

Walking Together- Exploring Covenant

A sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Silver City

October 9, 2016 by Rev. Claudia Elferdink

Do you take walks alone? maybe to commune with nature, health reasons, or sometimes to just get out of the house! Walking alone is solitary, you can listen to the ravens calling out overhead, maybe hear the rumble of cars and trucks, or stop to enjoy a raucous stand of bright yellow sunflowers. Walking alone gives time for reflection, maybe sorting through a difficult issue, deciding how you will vote in the election or making a big life decision. It is your time, alone, and no one to consult. You pick the pace, the distance, the route!

Walking together, with at least another person or even a dog requires some negotiation about speed, time and a myriad of other things. If you are undertaking a walk, or especially a hike with several others, you are now a group considering your choices. Many ideas and preferences are put forth. The I becomes we.

Conrad Wright, a great twentieth century Unitarian Universalist thinker, pondered this question of Walking Together as a metaphor for being together as a UU community where we have different opinions beliefs. He turned to the Prophet Amos, chapter 3. Amos asks, "Can two walk together except they be agreed?"

Conrad Wright described how America's earliest Unitarians, including Channing and Emerson, both rejected the trinity, and argued it was possible to walk in fellowship despite theological differences. This diversity of belief was a significant break with the more orthodox Christians who insisted that "to be in fellowship" everyone had to accept the same creed. The orthodox response to Amos' questions was, yes, to walk together, two people had to be agreed. It was not possible to walk together with people who were not agreed. These Calvinists felt their true religion would be polluted by walking with those who diverged from their so-called traditional Christianity.

But these new liberals, such as Channing and Emerson, strongly disagreed with the Orthodox. The difference, they argued was not theology but how Unitarians saw human nature. The orthodox Calvinists saw humans as sinful, corrupting, unworthy, unless they were saved in their orthodox form of Christian salvation. The orthodox excluded everyone not like themselves. Human nature was depraved and unworthy and required separating the saved from the damned.

The Unitarians rejected this “purity” and “denunciation” of the Calvinists. They claimed that small differences in creed or doctrines should not divide people. If people acted with good will and compassion, even with, and especially with divergent beliefs and doctrine, they could benefit from fellowship with one another. It was character, kindness, openness and hope that mattered. Tolerance was essential in walking together. To be in fellowship, both people need not agree on everything. It was how they walked together, with respect.... humility and love.

As we sang this morning, “Though I may speak with bravest fire, and have the gift to all inspire, and have not love, my words are vain, as sounding brass, and hopeless gain.”

Unlike the orthodox, Unitarians saw humans as righteous and sometimes noble. Yes, they could falter, show anger or be unkind. Whether you call it walking together, being in fellowship or having a covenant, the hardest part for the individuals and the community they are part of is when people falter, when they lose sight of their better selves. The community is called on to act for the common good, with love.

How can we remember what we have in common as UUs? How can we get help when we need it? How can we reach out as a fellowship when we lose our way?

Covenants look nice hanging on a wall in good times. The words are eloquent. However, covenants are really written for hard times when hope and inspiration are needed. Covenants are a reminder of good intentions and commitments.

A bullying incident developed in a UU congregation and many were very distressed. When one of the leaders was asked, "Don't we have a covenant? Does it offer any guidance?" It was like a light bulb going off! Oh, that is where we can turn!

It has taken several hundred years and many challenging disagreements to reach our current widely inclusive UU community. It took much understanding, forgiveness, kindness and cooling off. It took a lot of love- And we are still at it!

Whether you are a humanist, liberal Christian, atheist, Buddhist, Sufi, agnostic, or another life-affirming belief, you are welcome to walk together here. We walk together even when we are not agreed, with compassion, and firm in our covenant.

I invite you to take up the large dark blue hymnal, Singing the Living Tradition. Please open it to the page before the first hymn.

Please read along with me the top half of the page.

"We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association" covenant to affirm and promote.....

