

**The Promise-Makers - Membership Sunday**  
**Sermon by Gretchen Haley**  
**Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist**  
**October 24, 2010**

**Reading: “Promising Creatures” by Alice Blair Wesley**

We human beings are promising creatures. We can only do great and worthy things - indeed we can only survive - when we make and keep promises of loyalty and faithfulness to the ways of love with others. For distinct and different as we are as individuals, we are also thoroughly social creatures. The options and choices we have as individuals are effected and affected by those of others; our decisions and actions and inaction effect and affect many others. None of us can fulfill our promise as individuals without the faithfulness and loyalty of many others.

We human beings are also promise-breaking creatures. We violate our covenants in petty, small ways and in tragic, disastrous ways. Whether we do so out of sheer forgetfulness or poorly ordered priorities or ignorance for motives we ourselves cannot admire, ill consequences are real for the whole interdependent web.

We human beings, especially in a culture so complex as ours, are part of many communities. We need one- our freely covenanted church community - in which our purpose is to be reminded of and to take account of the promising character of human beings in the widest possible sense, that we may answer the summons, the call of all that is holy to live with authenticity and integrity and joy and resolve.

**Reading: “Whose am I?” by Victoria Safford**

Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher, says that the ancient question, “Who am I?” inevitably leads to a deeper one, “Whose am I?” - because there is no identity outside of relationship. You can’t be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose am I?” is to extend the question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder, *Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?*

**Words on Membership after welcoming New Members by Gretchen Haley**

This morning we are excited to welcome new members officially into our community. When we talk about membership, I like to say it’s both not a big deal, and also, a really big deal. You are simply promising to be a part - a *real* part - of this congregation. The act of membership says, I’m a part of this whole. I’m in. See, no big deal? But of course, as with any relationship of joy and challenge, real commitment in community life can be difficult, testing your patience and asking you to stay in relationship even in - especially in - the trenches of human frailty and short-sightedness, ego, and ignorance. So, I like to think membership is most of all an act of faith. Today we invite these people to acknowledge this act of faith - to witness to us their willingness for love, and loyalty to this gathered community. And we remember and renew our own faith, our faith in the human spirit, our faith in one another, and in the Spirit of Life.

**Sermon - “The Promise-Makers”**

## 1. *Becoming a People, Making a Promise*<sup>1</sup>

From faraway places, across a mighty ocean, they came seeking new life. Shaking loose the shackles of religious and social hierarchy, they felt the call of new possibilities, the call of the Spirit.

Not the kind of Spirit that comes to you through the hand of a designated church official, but the kind that speaks to you, within the confines of your own heart - the Spirit that whispers longingly for justice, for wholeness, for world community, and health.

They had a testimony. A personal faith born of their own conscience, their own sense of reason and understanding.

And born of this testimony, these 30 or so families, started out on a similar journey, each making their way to one small corner of an unknown continent, eventually squatting on land better understood as belonging to the Wampanoag tribe of Native Americans.

Whether we are speaking of today, in a small valley in a vast land filled with beautiful but sometimes treacherous terrain (any of you who have tried to make that drive back to Denver on a Sunday afternoon can share my testimony on this fact, right?), or three hundred and seventy four years ago, in the northeastern corner of what would become the United States of America,

as a religious people, we have always been prone to attempt brave and risky ventures for the sake of human freedom and in service of the Spirit of Mutual Love.

I know, we often deride the conservatism we inherit from our Puritan ancestors - and in another sermon, I'll tell you all the ways we remain burdened by their beliefs and methods. But here, today, I want to tell you of their gifts to us.

Specifically, the gifts we inherit from this one community in what was soon to become the town of Dedham, Massachusetts. It was 1637, and this little group had come for salvation - their own, and also, the world's. They knew, deep in their hearts, that the ways of the Spirit could never be confined by or channeled in the kind of hierarchy and dogma they had left behind in Old England.

