this child.

If you stop to think about it, a lot of what we do in church is covenanting. Last Sunday in our new member ceremony, we made solemn promises to one another – and so too every Sunday when we read our Unison Affirmation. The Executive Committee made a covenant at their annual retreat in August – and each of our Small Group Ministries’ agreed on one at their first sessions this fall.

Like God and his people in the Hebrew Bible, we here at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier seem to have caught the covenant wave.

But as much as covenants abound this fall at UCM, the concept of covenant goes beyond any particular ritual we perform in worship or any specific set of promises we aspire to here at the start of a new ministry in this congregation.

It also about who we say we are as a Unitarian Universalist people of faith.

In the September 2009 edition of the journal *Quest*, my colleague Thom Belote talks about the fact that, as Unitarian Universalists, we are a part of a covenantal, rather than a creedal faith. He begins his article by describing an experience he had a few years ago when he found himself being interviewed about what it means to be UU. Thom, who serves a congregation in Kansas, was at a demonstration protesting abstinence-only education legislation. I'm going to share with you, in Thom's words, what happens next²:

You see, at the protest there were these two young women hanging out. They were amateurish reporters for a fundamentalist Christian magazine. Soon, word got out that a minister was at the protest—that minister happened to be me—and the next thing you know these two were making a bee-line to me to interview this minister who supports sex ed. "How," they wondered, "is that possible?"

I introduced myself as a Unitarian Universalist minister. They asked me how to spell that, and then they asked me to explain what UUs believe. I explained that we are a covenantal faith, not a creedal faith. We share a covenant of how we try to be together, not a creed of what we all must believe together.

Then the questions really began:

"Well, does your church believe in the Bible?"

My response: That is a creedal question. We are a covenantal church. We share a covenant of how we try to be together, not what we are expected to believe together.

"Does your church believe in God?" they asked. That is a creedal question. We are a covenantal church. We share a covenant of how we try to be together, not what we are expected to believe together.

This went on for a while. It took them a while to get this. They were being challenged to think in a new way.

Tom continues: *I think that sometimes in our churches we stress the fact that we are not a creedal church a lot more than we stress that we are a covenantal church. We emphasize the creeds we are not asked to recite more than the covenants we are asked to share. We over-emphasize the fact that we are not necessarily required to believe in God or believe a certain doctrine about the Bible or the afterlife. And we under-emphasize the covenantal dimensions of our shared faith, preferring not to articulate the covenants of behavior we do share.*

Tom writes, *I'm really passionate about the idea of covenant. I believe it strikes at the core of our identities as Unitarian Universalists: that covenant can shape our lives and our living— can be a central motivating force in our lives. But let's face it: covenant isn't a sexy idea. Covenant is one of those religious lingo words—like creed, or catechism, or charisma, or co-substantial—that comes across as jargon-y and overly intellectual.*

² Thom Belote, "Covenantal – Not Creedal," *Quest*, September 2009. See: <http://clf.uua.org/quest/2009/09/belote.html>. I use italics in the section below to emphasize that the words come from Tom's article and are his, not mine.

Like my colleague Thom Belote, I, too, am passionate about the idea of covenant – even as I also know that it isn't that sexy of an idea.

And like Thom, who goes on in his article to breath life and vitality into this ancient theological and legal-sounding concept, I believe that covenants are, as he puts it, "powerful." In Thom's words, "the promises we make have the power to change lives; the promises call upon us to live up to our best selves, to summon forth our true, authentic, vulnerable, and passionate [beings]."³

My friends, when we enter into covenant with one another in spiritual community, we are not simply making rules or guidelines that govern our behavior – though the details of our particular covenants may sound rather mundane and legalistic.

Each time we make a covenant – no matter how basic the promises – even if they include things as humdrum as "we will start our meetings on time" – each time we make one, we are stating our intention of how we want to be together, and that in my book is a sacred act.

Why?

Because entering covenant requires us to be honest about who we are and what need to feel safe and respected and welcome in community.

And because entering covenant requires us to listen deeply to the other about who they are and what they need to feel safe and respected and welcome in community.

Why?

Because entering covenant asks us to search our heart and find there what we are willing to offer another person – and it asks us to stretch ourselves each day as we seek to live up to the serious – and often challenging – promises we make.

Why?

Because when fall short of the covenants we have made, which, as human beings, we will inevitably do, we are called to practice apology, forgiveness, and recommitment – ancient spiritual practices that are also themselves sacred acts.

The promises we make have the power to change lives.

They call us to be our best selves.

*They summon forth our true, authentic, vulnerable and passionate beings.*⁴

* * *

³ In the last phrase, I substituted the word "beings" for "selves."

⁴ See Belote.

There is a lot more that could be said about covenant – from the way it plays out in the Bible to how our early Puritan forbearers understood it in their churches. Be warned: This preacher thinks there may be more sermons on covenant in our future – after all, we are a covenantal faith.

But perhaps for today, it is enough to say this: Our covenants matter; they speak the truth of who we are and they stake claim to who we want to be in the world. They speak of the “love and the everything”⁵ we bring to and live out in our spiritual community.

They affirm that we bring to our relationships and to this place – our whole person – our whole hearts, that though imperfect – though bruised and nicked – still offer a deep and abiding love.

The poet writes:⁶

we be bringing, each of us
the music of ourselves to wrap
the other in

Forgiving clarities
soft as a choir's last
lingering note our
personal blend

I will be bringing you someone whole
and you will be bringing me someone whole
and we be twice as strong
and we be twice as sure
and we will have twice as much
of love and everything

Love is the doctrine of this church,⁷ my friends. May it live in and through us in our covenants, in our promises, in our solemn vows. Now and in the days to come. Amen.

⁵ See Evans.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ From the L. Griswold Williams covenant, *Singing the Living Tradition* #471.