Covenant, there is the word right with our Purposes and Principles. It has always been there since the Purposes and Principles were approved in 1985. These words are an important part of our Unitarian Universalist tradition, in part because with no creed, we need to agree on how we are together. Our purposes and principles express some of our common values. They are not a creed, but expand how we see what it means to be human. We are in covenant with fellow Unitarian Universalists all over America to affirm and promote these principles.

I am very interested in our UU history. Just a few weeks ago I was doing some research in Providence, Rhode Island, at the First Unitarian Church there. I

needed to know if a woman and her father had been members of the church in the 19th century. The church secretary kindly brought out an ancient membership book covered in peeling leather. I carefully set the book on a table and opened it to the first page. On top of a list of sequential dates and widely divergent signatures, written in large flowing script, was the word "Covenant." In a few short sentences underneath was their Covenant dated a few years earlier. Each new member had signed the membership book accepting this covenant.

Our UU Principles covenant, approved at the 1985 General Assembly are a good example of a strong and functional covenant. It is remembered and well used after 30 years.

Most congregations and fellowships include it in their literature and post it on their walls. And it is these commonly-held principles that form a foundation for the mission statement or purpose created by many congregations.

Planning this service involved looking at your mission statement. Interestingly, several versions were found, including on the website. It wasn't clear which version was actually agreed on by the Fellowship. The wording in many versions was similar to:

The UUFSC seeks to support its members on their shared life journeys through stimulating, inspiring worship services and caring, nurturing programs.

We also strive to serve the larger community within which we live, committing ourselves to socially responsible outreach, while building connections with community that will encourage diversity and growth with the Fellowship.

You may want to clarify your mission, why you are here.

This Sunday has been a long time coming. I was asked to do a three-part series on covenant last fall. Then I needed to have hip surgery in November so we postponed it to the spring. Well, then the other hip needed surgery in April,

meaning I couldn't do the sermons until this fall. I felt a little embarrassed that this was stretching out more than a year. Please, I said, feel free to find someone else to do this for you! Oh no, was the reply. What's another six months? We want you to do it.

So here we are. In all this time, the Board and committees have turned over and many people have been involved. I'd like to ask all those who have been on the Board and program committee and covenant planning committee over this period to stand and be recognized for their perseverance!

Soon we will get to today's topic: exploring covenant. In the three Sundays, today, October 23, and ending November 20, nothing will be decided. We are exploring, learning, questioning..... I ask that you be curious, open-minded and hopeful. Open minds, loving hearts, and welcoming hands....

Now, let's address the elephant in the room. That is, how your feelings might be triggered by certain words. In this case, some traditional religious words, such as church, religion, and covenant, to name a few.

Believe me friends, you are not going to shock me. I have been a Unitarian Universalist Minister for decades. This is a common issue especially in our medium size and smaller congregations and in many fellowships.

We're going to do a little exercise. Think of a religious word that bothers you, maybe even elevates your blood pressure. See the word in your mind. Say this word silently to yourself. Can you feel a visceral reaction in your body?

Now, on the count of three, say your word as loud as you want! 1, 2, 3

Now breathe, deeply, in and out. And relax.

So many of us come wounded from orthodox traditions. Orthodox means "right thinking" and if you are liberal and open-minded, you are bound to have done

battle with a priest, teacher or parent. Too often these people were not kind or understanding.

Now imagine a visitor comes to this Fellowship and uses your word. It clearly has great meaning for them. How will you respond. How will you respond when a visiting speaker uses a word that triggers someone else in the fellowship? Sometimes people want to censor trigger words. This is a slippery slope. Not only are there so many words that we lose our ability to discuss religion, but also many of the words are very important to some people.

I believe that as a faith with so much diversity as Unitarian Universalism, we each have to be spiritual translators. It is a personal practice that each of us can adopt. For example,

Church- fellowship, congregation, community

help me out...

Worship service- program

Sermon- lecture

Benediction- closing words

God-

Religion-

Hymn- song

Covenant- Walking Together- Promise

Others...