And so they came to this strange place hoping not just that the Spirit would live among them, but also that they would be a model for all the world, that their example would be so persuasive that others would follow suit.

---

<sup>1</sup> I share this story based on the stories in Alice Blair Wesley's first and second lectures in her 2000-2001 Minns Lecture series, "The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and Promise of Our Covenant." These are available online at <http://minnslectures.org/archive/wesley/wesley.htm>. This story, and the sermon as a whole is informed by the essays in *Redeeming Time*, edited by Walter Herz, the essays of James Luther Adams on covenant (especially those found in *On Being Human Religiously*), the work of Conrad Wright, especially in *Congregational Polity – A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practice*, the work of Rebecca Parker, especially in *Blessing the World – What can save us now*, edited by Rob Hardies, and also Alice Blair Wesley's introduction to *The Cambridge Platform* (<http://www.uuabookstore.org/productdetails.cfm?SKU=4714>), as well as the text of that document itself.

Of course, they had one significant problem. That is, they were strangers. They didn't know each another *at all*. Sure, they were all from England, and most of them were farmers, and they all had a similar sense of religious calling - but they knew nothing of one another's most deeply held loyalties, their yearnings, or their regrets. They were strangers in the most important ways.

So before they did what they had crossed the ocean to do - that is, before they formed a "church," they decided to get to know each other. Over dinners, and in one another's homes, in public spaces and across neighborhoods, they came together to *talk*.

From their own documents, they describe how they met every Thursday afternoon to "lovingly discourse and consult together and prepare for spiritual communion in a church society...that we might be further acquainted with the spiritual tempers and gifts of one another."<sup>2</sup>

What were they talking about in all those meetings? Again, in their own words, "For the subject of these disputes or conferences, diverse meetings at first were spent about questions as pertained to the just, peaceable and comfortable proceeding in the civil society."<sup>3</sup>

Are you surprised? They talked not about Jesus Christ (though they professed him), nor the Bible (though they held it supreme), but about peace, and justice, and the shared vision of a good life. Again - their vision was not only personal edification, but societal wholeness and health - in fact, they saw these two things as inseparable.

Their conversations were slow, and steady. Though there were only 30 households (not so different than this congregation, in fact), they spent an entire year in conversation before they thought they might just be ready to begin what they had in mind all along.

But first, they had to decide - could they start this church at all? I mean, without the order of a Bishop or other clerical mandate - by what authority could they call themselves a church? Alice Blair Wesley - whose words we heard in the first reading - and on whose research this story is mostly based - tells us their answer: they decided their authority rested in one thing - that is, their capacity to act out of *genuine, deep religious love*.<sup>4</sup>

Their authority came from their sense of reason, their personal experience, their own understanding of what is holy, and worthy of supreme affection - and their desire to act in response to these personal experiences of the Spirit. It was really, quite radical.

Yet, though they were open and affirming to the mysterious and uncontainable call of the Spirit among them, they could not be described as *casual*. No, they were rather *super-serious* in their vision. So though you may wonder why they did not just continue meeting up, weekly, having these deep conversations - and call *that* their church- they knew that they needed something more if they were to achieve their serious and mighty dreams.

---

<sup>2</sup> From Wesley's first lecture, pg 19.

<sup>3</sup> Wesley, pg 19.

<sup>4</sup> Wesley, pg 21.

Importantly - for them, and for us - they knew that personal and communal transformation took something bigger than just a bunch of folks meeting up to talk once a week, no matter how meaningful those conversations might have been. No, to do something so grand, they needed to be held *accountable* to something - they needed to hold each other *accountable* - they needed to be held *accountable* to the Spirit of Life itself. They needed to promise to one another a deep kind of loyalty, a *faithfulness* to each other, and to their shared big vision the vision they had spent so much time getting clear on through their weekly discussions. They could not become a people, a *real* religious people - they could not become all that they imagined they were meant to become - an example to transform the world - without making this shared promise.

