

Our Pilgrim Past: The Value of Covenant

Meditation

Litany by Tess Baumberger

Oh Divine Spirit,
healer of my hurts,
consoler of my sorrows,
vibrant light of happiness,
birther of all life
and gentle way of death,
hear my prayer.

I raise my heart to you
as do the ancient redwoods,
rooted in the ground,
swaying in the wind.

I praise and thank you for my life,
gifts of body and essence,
strength to bear life's burdens,
grace to dance life's joys.

I praise and thank you for my life,
gifts of eyes and heart
that fill with beauty smiling,
or with pain and sadness weeping.

I praise and thank you for my life,
gifts of ears to hear
words of grace and wisdom,
to listen to and lighten
the burdens of others.

I praise and thank you for my life,
my voice to sing out praises,
to speak my truths and visions,
to share my self with others.

I praise and thank you for my life.
gifts of all my senses,
rhythm of my heartbeat,
rise and fall of my breathing,
the will to live with passion, serenity, joy.

Spirit, guide me to a deeper knowing
of your presence in the world.
Show me the fuller meanings
of the patterns of my years.
Help me regard myself and others
with eyes of calm compassion.
Teach me to learn patience
with their failings and my own.
Help me accept the mold and fashion
of my life through marching years.

In the names of all who perceive
your transcendent presence
in trees and brooks and mountains,
in work and play and resting,
in all moments and places between,
amen and blessed be.

Reading**Excerpts from The Cambridge Platform**

1648

. CHAPTER XV

. Of The Communion Of Churches One With Another.

- . 1. Although churches be distinct, and therefore may not be confounded one with another, and equal, and therefore have not dominion one over another; yet all the churches ought to preserve church communion one with another, because they are all united ...
- . 2. The communion of churches is exercised sundry ways.
 - . I. By way of mutual care in taking thought for one another's welfare.
 - . II. By way of consultation one with another, when we have occasion to require the judgment and counsel of other churches, touching any person or cause, wherewith they may be better acquainted than ourselves;
 - . III. A third way, then, of communion of churches, is by way of admonition;, ... as one apostle might admonish another, so may one church admonish another, and yet without usurpation.
 - . IV. A fourth way of communion with churches, is by way of participation; the members of one church occasionally coming unto another, we willingly admit them ... if either their own minister be absent, or such a fruit of holy fellowship be desired with us. In like cases, such churches as are furnished with more ministers than one, do willingly afford one of their own ministers to supply the place of an absent or sick minister of another church for a needful season.
 - . V. A fifth way of church communion is by way of recommendation, when a member of one church has occasion to reside in another church; ...
 - . VI. A sixth way of church communion, is in case of need to minister relief and succor one unto another, ...

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Sermon Reprint by Tess Baumberger
Unity Church of North Easton
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Most religious traditions are bound together by shared beliefs about the existence and the nature of the Divine, the nature of humanity, the source of creation, and so on. Some of us grew up in churches where each week we recited a creed that began, “I believe in God the Father Almighty....” Shared theology is the tie that binds in most religions.

This is not true for Unitarian Universalists. We have never had a real creed. Word buffs might like to know that the word “creed” comes from the Latin *credo* which means “I believe.” Instead of a creed, we uphold freedom of belief. So in our faith, people have a variety of opinions about the existence and the nature of the Sacred, about the source of creation, and all of those other important theological questions. You could say that we believe in freedom of belief.

Another thing we believe in is the democratic process. This means that both in our congregations and as a denomination, our faith is run democratically. We don’t have bishops that pass down decisions. Instead, we decide things. We also elect leaders and empower them to act on our behalf, hiring staff, and so forth, so we don’t have to make every little decision.

On the national level, some of our leaders form a group called “The Commission on Appraisal.” These folks research topics of interest in our faith, and periodically publish reports. Their most recent report, titled “Engaging Our Theological Diversity,” generated a lot of buzz because we’re interested in, and proud of our diversity. In fact, it was the first report by the Commission that has ever sold out and needed reprinting!

The report asks what binds us together given that we believe so many different things. It concludes that shared values play an important part in our unity. One value we share is a love for the community we find in our congregations. Since that sense of community is built largely on the promises (spoke and unspoken) that we make to one another, we also value covenant quite highly.