The time I translate the most is with hymns, especially with gender issues. I know that before mid-twentieth century, man or men was used to include men and women. I just don't like it because I think it makes women disappear. So you may hear me belt out "all" or "folks" when the hymnal says "men."

Once you demystify your own triggers, you have an opportunity to work to understand your strong feelings behind the words. What images come up when you hear your trigger word? A person? A time in your life? An unhappy situation?

Feeling disrespected? This might be a moment of spiritual deepening. It is also a tender and vulnerable time. Talk with someone you trust about this experience.

Translating is a helpful way to engage in the moment. It empowers you to have a constructive door into the conversation without being distracted by a visceral reaction. It might save the embarrassment of having a meltdown, and it certainly helps the larger group get on with its discussion.

Translating is also a two-way street. If you mentally or verbally insert “walking together” for church, or God, or covenant, you need to respect the reverse, someone who prefers to use the word you are translating. And you might have an interesting and perhaps spiritually deepening conversation about your respective word choices.

If you want to explore using more secular language for religious discussions, you might look into the work of Paul Tillich. Tillich was one of the 20th century’s most respected and read philosophers and theologians. One of his most popular books was The Courage to Be.

So, let’s take some time to explore covenant. Or promise, or walking together. In preparing for today, I discovered a new way of translating covenant. Covenant is a relational word. In covenant, covenantal, together bound by a promise. I realized that “In fellowship” is very similar. What does it mean for you to be “in fellowship?”

Insert your translation, you have many choices.

Covenant. Rebecca Parker, the recent president of the Unitarian Universalist Star King School for the Ministry, says that covenant begins with this question:

“What shall we promise one another?”

“What shall we promise one another?”

In simple terms, covenant means to come together. “Con,” the Latin root for together, and venire, to come. Covenant. More specifically, covenant is coming together by making a promise.

“What shall we promise one another?”

In this Fellowship? When someone joins this Fellowship, what are you promising them? Is this a safe place for them to grow their spirits? Will they be respected and loved? What is expected of them? What do they promise you?

Here are a few samples of phrases in actual UU Congregational covenants:

Listen deeply and honor others with our full attention, assume good intention.

Stay in relationship, even in conflict.

Work with conflict addressing differences with honesty and compassion; making and receiving authentic apologies; being willing to forgive.

Use kind language, speaking with care and consideration.

Seek humor and joy remembering that these qualities can enrich all that we do.

What together are you promising each year when you renew your membership here in this Fellowship? What do you need from each other to create your compassionate and justice-making spiritual home? How do you handle conflict? What is your covenant?

Covenants are functional. Sometimes they are written down after the whole congregation or fellowship has had lots of time to review and tweek. Usually,

when it has become so familiar that no one has any more to say, a vote is taken and it is usually unanimous. Often a pretty copy is framed and hung on the wall, or sometimes filed away in a drawer.

Ironically, in the midst of our planning, Carol Morrison found a 1995 covenant which had been forgotten. We'll look into that more on another day. Functionally you have been without a covenant. Conflicts have arisen but the covenant remained in the drawer.

Many congregations and fellowships do not have a written covenant, or they have forgotten that they have one. But every congregation or fellowship has at least many unspoken covenants. Each member has their own version of a covenant. How they see the Fellowship, how they expect to be treated, what is expected of them, what is acceptable on Sunday mornings, and how responsibilities are shared. Having many unspoken covenants can be dicey! Each person knows their own promises, but there is no agreement on what the whole Fellowship needs.

Individual covenants might be similar, but they can also be very different. Some could easily conflict!

Creating a covenant together or revising an old one, walking together, can air these differences and bring new harmony to Fellowship life. Or you can simply live with the differences which can become landmines.

I hope today we have opened some doors to new and different ways.

Translating your trigger words might help you come to terms with and enjoy your spiritual growing edges. Embracing differences and assuming good will could add pleasure to walking

together.

Next time we will look at individualism and how our first principle might be creating issues in our congregational life.

iFellowship: Have we taken individualism too far?