Walking Together
Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist
Worship Service, May 6, 2012

Story – Partners, by Marc Gelman, in Does God Have a Big Toe?
Before there was anything, there was God, a few angels, and a huge swirling glob of rocks and water with no place to go.

The angels asked God, “Why don’t you clean up this mess?”

So God collected rocks from the huge swirling glob and put them together in clumps and said, “Some of these clumps of rocks will be planets, and some will be stars and some of these rocks will be... just rocks.”

Then God collected water from the huge swirling glob and put it together in pools of water and said, “Some of these pools of water will be oceans, and some will be clouds, and some of this water will be... just water.”

Then the angels said, “Well God, it’s neater now, but is it finished?” And God answered, “Nope!!”

So, on some of the rocks God placed growing things, and creeping things, and things that only God knows what they are, and when God had done all this, the angels asked God, “Is the world finished now?” And God answered, “Nope!”

God made a man and a woman from some of the water and stardust and said to them, “I’m tired now. Please finish up the world for me... really it’s almost done.” But the man and woman said, “We can’t finish the world alone! You have the plans and we are too little.”

“You are big enough,” God answered them. “But I agree to this. If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner.”

The man and the woman asked, “What is a partner?” and God answered, “A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough and on the days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That’s the deal.” And they all agreed to that deal.

Then the angels asked God, “Is the world finished yet?” And God answered, “I don’t know. Go ask my partners.”

Reading - “Covenantal, Not Creedal” By Thom Belote
Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal, rather than creedal faith. Covenant strikes at the core of our identities as Unitarian Universalists. But let’s face it: covenant isn’t a sexy idea. Covenant is one of those religious lingo words—like creed, or catechism, or charisma, or co-substantial—that comes across as jargon-y and overly intellectual.
It makes me think of Indiana Jones movies, where there is always a scene where Indy is a stuffy, nerdy archeologist, giving lectures to bored students who do not share his passion for sixth century Sumerian gravesites.

But, importantly for Indiana Jones, the other half of the time he is this rough and - tumble adventurer, traveling the globe and risking death.

Conventional church often has this double-life motif. You show up on Sunday to hear a two-thousand word sermon about a two-thousand year old story, and you learn what this word meant in Greek or Aramaic or Hebrew. And then you go off—to lunch, to your real life, and your real life is just about as far removed from the idea of the Hebrews carrying an ark through the desert as can be.

But what is interesting about Indiana Jones is that we are not actually living a double life. Indiana Jones is an archeologist in the classroom and an archeologist when he is racing to excavate ancient cities and save the world. Passion and purpose and calling infuse his life at every moment. His is not a double life—he is living his passion. He is living his calling.

The same can be true of Unitarian Universalists. We need not live the double life. While the concept of covenant can sound abstract and irrelevant, living it can be passionate and can help us all live our true purpose.

So, what does it mean to say we are a covenantal faith? A covenant is a set of enduring, but evolving, deeply held promises made between people and with the source of life itself. And while the covenant is taken super-seriously, the promises are often so intense that it is impossible to live up to them. So, we will always need to admit a falling short—and, when we do fall short—our proper response is to re-covenant, to recommit to those promises.

Our covenants in this church—made with one another and with the spirit and source of life itself—are powerful. The promises we make have the power to change lives; the promises call upon us to live up to our best selves, to summon forth our true, authentic, vulnerable, and passionate selves - living our greatest calling to transform ourselves, and transform the world.

Sermon - Walking Together, By Gretchen Haley
It is so good to be here with you this morning. I’ve been gone 3 weeks, the longest I’ve been away from this pulpit since last October. Maybe because these weeks just happened to coincide with the news that I wouldn’t be extending my contract into next year, it feels like I’ve been gone even longer than that.

While I was away, I guest taught a class at my former seminary – Iliff School of Theology. A Unitarian Universalist theology class- the professor asked if I would speak on the topic of ecclesiology. Ecclesiology – from the Greek ekklesia - meaning, congregation, or church, and logia, meaning logic, words, or knowledge - so, ecclesiology is "the logic of the congregation."
It includes questions about the purpose of a congregation, the boundaries of our churches, who is in/out and why, and how congregations relate to each other, and why. (What is it that reading said about the value in hearing the Greek meaning of old words? Don't worry, we're getting there.)

In this class I was teaching, my lessons focused on the concept of covenant. When Unitarian Universalists say we are a covenantal rather than creedal church - that's an *ecclesiological* statement - it tells you how we define ourselves - both as a particular gathered community, and in our wider sense of our liberal faith. As Transylvanian Unitarian Francis David said in the 16th century: "We need not think alike to love alike." The promises we mean to point to when we say we "love alike," those are the contents of covenant.

As I began my presentation to the class, one of the students wondered if “covenant” was one of those words our people get stuck on, like “prayer” or “God.” Like, does it come with baggage? I was caught off guard by the question, because of all the words I have found people come in with old definitions hanging them up, keeping them stuck - covenant is not one of them. Covenant - though prevalent in a lot of conventional theology and in sometimes problematic ways - has remained for most, a nerdy, lingo-y word - like Thom Belote says - a word that produces glazed looks and vacant nods.

