

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula**  
**Sunday September 23rd 2018**

**Sermon:** “Growing Through Covenant”

Much of our Unitarian Universalist story is told in terms of individual people, particularly if those individuals are more widely known in our culture. We might note that many of the founders of the United States were Unitarians, including our second and third US presidents, though, unlike Adams, Jefferson was only ever a Unitarian in theology, given the political expediency of belonging to the Anglican church here in Virginia. On the Universalist side, we might mention, amongst others, Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, and P. T. Barnum, more well known for the circus and the recent musical movie than for his philanthropy and opposition to slavery.

The problem with looking at our UU story in terms of well-known individuals, though, is that rarely did those individuals have a significant impact on either Unitarianism or Universalism. It makes us feel pride — or, sometimes, we have to admit, shame — to name certain people as part of our history, but did they actually change the course of our religion? We assume, of course, that their faith influenced Barton and Barnum to take up certain social causes, but did they influence Universalism? Jefferson famously predicted that, by the end of the generation, everyone would be Unitarian; he was clearly wrong about that, but in any case — since he saw faith as a wholly private matter — he did nothing to help his prediction come true.

As much as it might seem to grab less attention, in contrast to claiming some famous person as one of our own, it may be more honest to acknowledge that the course of religion is more often changed by groups of people, many of whom were just trying to figure things out. And it usually comes as a big surprise to most Unitarian Universalists to learn that one of the biggest influences on our religion, in ways that still impact us today, came from the Puritans. You know, the men with belt buckles on their hats who repressed women and banned Christmas and from whom we get words like puritanical meaning stuffy and prudish? Yes, those Puritans are our religious ancestors.

You see, for all that we may disagree with much of what they believed and with many of the ways they lived, we should be grateful that the Puritans did something quite at odds to the history of Christianity up until that point. Rather than requiring that

people agree to uphold certain beliefs as a condition of membership in the church, they required instead that people demonstrate that they had experienced conversion, which was a rather more demanding process than simply agreeing to a pre-written creed. Indeed, if someone had undergone a personal conversion experience, then creeds were irrelevant because the holy spirit would ensure that the person believed the right things anyway. So what mattered at that point, once someone was a member of the church, was not belief, but behavior.

Now this wasn't a new concept for the Puritans. After all, back in 1620 when they were still aboard the Mayflower, anchored at Provincetown thanks to a storm that prevented them from reaching Virginia as intended, the male passengers drafted a compact in which they agreed to follow common rules and regulations for the sake of order and survival. As the Mayflower Compact put it, "We, whose names are underwritten, [...] Do by these Presents, solemnly and mutually, in the Presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation, and Furtherance of the Ends aforesaid". Not every passenger was a Puritan, but they all recognized that common cause required them to band together for mutual benefit.

For the Puritan churches, there was a similar agreement enacted three decades later. The Cambridge Platform, as it became known, was an extensive and biblically annotated document that described the structure of the churches and their relationship to one another. There was no outside authority — no bishops or elders or denomination to tell churches and ministers what they should or should not do — but rather the churches were to be in relationship with one another, connected by association for the common good. As it says in Chapter Fifteen of the Cambridge Platform:

"Although churches be distinct, and therefore may not be confounded one with another, and equal, and therefore have not dominion over another, yet all the churches ought to preserve church communion with one another, because they are all united until Christ, not only as a mystical, but as a political head."

As such, each church admitted its own members, chose its own officers and ordained its own ministers, which is the congregationalist model of governance that Unitarian Universalists continue to practice to this day. And just as the churches were all part of the Cambridge Platform, the members within a given church were bound by a

voluntary agreement or covenant that applied Jesus' commandment to love one another. It was the covenant that mattered, that was the visible sign that someone was a member of a church, because nobody could truly know the faith that was in another person's heart. (And, just to make clear the break with Anglican and Catholic theology before it, it's not simply about sacraments either: "One person is a complete subject of baptism," the Cambridge Platform declares, "but one person is incapable of being a church.")

