

First Unitarian Church

September 10, 2023

We've just completed our summer seminary sermon series on world religions. We started with a sermon about how we'd even define religion. Then we explored Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianities, Judaism, and Native American traditions. We also delved into Religious Liberalism as a distinct framework, into the perceived tension between science and religion, and finally into atheism.

I understand Carl Coyote dabbled in atheism while I was away last week? Carl, who never fails to remind us that coyote is a deity in some traditions? (A *minor* deity.) I'll believe it when I see it.

I've been a UU all my life. This tradition feels so normal to me that sometimes I forget how unusual and exciting it is to be part of a congregation—and a whole denomination—that embraces theological diversity. To even welcome guest preachers from other religions. And how wonderful it is to find so many guest speakers who also embrace diversity and would share their paths with us.

One of the reasons we UUs are the way we are is that Unitarian Universalism is non-creedal. We don't think that there is only one right way to believe. We don't insist that everyone have the same beliefs. Instead, what brings us together is a set of values. They are reflected in our services, and in the work we do together, and in the mission covenant of this church. That's what we have: a mission covenant.

It's significant that our church doesn't just have a mission *statement*. It has a mission *covenant*. A covenant is a promise. It's a sacred contract. It is relationship based. While a creed is an individual thing—I, Angela, believe in x, y, z—and a statement is a kind of proclamation—we will do x!—a covenant is a relational thing. We promise. We promise to each other, and perhaps—but not necessarily—to God or the Spirit of Life. Our church's mission covenant reads:

We, the members of First Unitarian, agree to:

- Promote the spiritual, intellectual, and personal growth of each member
- Minister to each other in an atmosphere of welcome, acceptance, and caring
- Be a positive force for social, environmental, and economic action
- Promote the wider understanding of our purposes and principles in the larger community
- Provide a dynamic religious education program for all ages

Does anyone here know when this mission covenant was first adopted? I don't actually know how old it is.

Based on what I know of our history, I'd guess it's from the 90's. The wording sounds like that era. But the set of values it reflects are much older. There's another example of a UU covenant statement in our gray hymnal. Will you turn to it with me? #471. Let's read it together. This is one of the most popular ones in our tradition. We've read together many times over the years. If you're on zoom, the usher will put the words in the chat.

Love is the doctrine of this church,

The quest of truth is its sacrament,  
And service is its prayer.  
To dwell together in peace,  
To seek knowledge in freedom,  
To serve human need,  
To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine -  
Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.

This one has some old-fashioned words in it, reflecting the long history of these values. A doctrine is an official teaching. A sacrament is a religious practice that is considered especially significant or important.

So, Love is the official teaching of this church. The quest for truth is its sacrament. And service is its prayer. We covenant, we promise, to dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge freely, and to serve human need. So that everyone may grow into harmony with the divine. What is the divine? It's simple.

I'm just kidding. It's a big question. Maybe for today we can say the love that holds all. Or the love that moves through and among us. Or the spirit of life.

Our theological theme this month is the Gift of Welcome. It got me thinking about some of the tensions that are inherent in radical inclusivity, and the role covenant plays in helping us navigate those.

When you count not only official members but everyone who participates, including all of the kids too, we are a congregation of over 1000 people. Although we'd like to believe that everyone is here for the right reasons, in truth, it's inevitable that in a group this size there are going to be some people who do harm. Intentionally or unintentionally.

In my years here, I've had to deal with several cases of men's sexual misconduct or harassment or otherwise inappropriate behavior toward women. I'm not nice about it. You know those signs that say, "shoplifters will be prosecuted?" That's how I feel about misconduct. If you misconduct here, you'll be kicked out and I'll file a police report. It's not fun, but I did have to laugh one time when a person who miscondacted complained that I was not being welcoming to him.

It's not just me who won't put up with it. Our safe congregation policies, which you can find on the website, are clear. We don't welcome that kind of behavior here. We even have policies that address ambiguous situations, where someone is doing something that makes you uncomfortable. And we encourage you to report that as soon as you start to notice it, even if you aren't sure it rises to the level of misconduct.

That's because in order to create a welcoming place, some behaviors cannot be welcome. That's the welcome paradox. If we welcome unwelcoming behavior, we make an unwelcoming place.

Misconduct is an extreme example of that.

But there are other examples.

One time, a person repeatedly came to church wearing a provocative political t-shirt. The shirt was also racist. It was obviously meant to cause a reaction. I told him to cut it out. He accused me of violating his free speech. Was I?

No. If I were a government official, telling him he can't wear the shirt outside of his home, that would be a violation of his free speech. As the minister of a church that covenants to minister to each other in an atmosphere of welcome, acceptance, and caring, I was calling him back into covenant. Being an intentional provocateur and being racist, including "just joking," works against our covenant. It creates an unwelcoming, uncaring atmosphere.

As we lean into the work of our 8<sup>th</sup> principle, dismantling oppression within ourselves and our institutions, we will continue to encounter moments of tension related to being welcoming. By far, most of these will be unintentional. We will learn that words or phrases we thought were okay, are not received that way by others. We may have to let go of a comfortable way of doing things, to make room for others or be more welcoming to them. We may discover that values outside of the church, like free speech, are superseded inside the church by the promises we make; promises based in other values, like caring, welcoming, and acceptance, and spiritual, intellectual, and personal growth. We may—no, we will—also encounter areas of genuine disagreement about how to interpret something or what is welcoming or how to proceed.

It's one thing to hear or think about this kind of tension, and it's another thing to experience it. Because when we experience it, we don't just think about it. We *feel* it. With our *feelings*.

That's when our covenantal faith asks the most of us. When we are upset.

I'm going to share a trick therapists like to teach people. It's as helpful in church as it is in other kinds of relationships. Because in all our relationships, there's a way we aspire to be, and then there's what we default to when we have big feelings, right?

The trick is to *slow down*. When we get upset, we speed up. You know what I mean? We talk faster, and gesture faster. We pop off with our reactions.

Instead, try to slow yourself down long enough to name what's happening. "I'm having feelings." Figure out what they are. Maybe it takes a minute to figure it out. What are you mad about? What are you sad about? What are you afraid of? What do you feel protective of? Are you embarrassed and trying to save face?

And then, if you can muster up the courage, and if it feels reasonably safe to do so, share the feelings before you proceed.

It can make a big difference. Sharing a feeling can increase connection between two people by fostering understanding. Popping off, not so much!

In our personal lives, an example might be, say, a loved one who repeatedly comes home late. A partner or a teenager, perhaps. Your first reaction might be to scold them for it. And then maybe they get defensive and give you excuses or get mad back. But if you slow your reaction down, maybe you realize what you've been feeling is scared. When they don't come home on time, you get scared that something has happened. Maybe you've lost someone before. So, you share this, and then they know your response has to do with love and with grief. And they are

more likely to remember and to care back after that. Maybe you're able to talk about what you both need and renegotiate so it works better.

You see what I'm getting at.

If you forget at first, do it when you do remember. If you encounter someone else who is forgetting to slow down, maybe you can invite them to. Maybe you can model that yourself.

A welcoming, religiously liberal congregation is a brave and wonderful space. It's a space where the promises we make keep pulling us toward the vision of who and how we want to be.

There's so much we can't fix in this world. But as long as there are people who love and care, people who quest for truth, and make promises to each other in a spirit of community, then it's still a beautiful world. The divine is still moving in it. As we welcome each other and our own moments of growth, we transform the world with our love. We create in it the very things we need, in order to feel welcome and at home ourselves.