

FAITHFULNESS TO THE COVENANT WITH OUR COMMUNITY

Rev. Kit Ketcham, March 18, 2007

This past week, I did a little sleuthing, a little undercover work, here at UUCWI. I am quite the aficionado of the clever murder mysteries of Agatha Christie, PD James, Tony Hillerman, Elizabeth George, and the like, and I know that a clever sleuth needs to keep her eyes and ears open in pursuit of knowledge.

The knowledge I was seeking was evidence of covenantal relationships within the UUCWI community. No, not murder, not crime, but evidence that here at UUCWI and among our loved ones generally, there are covenants, ladies and gentlemen, covenants of the most tender variety.

Remind me what a covenant is, you say, for it has been a long time since last Sunday when we defined them and talked about our involuntary covenant with life. Yes, remind me of the nature of covenant, of faithfulness, and, while you're at it, uncover the mystery of covenantal relationships with those we love.

I am glad to do so, gentle listeners. And please file these definitions away in your memory banks, for we will think about them again next Sunday, when we explore the mystery of our covenant with the earth.

Covenant, in a religious or personal context, is more than a contract, more than a bargain made over a signature, more than a set of rules governing a housing development. Covenants, in religious life, mean promises, commitments, vows, pledges, as in a marriage covenant---to love, honor, and cherish.

Religious covenants are different from a contract or a binding agreement. They are often unspoken and resonate with expectations and hopes about how the religious community will be together, just as a marriage covenant implies expectations and hopes beyond the words on the contract entered in the county clerk's office.

And faithfulness, we seemed to agree last week, has dual implications as well, from mundane meanings such as accurate, true, and firm adherence to a policy to meanings with a more reverent or ethical essence: loyalty, devotion, fidelity, trustworthiness, and reliability. I think we're pretty much on the same page on the meanings of these two words.

So then, what do we mean by "community"? I'm interpreting this word as the groups we belong to, whether they are small, as in a marriage or family setting, medium, as in a congregation or club or school, large, as in a town or city or state, and extra large, as in our society as a whole.

Of course, community is more than just populations. Community implies relationships as well, and the relationships I'm focusing on today are those which are with our beloved ones. That would include our families, our closest friends, our congregation, and other groups with which we feel an intimacy beyond mere acquaintance.

What are the covenants, the promises and commitments, we have within these groupings? Well, in a marriage, what does that covenant imply?

Yes, marriage is a partnership, a relationship that is both strong and fragile, for the mutual nurture and support of each person, and it is expected that both partners will be trustworthy, cooperative with one another, freely offering resources to one another, caring for one another beyond ordinary friendship.

It's further implicit in a marriage covenant that the energies of the partnership will be spent in providing for the needs of the family, whether that includes children or elders or pets or all of the above, that there is growth to be found in mutually pleasant and productive pursuits, that faithfulness to the partner is important, even essential.

We have somewhat similar covenants with close friends---loyalty, trustworthiness, mutual caring all figure into our friendships. Sometimes we are asked, by the nature of our friendship, to provide more than average nurture and care to a friend, and this is part of many covenants between friends.

But back to my detective work earlier this week. It happened that on Wednesday, I joined other UUCWlars at two community gatherings----the work party on the land and the South End Koffee Klatch at Rockhoppers. My fellow attendees did not know (unless they read my blog) that I was using both gatherings as an opportunity to see what is happening between people in the UUCWI community.

For we are a community of people who care for each other, who envision a future together, who invest ourselves in each other, who reach out in support and caring, who are generous with time and energy and money and physical strength.

So here's what I saw in those two very different gatherings of members and friends of this community. Those of you who were also present, think about what we experienced together.

At the work party, I saw men and women cheerfully expending a lot of physical energy hauling branches and logs around the lot, piling them in a stack for future burning (I understand there were pyromaniacs in the crowd who could hardly wait to strike the match!), raking up and tidying the ground, establishing the silt fence, making ready for the day when we start putting walls up. All these efforts were in service of a dream, a dream begun several years ago with the support of members of this community and kept alive by work parties and capital campaigns and a desire for green design.

My own part Wednesday morning was minimal but significant: I got to select new sayings for the wayside pulpit and I chose two which seemed to me to exemplify the heart of this community: "We need not think alike to love alike" by Francis David, and "Unanswered questions are far less dangerous than unquestioned answers".

I couldn't stay very long at the work party because I had made a pitch for folks to attend the South End Koffee Klatch and I needed to be there too. Besides, it was another stop on my detective journey, to listen to the conversation among attendees and think about where it figures in the community of UUCWI.