The problem is that the Puritans still relied on that conversion experience as a condition of membership in the church. It worked beautifully for the first generation, but most of the church founders' children could not — or would not — claim such experiences for themselves. "Your children are not *your* children," as Kahlil Gibran would put it a couple of centuries later. "They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself." And that was a big problem because it meant that the founders' grandchildren weren't getting baptized. So in the 1660s, the churches started adopting so-called Half-Way Covenants, granting partial membership to the unconverted, and at that point the genie was truly out of the bottle. After all, if creeds are irrelevant and if personal religious experiences are just too, well, personal, and if nobody can truly know another's faith, then it really is about the promises we make to one another about how we will be together, and Unitarian Universalists continue to practice that to this day. As UU minister and historian Alice Blair Wesley puts it,

"Ours is a covenantal church. We join by promising one another that we will be a beloved community, meeting together often to find the ways of love, as best we can see to do. We have found there is always more to learn about how love really works, and could work, in our lives and in the world."

It was only a matter of time, then, until people in those congregationalist churches, particularly the ministers who were expected to study the Bible and explain it to everyone else, started questioning points of doctrine that would have been unquestionable had there been creeds and tests of belief. One of the points of doctrine that was so questioned was the simultaneously human and divine nature of Jesus, which is, of course, one of the mainstays of various creeds going back to the Council of Nicaea in the year 325. After all, the Trinity isn't mentioned in the Bible itself, and if Jesus is fully human, then God doesn't need to be Father, Son and Holy Ghost, but can just be one God, which is a whole lot easier to understand mathematically. And since these

people who rejected God's Trinity believed instead in God's Unity, they were disparaged as heretics and Unitarians, which was a slur up until William Ellery Channing claimed the name with pride in his famous sermon on "Unitarian Christianity" in 1819.

Of course, once the genie is out of the bottle, there's no limiting it. Thanks to the nineteenth century Transcendentalist Movement, Unitarianism grew beyond Christianity, and thanks to the twentieth century Humanist Movement, it grew beyond theism. Universalism grew beyond its own Christian origins by another path, but it too had developed an emphasis on covenant rather than creed, and so when the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association consolidated in 1961, the result was a religion based in covenant as a mutual commitment to the social practice of love, all of us looking around in wonder at finding ourselves aware of the Cathedral of the World.

Now even if we, as Unitarian Universalists, didn't have that history, I would argue that covenant still makes sense as the way to do religious community. After all, we are all here in the Cathedral of the World, and yet each of us is seeing the light through a different window. We might be moving from one window to another, but even if we've settled ourselves in front of just one, we are at least aware that other windows exist. And whether we like those other windows or not doesn't really matter; what does matter is that every window is trying to answer questions such as: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? We may not understand how a given window is trying to answer such questions, so maybe we keep moving. Or maybe we've found a window that makes enough sense to us for now that we'll stick with it. But here's the important point: the Cathedral of the World is so big, and there are so many different windows, that no two of us are seeing the light through the same window.

So how on Earth do we deal with that? How do we handle the fact that every person does have different experiences, does hold different beliefs, does think in different ways, and yet somehow we're supposed to be part of one community? How can we be companions on our spiritual journeys and colleagues in growing in wonder, but yet that still doesn't mean that we all see the world the same way?

One answer I offer is that this is what we're figuring out every time we meet. In RE classes, our Religious Educators help our children and youth to figure out their own faith — and they learn a lot about themselves in the process. In the Forum, our adults

prove every Sunday that it is possible to learn from people with whom you may disagree. And in Fellowship Circles, we help each other to make sense of our lives, offering a safe place to share what's in our hearts and minds and, perhaps more importantly, learning to simply accept another's account of their own experience for what it means to them. All of those groups have found ways to be together, to reconcile the fact that we are all within the Cathedral of the World with the fact that we're all seeing the light through different windows.

Now the most important part of any group, any relationship, especially if it's going to last, is managing expectations. My daughter's going through a phase where she likes to block my way into a room and ask for the password. Well, I don't know the password, because she hasn't told it to me, but she still expects me to know it. And when I don't know it, she gets upset. How many of us have got upset with someone because they didn't do something we were expecting them to do, only —and be honest now — we hadn't actually told them what we were expecting? Every relationship, every group of people, needs to be clear about expectations if it's going to last.

