“Covenant at Our Core”
Message by Rev. Sarah Richards, 9/27/26, AUU

Why do you think both Wendell and Sophie finally had fun playing firefighter, when playing family, hospital, bakery, was one-sided[i]? As a UU and UU religious professional, I think it’s because they made the first step toward covenant – they had an equal say in making the rules. It’s only a first step, since they didn’t promise each other that they would make up rules of play together. If there was a sequel in which many years later, the two of them got married, a public commitment to each other – that’s a covenant. As Dawn described, marriage is an explicit and parenthood an implicit covenant. I invite you to take a moment and bring to mind some of the covenants/commitments you are or have been in that shape your relationships. *[pause]* The practice of covenant is a core part of being a Unitarian Universalist – we are bound together by our promises, rather than common belief, which seems a radical departure from the norm for religious community.

But the creation and use of covenants are ancient, covenant between God and the people of Israel, God and Christians; modern UUs can trace our covenants to our Puritan ancestors. The European settlers who established Dedham, Massachusetts were a bit different from others of the mid-seventeenth century: they didn’t come from the same village or town in England on the same boat, these immigrants didn’t know each other at all. They spent a year meeting weekly in each other’s homes to discuss how they would come together as a congregation, and in 1648 agreed on this covenant.

1648 Puritans in Dedham (modernized language)
We pledge to walk together
In the ways of truth and affection,
As best we know them now
Or may learn them in the days to come,
That we and our children may be fulfilled
And that we may speak to the world
In words and actions
Of peace and goodwill.[ii]

Note that the covenant here is with each other, not with God (not to say they didn’t have that too – they were Calvinists, after all). The Dedham church’s understanding

of covenant was rooted in their Christian tradition, which itself flows from the earlier promises made between the Jewish people and their God. Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams analyzed the meanings of covenant from this "original" source. He proposed that

> The first characteristic of human collective existence is commitment, that is making an agreement, a promise. Promising is a characteristic feature of meaningful human existence....The meaning of life is found in the processes and responsibilities of groups and institutions....This is one of the great insights in history, namely that one is related to the collective in such a way as to be responsible for the consequences of one's actions and for the consequences of collective action.[iii]

Adams goes on to note that the covenant includes a rule of law, "a consensus and a commitment with regard to *what is right*.[iv]" Making up the rules of the game, also means defining cheating, breaking the rules—as Adams says, "The desire for justice can be fulfilled only through collective concern with law as the major agency of social control.[v]" That sounds pretty stark, as if the covenant between God and humans, or between a group of kids playing tag or firefighter is all about law and order, crime and punishment. Adams reassures us that "It is not only a covenant based on adherence to law but also upon trust and affection. One maintains responsibility for the collective, not, finally, because it is the law, but because of love. The responsibility is motivated by affection. Thus the breaking of the covenant is not merely a violation in the sense of criminality but in the sense of breaking faithfulness, of violating the affection that was the ground and nerve of the covenant in the first place.[vi]"

What wondrous love is this, that calls us to make promises to ourselves and each other, to bind us by choice to responsibility beyond our personal comfort and growth?

Our covenants today are quite different in many respects from the ones described in Hebrew and Christian Scripture, and from the Dedham Church. But they all are based in love and faithfulness among the covenanted community. The promises made help define the identity and purpose of the covenanted community, and they remind us why and how to "stay in" when the promises are broken.

As a UU adult curriculum states:
Our central question is not "What do we believe?" but rather "What values will we uphold and how will we do this together?" Our covenant, the promises we make to each other in regarding how we will be a community of faith, is at the heart of what it means to be Unitarian Universalist.[vii]

Each UU congregation develops its own covenant, and many groups within them, like the Board, Youth Group create their own. All these covenants must be recreated over time, in order to be relevant and useful in the present, to help us orient to the future. This adaptability is part of liberal religious orientation.

I learned a lot about the creation and adoption process of this congregation's covenant from Dick Dana, chair of the Congregational Covenant Team – please seek him out for more information. It took patient effort from many people from the first steps in late 2016 to the successful congregational vote in November of 2020. Let's say our AUU covenant, together now:

As a congregation with respect for our past and commitment to the future,
we draw from the depth and power of our hearts and minds,
guided by our Unitarian Universalist principles, to serve our mission and vision.
We celebrate the diversity of our identities and experiences,
and foster a culture of appreciation, inspiration, and kindness.
We honor both the strength of the collective and uniqueness of the individual,
willing to support and challenge each other with love and compassion.
We entrust ourselves to each other in beloved community,
to embolden personal and congregational growth and transformation.