Younger people may wonder at this because apparently the word “covenant” has come to mean bad things in pop culture. As I wrote in a column in the Easton Journal this week, this is apparently due to a recent horror movie about a curse visited on descendants of witches who broke a pact with other witches. There’s also a video game in which “covenant” refers to a group of evil aliens. I would have no clue about this if not for my teenager. Lacking hand-eye coordination I don’t play videogames and I don’t go to horror movies because I’m a big chicken.

For us clumsy chickens, “covenant” remains a good thing. But what exactly does it mean? And how has it come to hold such a central place in our faith? To answer those questions we need to go way back in history, long before there were either Unitarians or Universalists. As I explained in the children’s story, the concept of covenant is ancient. The first covenants, mediated by priests and prophets, were between people and their gods.

“Covenant” remains central for Jewish people, who long ago entered into a sacred agreement with God. In order for it to be a religious covenant, both parties must enter freely into those promises. In fact, the root of the word covenant means, “agree” which implies both free choice and mutuality.

Early Christians took up the notion of covenant and adapted it to their own needs and beliefs. For them, the covenant became a promise of salvation and of a heavenly reward. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, in the 16th century, the notion changed some more.

Prior to the Reformation, there was not really any free religious choice for Christians in Western Europe. It was the Roman Catholic Church, or nothing. But choice became possible for Christians as there were more and more new “protestant” groups (called “protestant” because they were protesting aspects of the Catholic Church).

The idea began to emerge that covenants could be sacred agreements between people who freely chose a particular faith, as well as between that people and the Divine. This evolving meaning of covenant laid the groundwork for a covenant between the churches founded by the Pilgrims in Massachusetts.

What happened is this - when the Pilgrims’ first, single community of faith grew to become several churches, they eventually had to work out two issues. First they had to

work out how each congregation would govern itself and second, how each congregation would relate to every other congregation. So the elders of the faith came together and talked about it, and ended up writing a document known as “The Cambridge Platform,” from which I read earlier.

The Pilgrims hit upon the idea of a community of equal, independent, and interdependent congregations. Each congregation had the power to govern itself, to set its own rules, to elect its own leaders, and to call and ordain its own minister. So far, that’s just *independence*. The Pilgrim elders further found it wise to emphasize that each congregation is linked through bonds of love and service to every other congregation.

Over time, these Pilgrim churches linked by the bonds of covenant with one another became known as congregational churches. Then in the late 1700s and early 1800s, some congregational churches voted to adopt Unitarian theology, which is the belief in the unity or oneness of the divine. The transition from being congregational to Unitarian was not generally smooth, to put it mildly. You should read some of the pamphlet titles from that period. They’re pretty vicious.

Many churches split in two, battling over who kept the building and the communion silver. One group or the other would leave and found a new church. This explains why you often see congregational and Unitarian churches near one another in New England towns. In some towns the one called “first church” is Unitarian and “second church” is Congregational, and in other towns it’s the other way around. Whichever one is “first” tells you who won the battle to keep the building 200 years ago.

Even if they didn’t keep the building, Unitarian churches did continue to value covenant. As individuals, they entered into covenant with one another, and as churches they held onto the way of governing themselves and relating to other churches laid out in the Cambridge Platform. And this is something we still hold onto, after all these years. Our congregations still govern themselves, set their own rules, elect their own leaders, and call and ordain their own ministers.

In some respects, we remain a “Pilgrim Church.” Mostly we see this manifesting in the pride we have in the independence of our congregations. We’re good about remembering that part of the agreement. What is often lost is the part about “walking together” as congregations in a broader Association.

There are probably two reasons for this selective amnesia. One is that we have come to emphasize the importance and the rights of the individual. In this respect we tend to mirror rather than oppose the wider culture. The second reason we lose the “interdependence” part is that it’s easy to become so focused on our church’s life that we forget we are part of a larger whole, that there are other churches out there quite like us in their struggles and their successes. It is good to remind our selves of this fact once in a while. It means we are not alone.

The interdependence between our congregations is written right into our denomination’s by-laws. To see that sacred agreement, I invite you to turn to the front of your hymnal, the page right before the preface. This page lays out the covenantal principles of our faith, which we arrived at democratically.

While you’re finding the page, let me give you a brief history of the principles in case you’ve never heard it before or in case you have heard it but have forgotten it. Our principles were proposed, debated (knowing us, at GREAT length), amended, and adopted by representatives from our congregations over 20 years ago.

Through a long process our congregations, through their delegates, depended on one another to speak the truth, to share ideas, to listen, and to vote in order to arrive at a set of shared principles. In some sense our principles arose from our congregations practicing their interdependence.