And so, they decided together, that they would make a covenant - a covenant with one another, and a covenant with what they named as God and what we experience today as the Spirit of Life, and of Love.

Though we may have discarded many aspects of our Puritanical inheritance, today, in this very space, we remain committed to this most brilliant and radical insight: To be a people - to follow our calling as a people, to transform ourselves, and therefore, transform the world, That is, to be Unitarian Universalists - Is to make a *covenant* - To make a sound and binding *promise* to one another - That we will hang in there with each other, That we will act in service of a larger vision - a big, mighty vision, In service of the Spirit of Life, That we will act out of our genuine reasoning, our personal experience of mutual and transformative love. All these years later, to become Unitarian Universalists, is to live in covenant.

## **2. Making a Promise, Becoming a Person**

Unitarian theologian and ethicist James Luther Adams liked to say “Church is the place where you get to practice what it means to be human.” If this is the case, then I like to imagine that not only were our religious ancestors radical in their notions of the Spirit and its democratic nature, but they were radical in their understanding of what it means to be a full person.

Perhaps it is a modern phenomenon, a notion born out of the Enlightenment and the concept of the highly individualized self, but in today’s world - a world where we are debating the prospect of personhood at the first possible stage of fertilized egg, I think it’s fair to say that the standard assumption is that we start off as individuals - as whole persons - and then a bunch of us individuals come together, and form a group.

But our religious ancestors, as they imagined the conditions necessary to adequately practice what it means to be human - they did not imagine isolation - or rugged individualism.

Their coming together as a people did not start by affirming individual paths or going your own way. Quite the opposite. In their most compelling vision, they discovered that to be a church required simply (remember what I said at the start of this service) *simply* being with others in a deeply accountable way and then, from these experiences of belonging and accountability - *there*, we can be a church - *there*, we become what we should call persons.

As Victoria Safford so boldly proclaims - you can't be human by yourself. Perhaps you can be a bunch of cells - even a bunch of beautiful cells - up to some interesting things...but this thing we call human-ness - or person-hood - it is only possible by way of relationship.

And we affirm this: "Love is the spirit of this church." *Love!* Not intellect, or wealth, or athleticism. Not right beliefs, or independent thinking - not thinking at all actually. None of these things that describe individual capacity, but *Love* - this thing that only really makes sense when we are with others.

We are a *relational* church - because, church is the place where you get to practice what it means to be human, and you can't be a person by yourself.

Which means, the endeavor of covenant is both incredibly necessary and highly risky.

If we are made human by way of our binding relationship with others, well then, if we have any hope of growing up, of ever fulfilling our call as human persons, then we better get busy making covenant. And also - we better be careful in this covenant making - and be darn clear *who* it is we are making covenant with - who they are, and to what or to whom they are most loyal, and what it is we are promising. For these others, and our covenants with them - they are the stuff of our humanity.

### **3. Promise with whom, and for what; or, Whose are we?**

Most of us know about covenants, though we may not call it that exactly. *Until death do we part* - that's a covenant. My partner and I recited our own version of those marital promises to one another, in front of friends, and family, and the universe, over 7 years ago now.

Though not legally binding, it was a covenant. A little over a year ago, a judge asked Carri and I if we would be there, as mothers, as parents, to the newly named Josef Richard Ratazzi, for all of his life - and we said *yes*, and the judge banged his gavel. Though we may call this a covenant, I think we would better understand this legal exchange a contract, and that the *covenant* happened a year earlier, when the social worker called us and asked us if we would come get this two day old boy from the hospital and welcome him into our family. We said, "We'll be right there." Picking him up on that Saturday afternoon, and putting him into a car seat, driving him home, we knew in some intangible, mysterious way, he was already family. Fueled by this deep knowing, we kissed his sweet face and held him in our arms. *That* was a covenant. Though a covenant bares similarities to a contract, they are not the same thing.

