

## **Plighting thy Troth: Commitment and Fidelity**

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Sermon Delivered Sunday May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009

Since this past September, in our worship services, we have been exploring the theme of virtues and values for our times. Ethics, values, and virtues are much discussed in the public square these days, and they are being discussed from much more diverse religious perspectives than in recent years.

For one thing, the talk is not limited to sexual ethics (and how various disasters are the fault of those who are not straight and narrow). Instead the ethical discussions I'm hearing include concerns about greed and poverty, consumerism and ecology. I find these developments encouraging.

This past week the Dalai Lama Center for Ethics and Transformative Values, which is dedicated to fostering enlightened leadership, celebrated its opening at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. Its launch is one of the reasons the Dalai Lama has been in the area this week, as he is one of the founding members of the center.

This past Tuesday I heard an interview with the center's director, the Honorable Tenzin Priyadarshi, who is also the Buddhist chaplain at MIT. In this interview, he said that before the economic recession in this country there was an "ethical recession." It seems to me that the two recessions might be related. That is, the values of generosity, voluntary simplicity, and concern for the common good receded in the wake of self-centered over-consumption. Not that I have an opinion about that!

Two of the virtues that can help us address and reverse this ethical recession are the virtues of commitment and fidelity. Now talking about these two virtues might seem to return us to a focus on sexual ethics, because we commonly associate commitment and fidelity with that realm of our lives. In fact, I chose those virtues for this day because of the association between May Day and the northern European tradition of handfasting.

If you saw the movie "Braveheart" you have seen this ritual. Each member of a couple offers one hand to be bound together with a special cloth or cord to that of his or her partner. According to some sources, handfasting is a trial marriage for a year and a

day, but I first heard of it as an engagement ritual, a ceremony to declare your intent to marry. In other words, handfasting is a commitment to make a commitment.

Commitment and fidelity are even more appropriate for today's service than when I first scheduled them because it turns out this is the day when our members and friends make financial commitments to this congregation for the coming fiscal year. Our fidelity to that commitment will keep this place thriving. So talking about commitment and fidelity today is very timely.

The word commitment comes from the Latin word which means "to commit," oddly enough. To commit means to give something in trust, to do or perform, to pledge or to bind oneself, as is literally done in handfasting. A commitment is a pledge to do something made in a spirit of trust.

To fulfill a pledge or vow requires fidelity, which derives from the Latin word for faithfulness. We usually think of fidelity as faithfulness to a romantic partner, but it can also be to a cause, a vow, or a group. We show fidelity when we adhere to our promises and live up to our commitments.

Some thinkers in the area of ethics consider fidelity to be a central or foundational virtue. In order truly to be virtuous or moral people, we must be faithful to our ethical commitments. The French humanist philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville says fidelity is "not one value or virtue among others; it is the how and wherefore of all values and virtues. ...there is no virtue without fidelity." Without fidelity our lives lack integrity and our spoken commitments or pledges mean nothing.

It is also true that the worst of our inhumanity to one another also would not flourish without commitment and fidelity. Consider, for instance, that the Nazi party was extremely committed to Hitler's vision and faithful to his dictates. Of course, commitment and fidelity to immoral or even evil causes is the furthest thing from virtue. In some sense, fidelity and commitment are value-neutral.

In order for commitment and fidelity to lead us to virtuous living we must exercise some moral discernment. When we're about to commit to something or someone, we need to be sure that person or thing is a good choice. One way to check on this is to ask if the object of our commitment is doing things that create versus destroy, that heal rather than hurt, that serve the spirit of freedom in positive ways. Does this

individual, group or cause further the good of others? If so, living out that commitment is “good” or “noble” fidelity.

Committing to worthy people or causes, and fidelity to that commitment, are essential to our emotional and spiritual growth as human beings. People who fail to exercise their freedom by choosing faithful commitment to some good beyond themselves remain spiritually and emotionally immature. Their relationships suffer. Their values recede.

If you want to mature spiritually and emotionally, a good beginning is to ask yourself some questions and to search your heart for answers. What in your life is worth your good and noble fidelity? To what can you commit? Will you grow by being faithful to that commitment? Will others be served by it?

It’s probably clear from my vocational choice that Unitarian Universalism is one cause to which I have committed considerable time and energy. I also commit financially to the church I serve and to the wider movement. In doing so, in both making those commitments and keeping them as faithfully as possible, I have grown in spirit and as a person. Those who have made similar choices can attest to the meaning a high level of commitment can give to one’s life, how it makes one grow and mature.

There are many people here who are highly committed to this church. In fact I’m mostly preaching to the choir because most of those who aren’t that committed rarely come to our services on Sundays. That’s too bad, because they are really missing out – and I’m not talking about our fabulous music and great worship– they’re missing out on you - on this community!