Sometimes when I talk about “covenant” with Unitarian Universalists, the only thing they manage to conjure up are a few words, a few promises that they recite in their church service – like – “covenant means we promise to help each other,” or “we dwell together in peace.” If they are UU youth, they tell me promises like “turn off your cell phone,” or “don’t talk unless you have the talking stick.” (We don’t have a youth group here yet, but once you do, mark my words, those will be key parts of the youth “covenant," along with "don't share sleeping bags.")

Now, these are examples of covenants, good ones. But if this is all covenant meant - well, I guess it would’ve been a very short lecture I gave that day - and a very short month of reflection we had ahead, not to mention a pretty shallow theology, a pretty limited "good news" we'd be proclaiming when we describe ourselves as a "covenantal" rather than creedal faith.

As Unitarian Universalists, we trace back the good news contained in the concept of covenant to the Hebrew Bible. In the stories of Genesis, God chooses to make a "covenant" with a few particular people. That is, God chooses to make a promise to stay in relationship. In turn, God gives them the Torah - instructions for how to live as a people chosen not for special privilege but for special responsibility.

Fulfilling the Torah is the way the people stay in relationship with God. They are the promises of the covenant. You might have heard about 10 of those - but actually the Covenant Code goes on way beyond 10. God actually gives the people 613 laws - or promises of behavior as a guide for maintaining relationship with God so that together, they can finish the world.
Now, to help us think about this, let's remember that the people who wrote and compiled these stories of the Hebrew Bible - they were an occupied people. They lived under an oppressive rule. And so while we might be wondering why anyone would prize a relationship with so many rules - we can guess that at least part of their move in telling their story in such a way, was to be able to resist the idea that their occupiers had the final say over their lives.

Covenant was an an alternative way of being in the world, an alternative way to understand the purpose of life. Rather than the harsh realities they faced in their everyday lives, they laid claim to a long history that made them inheritors of a special relationship with a ruler more powerful than anyone in this world, and they laid claim to a special responsibility granted to them by this Great King - this Great Lord - to carry on the good work of caring for each other, and for the world. Claiming themselves as people in covenant was a way of saying they had been especially chosen for - and agreed to - partnership in finishing the world, just as the story told it.

That story - that's a story that's usually told at the beginning of a new ministry. I have heard it in at least two different installation services for new Unitarian Universalist ministers. It is a great way to describe the relationship between minister and a congregation. Don't get too hung up on which one is God by the way. God is not really the point.

The point is the deal that gets made between the parties. They define their terms, they make promises to be faithful, to stick with it, not give up - They make promises acknowledging that they'll do something big, something bigger than they could do on their own - that is, to "finish the world."

You can see why this story works so well for the beginning of a ministry. It sets out this path for the minister and congregation to follow: Be partners, dare to do something big that none of you could do on your own, don't give up, trust each other, do your part for the community that extends way beyond this little circle, imagine way out into the future, and keep going.

When I met with members of TRUU’s Board in late spring of 2010, we began to form such a partnership. And over these last two years, we have all learned together the challenges and great wisdom there is in living out such a shared project of creation. We have learned together especially because none of us had done this before. I had some experience from my internship in Boulder, but as one colleague - told me after I gloved about the amazing experience of my internship, "Internships are supposed to be amazing, talk to me next year."

Unitarian Universalist ministry, this strange relationship between congregation and minister - look, it's still amazing. More so. But it's also confusing, and heartbreaking, and sometimes in these past two years, I have felt overwhelmed by the promises I made implicitly by agreeing to being your minister, to being anyone's minister - you know, those promises about remaining mature and differentiated, promises to see the big picture when the details are so seductive, promises to remind us all again and again that we have come to do something big, something none of us could do alone. Promises to love with all my heart all of this - all of you - all of what
we're doing here - without getting confused that it is about me. The good stuff, it's not about me. The difficult stuff, it's not about me.

In his lecture to ministerial colleagues at General Assembly a few years ago, the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed said it like this: "You will pour out your lifeblood for a congregation, but never settle there." He quotes then that line that I bet many of us are familiar with, from Mary Oliver - from her poem, "At Blackwater Woods:" "To live in this world, you must be able to do three things - to love what is mortal, to hold it against your bones, knowing your own life depends on it, and when the time comes to let it go, to let it go."

This story about partners, is a story for the beginning of a ministry. And yet here I am, with just three worship services left with all of you, maybe 8 weeks or so in my ministry, setting this story before us to consider. Setting before us this story of faithfulness, of sticking with it, of staying in partnership – right when we’re about to end our partnership. It’s almost cruel, right?

And it would be cruel. If covenant was a matter of particular promises at a particular time and place, or if ministry or Unitarian Universalism more generally was about a single minister - a particular person - in relationship with a particular congregation at a particular moment. But these are examples - they aren't the whole of covenant, or the whole of what our covenantal faith offers us by way of good news.