These are aspirational statements, yes, and they are also commitments to the way we treat each other, how we behave in relationship to each other. I invite you now to take a moment to reflect – how have you experienced a culture of appreciation, inspiration and kindness here? How has it felt to support and be supported, to challenge and be challenged with *love and compassion*? When have you felt personal growth and transformation as a part of this congregation? When have you witnessed or been a part of congregational growth and transformation?

What wondrous love is this, that challenges us to open our minds and hearts, keep them open even when we feel fear and anger?

Every UU congregation that is a member of the UU Association of Congregations also shares a covenant, developed and voted on at General Assembly – also revised to answer the needs of the times. Our current version commonly known as "our shared values" with love at the center, was adopted at the General Assembly in 2024, 40 years after the previous version. The UUA website summarizes: Our beliefs are diverse and inclusive. We have no shared creed. Our shared covenant is expressed through the inseparable and deeply interdependent shared values of interdependence, pluralism, justice, transformation, generosity, and equity – all centered around love.

To be clear, the by-laws also affirm freedom of belief and congregational polity – every congregation is self-governing. And, just as this congregation can accomplish much more than individuals working alone, the UUA wields more power and provides more resources than any single congregation can, no matter how big. That's why it is important for us to not only be familiar with the promises we've made to each other in this congregation, but also those our congregation makes to the other members of the UUA.

Looking at our AUU covenant, and our UU covenant, our seven values, we see there is a purpose beyond staying in, returning to covenant so that we can enjoy and nurture congregational life. It is also about making the *world* a more just, more compassionate, more loving place. James Luther Adams' analysis of prophetic covenant includes the understanding that "Responsibility for promoting mercy and justice, especially for the deprived, requires criticizing those who have power in the society.[viii]" In other words, love is not only at the root of our promises within our congregation, it is in its branches—our work in the world--as well.

A covenanted community is not a family, it is not a club, whose concerns are inward-focused, it is a congregation that has a voice and takes action in the world according to its promises. So according to both the AUU covenant and the UU covenant, it is necessary, but not sufficient to love and respect yourself, and those like you in your community; it is necessary, but not sufficient to love and respect those who are different from you in your community, it is necessary—Adams would say, we have a responsibility-- to act in love and respect on behalf of those who are unloved and

disrespected by the powers that be in our society; the marginalized and dismissed. Right now, there are many organizations, faith-based and secular that are working to resist the attack on the rights and freedoms guaranteed in our U.S. Constitution. There are actions we can take within our congregation and in our community: for example, volunteer at the Latino Center Food Pantry, participate in the BEAR WITNESS TO ICE VIGIL (coming up on Tuesday). We can identify the local businesses and organizations that are run by or serve immigrant, LGBTQ+, BIPOC, poor, disabled, unhoused that need extra support and show up!

And a third example: every one of us can make an effort to talk to someone we don't yet know – during coffee hour here or on-line. We can sign up for Caring Network, helping AUU folks out with meals, rides, or whatever is needed in times of illness or recovery. These are only a few of our "ways of truth and affection" that we can do.

Friends, when we are filled with frustration, when we have broken our promises to treat each other with love and respect, may we remember What wondrous love is this, that brings us together, and calls us to stay in.

When we are filled with anger at injustice, may we remember that when we were sinking down, friends to us gathered round, and reach out to do the same for those sinking in our world.

What wondrous love is this, oh my soul.

Amen.

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[i] Henke, Kevin. *A Weekend with Wendell*. Greenwillow Books, 1986.
[ii] https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/river/workshop7/175913.shtml
[iii] Adams, James Luther, 1977. "The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern" in *The Essential James Luther Adams: Selected Essays and Addresses*, 1998. George Kimmich Beach, ed. Boston, Skinner House Books, 232.
[iv] Ibid, p. 234, emphasis added.
[v] Ibid.
[vi] Ibid.
[vii] ibid
[viii] Ibid, p. 233.