One tendency that plagues some Unitarian Universalist churches is a culture of “low commitment.” Some churches expect nothing more of members than signing the membership book and making a monetary pledge once a year. One of my colleagues, Barbara Wells, laments that such churches have, “No expectations of involvement. No commitment to learning and growing in faith.”

In a chapter on responsibility and commitment in the book *Salted with Fire: Unitarian Universalist Strategies for Sharing Faith and Growing Congregations* the Rev. Wells goes on to say,

“In my experience casual commitment to membership translates into indifferent support for the church in all areas from volunteerism to financial support. Serious commitment, I have discovered, usually translates into real

involvement at all levels. This kind of commitment and involvement eventually evolves into more active and engaging congregations. And active and engaging congregations attract people.”

So why would churches ever think that low expectations are a good plan? For some it may have to do with freedom. We greatly value intellectual and spiritual freedom. For some of us commitment and fidelity smack of creeds and dogmas, or at least are seen as restricting freedom. This is what you might call a philosophical reason for low commitment. We often have highly intellectual excuses for what we do – it’s one of our failings.

In response to this notion that commitment is antithetical to freedom, I can do no better than to highlight what Donald DeMarco said in the reading we heard earlier. Commitment and freedom are not mutually exclusive. In fact they are necessarily interdependent.

This is because without true freedom, commitment and fidelity are meaningless. We must enter into a commitment freely from the first, and reaffirm it freely on a regular basis or else it is not commitment, it is coercion. Fidelity and commitment must be free choices, and in fact are one way we exercise our freedom.

Churches may also think low commitment is a good idea because we so value welcoming new people. We want to make it easy for people to join, thinking this will help our churches grow and so serve more folks. This is a good objective, but in fact the opposite approach works better. Having high expectations for commitment is what promotes congregational vitality.

The Rev. Barbara Wells says, “Growing churches are churches where high expectations and serious commitment are the norm.” At the church she serves, they created a class called “The Path to Membership” where they laid out clearly the responsibilities of membership.

1. Attend church regularly – if you don’t do this it’s hard to feel like a part of the community or to find regular nurture for your spiritual life. This responsibility is even more profound for parents of young children, who only learn what church is all about by attending.
2. Work on your own spiritual development. We are each responsible for our spiritual development. Participating in covenant groups, social events, classes and volunteer opportunities will help foster your spirit.
3. Serve on a task group or committee. The church cannot function well if only a small

contingent do everything. They tend to burn out and leave, and that's not good for the community. It's up to us – all of us.

4. Pledge at a stewardship level. Our budget comes almost entirely from our members. Some of us are “tippers” meaning we give a nominal amount of money, such as we might give to a cause like public radio or television. However, some of us give in sacrificial ways, meaning that we give up things in order to give more to our church. Our programs cannot function, our staff cannot be paid, and most importantly *we cannot be here when people need us* if we're not willing to sacrifice something for the health and vitality of our faith community.
5. Be involved in service to others – at church, in your work, or in civic life. We need to have integrity to our beliefs and the values we uphold here. Otherwise we are hypocrites, and none of us like that title.
6. Connect to the wider Unitarian Universalist movement, looking beyond this church to see the many other churches and Unitarian Universalists to whom we are connected. Visit the UUA website [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org). Read UU World, our faith's magazine, either in print or online ([www.uuworld.org](http://www.uuworld.org)). Visit other Unitarian Universalist churches when you are away for work or vacation. Attend district events or even a General Assembly. It's fun! I can't describe for you the feeling of being in a worship service with thousands of other Unitarian Universalists. That's something you have to experience for yourself.

These recommendations are all excellent commitments to make to our church. If you're new here and not sure about making such commitments, I encourage you to take your time. Look around. Ask questions. Learn as much as you can about this place so that your free choice to commit yourself here, should you make it, is as informed and intelligent a choice as possible.

Again, it's clear I'm mostly preaching to the choir because many of you do all of the above already. This is good. It's good for the church, obviously. What may be less obvious is that it's also good for you. The Rev. Barbara Wells affirms, “When people commit themselves to something, their lives can be transformed. I know, I've seen it happen.” So have I. It's a wonderful thing to behold someone blooming because of their faithful commitments.

So this spring consider plighting thy troth, pledging your fidelity, to some good cause or group or person, maybe Unity Church. In making that pledge and seeing it through truly and faithfully, you may find yourself growing and maturing. If enough of us in our nation do this, we may turn the tide of the ethical recession until we reach a new high water mark of virtuous living. This would be good for the whole world and all the people in it. So may it be. Blessed be and Amen.