

Commitment and Faith

A Homily by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

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In June of 2010, I entered into covenant with my spouse as we created a bond of marriage. On that day we vowed to walk together in constant and faithful partnership through all that life might bring.

With this vow I bound my heart to another.

In May of 2011, I entered into covenant with God, whom I know as Creative Love, and with the church universal as I was ordained to the office of ministry. On that day, I vowed to walk with our faith communities and with the Holy in the ways of love, truth, and service my whole life long.

With this vow I bound my life to its own greater purpose.

In January of 2013, I entered into covenant with you, during a ceremony where your call was confirmed and I was installed as your third settled minister. On that day, we vowed, with a sense of responsibility and joy, (and I quote!) “to walk together in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in all the ways of Love.”

With this vow I bound my spirit to a community.

Even now, saying those words, I feel deep emotion. These three formal vows are the pinnacle moments of my life so far - each commitment opening the way into a deeper engagement with life and love, each of them marking me and calling forth all I have to give – each changing me irrevocably.

If the spirit had growth rings, like a tree, these three moments of covenant would be my strongest, brightest, widest rings.

If you think back on your own growth rings and mountaintop moments, I am guessing that they, too, will represent some vow – whether formal or informal. Our lives are marked by promise – by commitments to life and love across our span of days, as we walk through this world binding ourselves to those who we would have share our journey.

There is the unspoken vow to life itself made with the birth of a child; there are spoken and voiceless vows of love creating friendship and family; there are lifestyle transformations that began with a promise to yourself, to God, to the earth, or to the vocation that called you on.

Our lives are made up of the vows that bind us to each other, to that which is sacred, and to the mysterious center of life itself.

Our covenants bind us together in a great tapestry of shared life and destiny, into the great communion of all souls. They bind us to those who have lived and loved and covenanted themselves before us, and they bind us especially in a vow to all those lives that will come after us.

But a covenant is not just a promise made to another human person. Our lives themselves are a promise made to the Universe, and a great covenant tethers us to a larger source and a deeper meaning.

Unitarian Theologian James Luther Adams writes of that covenant beyond our human bonds. He says: “The covenant is a covenant of being. It is a covenant with the creative, sustaining, commanding, transforming powers which may be interpreted theistically or non-theistically” He goes on: “In a religious covenant the orientation is to something we cannot control but something upon which we depend – even for our freedom. Jonathan Edwards called it, “the covenant of being.”¹

In this way, the concept of covenant rests at the paradoxical point where our dependence on the mysteries of being meet our agency in creating and keeping human commitments. Our capacity to make, keep, break, and renew promise is a combination of unearned gift and solemn intention.

We make covenants to bind ourselves together and express our desire for greater love and life more abundant. And yet our human covenants rest on that larger “Covenant of Being” into which we were born and upon which we depend.

So to say that our tradition is covenantal, is to say something deeper than a lecture on polity or how we organize ourselves. Our tradition of covenant is a deep theological stance and worldview that expresses our simultaneous *faith in* and *commitment to* Life itself and the Love that will not let us go.

I would even go so far as to say that covenant is the great spiritual tool that our faith has to offer our world.

Commitment and faith are rare experiences in our culture today – experiences for which I long. I suspect I am not alone in this.

In a technological, globalized world where the options laid out before us are almost infinite, and for a generation told we could be and have anything we could dream or desire, choosing a path to walk together with intention and commitment is both painful and achingly desirable. The world is open before us, but it is too big. Amid such breadth, we long for the depth that true commitment brings.

In an age of ambiguity when no truth is absolute, and apathy is encouraged, binding ourselves to each other and making solemn commitments out of a sense of trust in life and in the power of love – these are some of the most difficult, countercultural and transformative things we can do.

¹ James Luther Adams, as quoted in *Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant* edited by Walter P. Herz. Pub. 1999 by Skinner House Books.

We come to church in order to find passion, depth, and commitment. We come searching for real and true things to give our lives over to. We come to church to bind ourselves to each other and to a greater purpose – to tether our lives to what really matters.

We come because we need to be in covenant.

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote that religion and faith are essentially the practice of orienting our lives toward an Ultimate Concern. Henry Nelson Wieman, a Unitarian and process theologian, later added his proposition that religion is driven not only by consideration of an ultimate concern but by the urge or desire to make an ultimate commitment. “Inevitably in our lives we commit ourselves to something, whether worthy or not. The direction and intensity of our loyalties give shape and meaning to our lives. Loyalties, commitments, covenants, the promises we make to one another: These are the things [that] tell us to what we belong. By doing so they tell us who we are.”²

This combination of Ultimate Concern and Ultimate Commitment is essential for Unitarian Universalists, as practitioners of a covenantal faith. Though we all have them, we do not all share the same exact Ultimate Concern. In our diversity of experience and belief, what we share is Ultimate Commitment – the vow of Love that binds us to a deeper connection with each other and with Life itself, for better or worse, through thick and thin. If our ultimate commitment tells us to what we belong, then the strength of our covenantal faith is the memory that in this world, in this life, we belong to each other. All of us, every one.

What you find here is not fists grasped on some statement of belief, but rather hands open to take your hand, as we walk together in all the ways of Love.

This we pledge: To belong to each other. To journey together as we seek that deeper meaning, which calls us on... To be changed together as we bind our hearts to the good and the right and the true... To work together as we build that nobler world of which we have dreamed.

This is our great covenant. May it be so.

² “Belonging: The Meaning of Membership” by the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), 2001.