

“People of Covenant”
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First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
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Reading excerpt from “Jayber Crow” by Wendell Berry (p 220-2, Kindle edition)

Sermon

It was almost 30 years ago that I first set foot in the Unitarian Universalist fellowship that would become my spiritual home. I still remember being very confused. What was that chalice about? And those hymns, with music that I vaguely remembered from the Catholic church long ago, but I’m pretty sure those weren’t the words. I had no idea what the minister did outside of Sunday morning, or where the money came from to run the place, or who made decisions and how. And it wasn’t at all clear what held these feisty independent spirits together, or whether I belonged. But like many who find their way to Unitarian Universalist congregations, I was there for my children, and I persisted.

I chose Unitarian Universalism because of the freedom of belief - I had been told that Unitarian Universalists can believe anything they want, and I certainly didn’t want anybody telling my kids what to believe. Later on, I learned that not all beliefs are consistent with Unitarian Universalism. But it is true that we don’t tell anyone what to believe. We have no creed, and perhaps even more important no canon - so there’s no limit on the sources to which we turn for religious truth, and no specific language for speaking of the sacred. I’ve come to believe that the available words are all too limited. It’s good to not get too attached to any of them.

But without those specific and limited words, who are we? I wondered.

It took me a long time to learn that we are not just “not creedal.” Unitarian Universalists are affirmatively something else – we are covenantal. Being covenantal is central to this faith, and yet, we’re still learning what that means in real life.

A simple definition of covenant is a set of promises that we make to each other about how we will be together. [slide] Our children and youth often create covenants for their time together. This one was made by preK through grade 1 kids here. They had some clear ideas about how they wanted to be together – about what makes things go well in community: take turns, help clean up ...

Your Board has a covenant; your staff have a covenant. Other groups within the congregation have covenants. They have a few more words than this one, and they aren’t written in chalk, but the concept is the same. Unitarian Universalists make lots of covenants like this. [end slide] And this congregation as a whole has a covenant, that was approved in 2020, and is on an insert in your order of service.

These covenants are all open to interpretation, and we won’t always agree on what exactly any covenant asks of us in a specific situation. But for humans trying to be in community with other humans – they give us at least a framework for conversations about the details.

But our predilection for crafting these documents is not what makes us people of covenant. And these are not the covenant that holds us together. **We are people of covenant because we have chosen a deeper commitment to staying in relationship with our truest selves, with each other, and with something larger, that we might call Love.** It's a commitment to hold that "will toward goodwill," even in hard times. The covenants we create with words are expressions of this deeper, sacred covenant - imperfect articulations that change over time and context as we learn and grow.

We've seen this in Unitarian Universalism as a whole. When the Unitarians and Universalists came together in 1961, they agreed that the new denomination's identity was rooted in 6 core principles.¹ But, the language reflected that time and was soon found to be too limited for this evolving faith. So, two decades later, those Principles were pretty thoroughly redone. In 1985, there were 7 of them, and they were explicitly a covenant - starting out "We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote" inherent worth and dignity and so on.

As time went on, we discovered new ways in which that covenant was more limited than the deep covenant that binds us together. First, many congregations (including this one) added an 8th Principle that explicitly addressed oppression and accountability. And then, last year, after a long denomination-wide process, the Principles were replaced altogether with a covenant to live our shared values, framed as six values, with Love at the center. Many of the ideas and words from the Principles are still there, along with some new ideas and new words, and a little evocative imagery.

And we can do this, because we know that our understanding of which words best express our deep sacred covenant of relationship is always evolving. That's why our denominational bylaws say that we're supposed to rewrite those words every 15 years. That time frame turns out to be aspirational, but that commitment to an evolving expression of covenant is not.

We create our expressions of this covenant even though the language of our promises is both too small for what we mean, and too big for what we can actually do. Our words are aspirational; we will break our promises. And make them again, and fail and try again - this process is how people of covenant live a faithful life.

"Though you have broken your vows 1000 times, come, yet again, come."

This understanding of a sacred, aspirational covenant at the center of religious community goes way back. In the oldest writings of the Hebrew bible, the people entered into a covenant with their God in which God promised blessings and the people promised to follow their understanding of how God wanted them to live together. Some of the details may not hold up well today, but this was, I think, a profound insight into what makes life go well - the blessings that matter most do show up more when we live with care for one another, a commitment to a Love that is bigger than we humans, and a certain humility.

But that covenant was aspirational, too. Generation after generation, the people didn't manage to live together as they promised. Over and over in those stories, they fall out of covenant, realize their error and try again.