It never fails to amaze me to hear the kinds of conversations that ensue when Unitarian Universalists get together, and SEKK was no exception. This particular group was all women and the conversation, while far ranging and varied, tended toward listening to each others' stories about life. At the end of the two hours we were together, we had been invited into each others' lives in ways that are rare, except among members of a community.

In a faith community, people learn to trust each other, to freely help one another, to cooperate to keep the community growing and thriving, to reach out beyond the community itself to bring others in and to offer help in the societal community beyond its immediate walls. It is voluntary faithfulness to the ways of love, a demand we as a community are called to understand and to fulfill.

There are also covenants embedded in the larger relationship of the congregation to its membership. We have a covenant with our children as well, to teach them, protect them, and help them grow into an understanding and appreciation of Unitarian Universalism, as well as to become productive, loving members of the larger community.

To do this, we need to give our CRE staff every assistance we can, to pay them enough that they can reasonably continue to serve UUCWI, to give them needed supplies and education, and to value them in every way.

And you and I have a covenant with each other, an agreement both written and unwritten. In our official agreement, my hours and responsibilities and remuneration are spelled out, but it is hard to quantify my relationship with you because so much of it is intangible.

What are some of the intangibles of our covenant with each other?

In seminary, frantic students about to go to their first pastorate ask for advice from their mentors, and the reply to their question “what shall I do first with my new parish?” was always “Love them.” And that advice holds true for every minister who ever went to serve a congregation.

I came here to love you. And it has proved to be one of the delights of my life, to love you and be loved, to welcome you and be welcomed by you, to appreciate you and be appreciated by you.

I love loving you and being loved by you. I want this community to prosper, to grow into the best UU congregation it can be, to offer the love and hospitality in its heart to the wider island community and the most effective thing I have to offer is my love for you. One of the ways I show my love is by being generous with time, energy, and money.

In the past four years, I have pledged to three different congregations---Shoreline, Vashon, and UUCWI. Next year, my entire pledge will go to UUCWI and I will double my current level of giving, from about \$100 a month to about \$200. This congregation is that valuable to me.

How do others here see UUCWI? In the past couple of weeks, members of UUCWI have been invited to share their thoughts about what the congregation means to them and I'd like to repeat some of their words. I haven't asked their permission, so I will offer these excerpts without naming the writer.

“Believing as I do, that we all need Relationship and Community to guide our journey on life's path, I testify that I have found the UUCWI to be a wonderful source of nourishment. I have become a born-again Unitarian Universalist here on South Whidbey. I believe we UU's offer a path to peace and justice that can save the world. Amazing Grace has brought me here.”

“What a joy to discover the UU community. With the dream of "our own place of worship" the dream exists for all. Although I feel my greatest form of contribution is my time and being "present", I realize from owning my own small business that there is also cash requirement. I am committed to this community and will do whatever is needed to see the dream become a reality.”

“As a Unitarian Universalist I feel validated, supported and empowered to be true to myself and to cause my spirit to be consonant with how I live.”

“I have been a UU all of my adult life and cannot imagine my life without this solid anchor. It is not just a place I go on Sundays. When it comes time each year to decide how much I will pledge to the next year's operating budget, I already know that I will give until it feels good. For me, most years that means that I pledge 3% of my adjusted gross income. I am very excited about the possibilities that lie before us. There is so much we can do with our time, talents, creative energy and financial support.”

“In 1984 I discovered UUs and now I can't imagine having a life without my UU family. UU churches provide an incredibly valuable refuge for those who need a religious or spiritual community but who also like to think for themselves. I give to support our community. A community that supports our minds AND our hearts by helping people, who like to think and question, feel at home.”

I mentioned last week, in my sermon about faithfulness to our covenant with life, that we humans often have a hard time talking about money, about generosity. Many of us have been through a war or two, have lived with Depression era parents, have experienced scary financial times.

I hope that those of you who heard that sermon thought about it later and have identified the uneasiness you may feel about discussing money. I hope, too, that you've thought about how being generous might allay some of that fear that so many of us find hiding in our past, a fear that often handicaps us when it comes to supporting our community.

I had a weird dream this past week that involved a character from my past, a guy named Tom, the assistant principal of my former junior high school in Colorado. Now, Tom never attended any UU church that I'm aware of and we never had a social relationship at all, just professional.

But in my dream, Tom was a member of this congregation and he was refusing to come to church. He was saying to me, “I don't get what I need there. Why should I come to services? Why should I support the congregation?”