In the short term, expectations in, say, a class or a series of workshops can be in terms of ground rules. Here's a pre-written list of things we should expect by being together. In the long term, expectations are better articulated as a covenant, developed from scratch by the group, within the group. So each of our Fellowship Circles, including the group of Fellowship Circle Facilitators, has a covenant, a set of promises we make to one another regarding our mutual expectations in terms of attendance, authenticity, open-mindedness, sharing and confidentiality. In some congregations, what we call Fellowship Circles are called Covenant Groups, given the importance of such covenants. And at the start of every church year, the Policy Board members and the Religious Professionals develop a covenant to support our work together. Our youth group recently made a covenant, too. These are all groups that, although they exist for very different purposes, will call upon us to trust one another, to be vulnerable with one another, maybe to disagree with one another, but always to love one another, and that's why they need covenants.

Now whenever we welcome new members, as we did today, I remark that we covenant to live in community with others whose journeys may be different. As individuals, we have chosen to weave our lives into the fabric of this congregation, each of us offering a mutual opportunity for renewal and transformation. And then I read

some words — some from our bylaws, some from ministers who previously served here, some from my ordination — and both new and existing members say “We will!” and that’s great. But that’s not a covenant. We don’t actually have a congregational covenant, and over the years, a number of people have wondered about that. Some groups, even some committees, have covenants, and we have this four-hundred-year history during which covenant made us the people of faith that we are today, and yet there is no UUFP covenant.

I’ve wondered if there is such a thing as implicit covenant. And I think there is in terms of recognizing that, thanks to our very existence, we have some mutual obligations. It’s the song of the Universe, that song of possibility, the song that we — as parents, as children, as siblings, as our grandmothers’ prayers and our grandfathers’ dreamings — the song that we sing back to the Universe by celebrating life and sharing our lives with others. There’s a natural reciprocity. After all, if you value your own life, you shouldn’t kill someone else. If you value your own well-being, you shouldn’t harm someone else. If you expect to be able to support yourself and your family, you shouldn’t prevent someone else from being able to do that, too. And so on. It’s basically the Golden Rule. And yet, there’s no mechanism built into the Universe to enforce such “natural” obligations. We might wish there was such a thing as instant, personal karma, but unfortunately there’s plenty of evidence that there isn’t. Not only are there greedy and selfish people, but they seem to win so much more of the time than seems fair. We may believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but that doesn’t mean we can merely assume that everybody will do the right thing. As my wife likes to say, you know what happens when you assume? You make an “ass” out of “u” and “me”.

So a covenant needs to be explicit. You don’t know what other people expect from your relationship until you invite them to articulate their expectations, and who knows what assumptions might lurk unspoken until they’re brought into the light. Indeed, developing a covenant is itself an exercise in community building, an invitation to be vulnerable in expressing our needs and an expression of trust that we will indeed engage in the social practice of love that the covenant represents.

Sometimes it becomes evident that something important was left out at first because nobody thought of it at the time, so it can be added in if everyone agrees. It may be that some of the wording was unclear and needs to be rewritten. Please note that this is not an invitation to endless wordsmithing! But I’ll happily note that the Cambridge

Platform recognizes that when it comes to a covenant, “the more express and plain it is, the more fully it puts us in mind of our mutual duty; and stirs us up to it, and leaves less room for the questioning of the truth”. Keeping a covenant in mind, reviewing it every so often, as Fellowship Circles do, is a good way to remind the group of why the group itself exists, too. It’s about the people in the group getting to know one another better, it’s about the group and its members growing in maturity and self-understanding.

The defining feature of Unitarian Universalism is not our liberal theology or our Seven Principles or our flaming chalice, but our basis in covenant, in the ways that we promise to live the Golden Rule and love our neighbors as ourselves. Covenant has allowed us to be a liberal religion, calling for peace and freedom and justice, because covenant allows for a wide range of beliefs to result in the unity of our religious community, not as a mere incidental but as an important part of who we are. This is a model of community that I believe we are called to share with the world, showing how we can understand one another, how we can appreciate differences, how we can navigate disagreements, and how we can all find our way to help grow the Beloved Community.

May it be so.