They both entail promises, but a contract usually relates to the tasks to be performed, while the covenant signifies, formalizes, and attends to the relationship which makes those - and other, yet undiscovered though equally (if not more) vital - tasks possible. Contract - tasks; Covenant - relationships. To put it another way - contracts are about doing; covenants are about being.

Making a covenant is one way of answering the question Victoria Safford offers us: "Whose am I?...*With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?*"

Those who join in covenant look to each other and say - with a deep kind of trust, a nearly unfathomable kind of trust - a kind of *faith* - that their lives are bound up together, that they are accountable to each other in profound and yes, perhaps inextricable ways.

One other important distinction, a covenant, unlike a contract, requires a “third thing.” Our Puritan ancestors would name this “God.” James Luther Adams called it *Being* itself - or as he describes it - the “creative, sustaining, judging, transforming powers, which may be interpreted theistically or non-theistically.”<sup>5</sup> In the covenant Robert and I made, we called it the Spirit of Life, and our living tradition. However *you* may conceive of it, a religious covenant - the covenant which binds us together must involve the transcendent, the mysterious, the interdependent web of all existence, the powerful and joyful “something more.” In making a covenant, we are affirming the possibility that our lives are bound up - not just with the human beings in the room with us, but with something larger than us, a greater and more beautiful possibility.

Which brings me, to today, and this whole notion of *membership* in this free church, *this* Unitarian Universalist congregation.

First of all, let me acknowledge a kind of tension we’re in. Like our friends back in 1637, in Dedham, Massachusetts, we sure would like to have a church already. We have a vision. We feel called. And so we want to hurry up, and get this all settled. We’re excited about the addition of new members, and we’re excited about existing members renewing their commitment to the covenant, especially given all the changes this group has initiated in the past year.<sup>6</sup>

And yet, we are aware that in many meaningful ways, we remain strangers to one another. And so we are wise, and we are healthy, to take our time, to get to know each other, to speak and to hear what weighs upon our hearts, to explore together our vision for a just and healthy society, our dreams of a just and healthy life - so that we can better know exactly what promises we are making - and with whom - when we covenant.

The decision to become a member should be a serious and meaningful decision. It is a decision of promise. That is, it is a decision of *your* promise, and *the congregation’s* promise to you, to walk together in service of the Spirit of mutual love. And it is a decision of promise, in that each time a person makes a decision to join in covenant, we become more possible - we become more human, more ourselves - the people we were meant to be.

With each new member, there is more promise for positive change, more promise for a loving world, more promise for justice and more promise for personal and societal goodness and health.

For those of you who have not yet made the decision for membership, I want to encourage you to take your time. Go slowly, and take the decision seriously - as seriously as our

---

<sup>5</sup> From James Luther Adams’ essay in *Redeeming Time*, “From Cage to Covenant,” page 45.

<sup>6</sup> As Jewish Theologian Martin Buber says – we are not just promise-making, but perhaps more importantly, promise-*renewing* creatures.

religious ancestors did way back in Dedham, Massachusetts. Become *convicted* of your desire to join in covenant. And then jump in. Remember - it is an act of *faith*.

For those of you who have already made this decision of promise - I invite you to take it ever-more seriously, as well. Take your membership in this covenant as an ever-present invitation to explore together your answers (as they are today, as they will be tomorrow) to the questions of your deepest loyalties, your worthiest dreams.

And when you know, in your heart - the way you and those around you answer these questions - this is when things get really exciting. This is when we get to talk about accountability. When we get to call one another to be faithful to these greatest loyalties, to be faithful to *following* these most worthy dreams - in real life!

When we get to hold ourselves and each other to *live* according to these commitments. As with our religious ancestors - here we know how transforming ourselves will mean transforming the world.

How necessary, and exciting are these decisions. How risky, and important are these conversations. What a privilege - to join in covenant together - to become together - humans, to become together - more fully, ourselves.

May it be so and amen.