Okay, let’s look at the principles as printed in our hymnal. Notice the word “covenant” in the preamble. It says that we covenant to affirm and promote what follows. The first principle states the first thing we covenant to affirm and promote - the inherent worth and dignity of each person. This emphasizes the worth of the individual, of separateness, of freedom and independence.

Now please skip down to the last of the seven principles, which was the only one adopted unanimously. It states that we also covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. This principle emphasizes the whole of our life, our interrelatedness.

When you look at those two principles side by side, the first and the last, you notice a tension between them – the tension between affirming the individual and affirming the whole. This tension exists in all aspects of our lives. In a sense it’s a

tension between freedom and responsibility. We hold in tension our rights as individuals and our concern for others. It's a good tension, like that between single cells, it helps to form the whole body.

Please put your finger in the page and close the book. Recall that it said we covenant to affirm and promote these principles. Do you remember who is doing the covenanting and affirming? Who are the members of the Unitarian Universalist Association?

It says, "We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote...." Member congregations. The unit that our delegates 20 plus years ago thought so important that they put it in the introduction to the principles, so that it applies to all the principles, was not the individual person, but the congregation. Okay, we're done with the hymnals for now.

This covenant is not just printed in our hymnals, it is also written into our denomination's by-laws. This means that like the Cambridge Platform of the Pilgrim churches of yesteryear, the by-laws of our association affirm that we are a congregation of congregations. Our churches have both a degree of freedom from each other AND a degree of responsibility to one another.

Covenant is what balances that freedom and that responsibility. Through covenant we enter freely into a sacred agreement to be accountable for our own actions. We also covenant to be responsible and responsive to others who enter that same covenant. Through covenant we proclaim ourselves to be part of a larger whole and to support that greater entity. For us, covenant is one of the ties that binds us into a single faith.

You might well ask, "Why have we held on to this old structure for so long? We could have come up with a new structure somewhere along the way. Why didn't we?" It could be partly because we were just used doing it that way, but I don't think that's not the whole story.

Conrad Wright, a scholar of our faith, says our congregational structure is important because it defines how we believe human beings should be related to one another. He says it goes to the very heart of our theology, and our beliefs.

The structure set down in the Cambridge Platform is a guide for human relationships. It addresses the importance of both the individual and the community, of freedom and responsibility. It tells us that the part (the congregation) can enhance the whole (the faith tradition) and vice-versa, just as the individual can enhance the congregation, and the congregation enhance the life of the individual.

I believe that our structure is a way of living our belief that both the individual and the whole matter, both are important. It is a fluid and dynamic way to resolve the tension between the part and the whole. It gives the entirety and the individual a place to meet - the congregation. It asserts that in a very deep and real sense, our congregations need one another, it says that our separate fires do kindle one flame, the chalice of our faith.

Our interdependent congregational structure lifts up the congregation as an important unit. It says that we are free to govern ourselves as we wish, but it also calls each congregation to be responsible toward the others, just as its individual members are toward each other. It calls us to see and acknowledge how much we need one another, as individuals and as churches.

Our community of congregations calls us to build and strengthen bonds of friendship between congregations. It tells us that our congregations need one another in times of mourning, to comfort each other in difficulty just as we need that comfort as individuals. Our congregations need one another in times of fear or despair, just as we do within this church.

Our congregations need one another when we would accomplish some great task but cannot do it alone. Our congregations need one another to share in times of triumph. Just as we need one another as individuals, our congregations need one another as points in that interdependent web.

Our very structure tells us we are not alone. We have friends. We have connections. We have resources right around us in our neighboring churches, and we can offer our wisdom and experience as well. We have friends we can call on for help. We have friends to help. We are not alone.

We are part of something broader that can bring us deeper into our faith if we reach out to connect with that breadth. Our separate fires do kindle one flame in the

chalice of solidarity that we light at the start of each service. Kindled in individual congregations that are part of a larger congregation, the flame ascends from each to blend into a great light of ages.

May that flame burn brightly as a beacon of hope, of truth, and most of all, of love. May our faith illumine our interdependence, shedding light on the strengthening bonds of love and service. We enter freely and solemnly into a covenant of mutual accountability with each other, and with other churches, because covenant is one of the ties that bind us together as a religious people. In walking together, we acknowledge, as our Pilgrim forbears did, that in this life we need one another. And that is as it should be. We are not meant to do this alone. So may we reach out beyond ourselves to draw upon, to build upon, the greater Good. Blessings.