¹ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/the-uuas-original-principles-1961>
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More recently, our Puritan religious ancestors did their own thing with the concept of covenant. As good Calvinists, they were committed to creating communities to live according to God's will (as they understood it), in direct relationship with one another, and free from outside control.

They codified this understanding in 1648 in a document entitled "A Platform of Church Discipline Gathered Out of the Word of God and Agreed Upon by the Elders and Messengers of the Churches Assembled in the Synod at Cambridge in New England." It's more succinctly known as the Cambridge Platform.

The Cambridge Platform codified the Puritan understanding of church structure and authority, and relationships between churches. But those agreements were understood to emerge out of a deeper, sacred covenant between people and God, and among people, to accompany one another in relationships of care and concern. The covenants they put into words were their imperfect expressions of that deeper covenant. As an aside, almost a third of the 65 congregations that ratified the Cambridge Platform in 1648 are now Unitarian Universalist. Their covenants, their approach to church governance, and their distrust of authority ... live on.

The Cambridge Platform lifted up the issue that is at the heart of a covenantal faith - to whom or what are we accountable? For the Puritans, instead of accountability to the Anglican hierarchy, there was accountability within and among their churches, and directly to the God of their understanding. It was a lovely web of mutuality as far as it went. But, from our perspective, we might notice some people to whom that accountability did not extend. The same Puritans who strived to be in ongoing relationship with each other also displaced and murdered the Indigenous people who lived on the land they occupied. They were so focused on their fierce independence and care for one another within their congregations, that they failed to recognize accountability beyond their congregations. With horrific consequences.

The Unitarian descendants of the Puritans mostly held an even narrower view of accountability. With their enhanced commitment to reason, freedom and the individual, covenant in Unitarian churches came to emphasize promises within the walls of an individual church. The Unitarians were committed to helping the less fortunate, but mostly as a responsibility – it usually didn't involve listening to the most vulnerable, or including (much less accountability to) anyone who was outside of their predominantly white, financially secure, politically powerful membership. They did help people. And they, too, did harm beyond the narrow circle of their perceived accountability.

In our time, the question of accountability came up a lot in the conversations that led to adopting the Six Values with Love at the Center. And it's at the heart of conversations about who we are in the world as it is today. To whom or what are we accountable as we continually re-interpret, express and commit to our covenant? Is it all the people who are here, now? That's challenging enough, but what about those who came before, or those yet to come? What about those who would be here if they felt welcome? Or those who will never be here, but who suffer harm because of systems that we participate in? How about non-humans, and the planet itself? Or perhaps accountability to a vision we hold for ourselves? Or to a wider vision of Beloved Community? And if the answer is all of the above, how in the world do we do that?

That is a question that people of covenant live all the time. We always have decisions to make about whose well-being we choose to center at any given moment. And we will not always agree on where accountability lies or what it means for our actions.

But here's what I've noticed. **An intentional accountability to the most vulnerable tends to bring us closer to becoming the people our expressions of covenant say we are.** What might it look like for us, in our lives, in this church, in the world if we centered that accountability just a little more?

If I had understood, 30 years ago, just how challenging a covenantal faith is, I might not have persisted. It's great that it doesn't ask us to confine our beliefs to specific words - but instead it asks us to choose - over and over - to stay in relationship with our truest self, those around us, and Love. It asks us to confront our mistakes, repair them and begin again; and to pay attention to the choices we make about who or what we are - in practice - accountable to.

And, a covenantal faith refuses to let us get stuck in one understanding or way of being, thinking we've got it all figured out. Instead, it insists that our expression of what matters evolve as we learn and grow in a changing world, knowing that we will never fully get it right. This is the challenge of a covenantal faith; it is also the hope and the power.

Because although it's not easy, it's worth it. For this covenantal faith offers us the truth that, "imperfect and irresolute" as we may be (says Wendell Berry), our worth does not depend on always getting it right. We do the best we can to be in relationship with each other and Love, and somehow, says the poet, we are "perfected, beyond time, by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace."

A faith rooted in staying in relationship, acknowledging mistakes, choosing our accountability and letting our understanding evolve is counter to so much of what we see in the world.

Day after day, the news is devastating. A lot of us just want to get out there and fix it – or at least vent our anger. We do need to engage. And ... our commitment to being people of covenant, in this community of covenant, is as important as anything we do out there.

For it sustains a vision of what could be ... should be ... must be. And it can sustain us, inspire us, teach us, ground us in what matters ... and ... change us and the world.

And through this commitment, we become - not perfect - but more like the blessings to the world we aspire to be. I've seen it happen to others; I know it has happened to me.

May it be so for you.

Let us be in silence together.

[pause]

Amen