Scholars tell us that those stories of covenant in the Hebrew Bible were written about three thousand years ago, give or take a few centuries. And yet still today, covenant comes to us, right here in the Roaring Fork Valley in 2012 - as an alternative way of being in the world, an alternative way to understand our purpose in life.

As Thom Belote begins to invite, covenant need not be just religious mumbo-jumbo, kept distant and scholarly. Covenant can be a powerful way to summon forth our true, "authentic, vulnerable and passionate selves."

The world talks about winners and losers in life; covenant offers us a vision of mutuality and reciprocity - where all are one and all are for all.

The world imagines limitless accumulation as limitless good; covenant reminds us of our boundaries and that our actions have consequences, near and far.

The world tells us our worth is justified through individual effort and independent accomplishment - covenant reminds us we are saved, we are made whole, and we are made human, through partnership - through relationship.

The world believes there are clear endings and beginnings, that time works in a straight line - covenant illuminates that we step into the middle of a story already in the works, and our job is just to pick up and carry forward the promises that we can, as we are able, for the time we are here.
The world teaches us to ask: what's in it for me? Covenant says: we're all in it together.

The world gives us laws that we must follow for fear of punishment. Covenant gives us the gift of being responsible together, being accountable together, out of a sense of love, and loyalty to a bigger project.

And covenant knows that we will fail to live up to our ideals, and invites us to make amends, to atone - that is to return to at-one-ment - and to promise again.

What we've done together these past two years (and I'm talking to all of you here - whether you showed up today for the first time, or have been along for the whole ride), it's an example of living in covenant. But what's at work here in this congregation, the goodness, and the struggles- like Judy Fjell says - "the muddy and the clear," this is so much more than about a particular minister - or a particular people. It's not about me, and truthfully, it's not about you. We're just examples, particular manifestations carrying forward what we can while we can, because really - We're trying to save the whole world here - right?

I mean, why go to church, why put in all this time, if it doesn't really matter in the biggest way? Like save-the-world - or finish the world - kind of biggest way. You don't have to - freedom is perpetual and central in our faith - and life is busy and full, and crazy a lot of the time.

And so this thing we've been partnering on here - this project we call Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist - it better have real-world consequences, it better matter. It better save real lives, save our own lives, it better not just help us learn what the Greek roots of "ecclesiology" are. Right? I mean, I've reading about all these congregations in search, who say what they really want form their minister, from their congregation - is "intellectual stimulation," and I think - really? That's the best we can come up with? That's what matters most? Surely, we want something more.

Again - It's not about me, and it's not about you - this partnership, this covenant. We're particular examples. In this great big story of life, this great big covenant that's been going on since the beginning of time, this great invitation to live into a fuller vision of life - what the Hebrew Bible would call God's Shalom. God's peace - or if you'd prefer - the Peace of the Whole, the Wholeness of Us All. The kind of peace I feel personally, but isn't about me, but about the whole world. Shalom.

I give you this story about partners not at the start of my ministry (maybe it would've been helpful), but as one of my parting gifts, it's true.

But I give it now because if you remember nothing else from all this time together, I hope you remember this.
Especially in those muddy times - in congregational life, when you wonder - what are we doing here - who are we to each other - this story can remind you - oh, right, we're partners. We need each other. I can't give up, or dig my heels in so much, or speak without kindness, or fail to make love the biggest priority - because we're partners, and we need each other. It's not about any one of us, it's about all.

And this story can be a guide as you all transition to new ministry - to help you remember - what are we looking for here - a partner.

And it can be a way to talk to people about our faith and what brought you surprisingly to *church* of all places - - what does it mean to join *this* congregation - it means agreeing to be a partner, it means recognizing that to live in this world, you need partners.

And this story can be a way to talk about our every day lives - how we are meant to live with our friends, our families, our spouses and our children - we're partners. We've made a deal with the Spirit of Life itself to finish the world. It's a big project, and it will take us all.

After I finish my time with you as your minister, I will still be your partner. I'll be out there in the world, doing what I can to be a good, faithful partner. And you will still be mine - you and your new minister, who is also my partner. And so I ask you all to make me a deal - to keep going, and don't give up.

Those of you who are new, especially - especially those of you newer - those of you teetering between commitment and "I can take it or leave it," Look - I've been there. I know how hard it is to get here, especially with young kids.

And I'm inviting you - all of you, regardless of your stage of relationship to this congregation - to take this leap of faith that this community could be worth it. That it could matter in a big way. That it could be the thing that saves your life, that thing that saves the world, and that with everyone believing that, and living into it, that it will.

I know, we are a people who like evidence first - we want to see that it matters - and then decide to join it. But that isn't how this thing is going to work - you have to decide that it's going to matter - no evidence, no proof, and then because you believe it, it will.

As your partner today, and way beyond today - I'm telling you, I need your help. The world needs your help. The Spirit of Life needs your help.

To heal these wounds, these old scars we've inherited - in our hearts, on our earth - and every little step in between - it will take us all. Living in covenant, promising to stick with it, continuing to try, walking together on this fragile, lonely, beautiful planet.

That's the deal.
May it be so - and Amen.