And I, in my ministerial wisdom, was expected to give him the answer that would change his mind forever and turn him into our most generous giver!

What would you have said? Well, as luck would have it, I woke up at that point---I think it was the sound of the cat outside my door that woke me, not my incoherent efforts to give him an answer. But the dream was in my mind as I went through my morning rituals.

And a memory of my own connection to a congregation came back to me. I was like Tom, in some ways, at one time in my life, feeling distanced from the closeknit community of the church I attended in Colorado, Jefferson Unitarian Church.

But one day I stumbled into a 12 step program at the urging of a friend and began to understand the essential-ness of belonging to a community.

I had always resisted getting very attached. I wanted to maintain my arms-length relationship with the groups I joined, whether that was the faculty at my school, my friends, even my family. I didn't want to be too dependent; somehow that translated in my mind to being helpless or needy. I didn't want pity; I wanted to do things for myself. I was happy to be helpful to others, but I resisted asking for help myself.

One day, through AlAnon, that changed. I was getting ready to go to a meeting, where I had agreed to meet someone who wanted to know more about 12 step programs. On my way out the door, the phone rang. It was my sister, calling from the Pacific Northwest. "Mom's had a stroke, it doesn't look good, can you come home?"

Scared to death, I went on to the AlAnon meeting hoping to find someone who could help the person whom I had intended to meet, so that I could get ready to fly to Portland. I had no intention of telling anyone what I was dealing with; I didn't want anyone to feel sorry for me or to think of me as needy.

But when two AlAnon friends walked up to where I was waiting, to my own surprise, I opened my arms to them, walked forward, and said, "I can't do this alone any more. I need your help." and began to cry. That moment for me was life-changing. I had shifted from merely observing the community around me to letting myself belong to it.

It wasn't long before I realized that my congregation was a community I had long resisted, though I had been a member for many years, had participated in dozens of programs and committees, had supported it financially at a fairly low level, and had used its resources abundantly for years. But I had never let myself truly belong.

I began to look at the ways this congregation had supported me, even as it asked very little in return. My husband and I had come to JUC in the early 1970's, when we moved to Jefferson County, outside of Denver. Our son was dedicated there on Christmas Eve of 1972, by the Rev. Leon Hopper.

Mike was a pretty rambunctious little kid and that congregation offered nursery care and later on, religious education for him, RE which gave him experiences we could not have hoped to give him on our own.

Sexuality education, a Coming of Age trip, and youth group helped Mike become the loving, thinking young man he is today. And RE teachers never gave up on him, despite his antics.

When Larry and I ended our marriage, we consulted Rev. Lex Crane, who was our minister in 1979. We found we could both still be members there, despite our changed status, and this helped us remain friends to this day. And all three of us had JUC to support us in this difficult time.

JUC taught me to sing. Whether it was singing the special music or in the choir or at informal jams with other members, I found my voice there, learned not to be afraid to get up and sing----or preach! Because they wouldn't let me fall too far. I might goof up, but I was never a failure in that community.

I began to relax my resistance. I began to experiment with being my real self with JUC friends, expressing deeper opinions, revealing more of myself. And as I began to do this, my gratitude, my joy at belonging to a community found expression in generosity.

For JUC also taught me to give. As I understood the preciousness of that place, as I let myself be supported and nurtured by the congregation, that fellowship of faith, I found myself wanting to give more than just my time and energy and a few measly bucks.

My pledge grew and grew and grew! At first, I just tried to make sure I paid my share of the cost of keeping the building open and the staff paid.

But I found I wanted to do more. I wanted to support the All-Church project, I wanted to make sure we had enough hymnals, I wanted our minister to be paid well, I wanted us to have a good choir director, and most of all, I wanted that congregation, that community to have the resources to make a BIG difference in Jefferson County Colorado, not to be just another nice little suburban church, having nice little services on Sunday. I wanted it to do for everyone what it had done for me.

And I feel that way today, here. I want the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island to do for others on this island what Jefferson Unitarian Church did for me, way back when. This memory of true community and the hope of creating it here for others undergirds my dedication to this community and my desire to give all I can to help it prosper.

I'd like to close with this story: A little boy was afraid of the dark. He cried out for his daddy to comfort him and his daddy said to him, "Don't worry, it's okay, God is with you. You don't have to be afraid." The little boy goes back to sleep, but only briefly, and he cries out again for his daddy. And once again his daddy answers, "God is with you, don't be afraid." Finally, the third time the boy cries out and is reassured with the same answer, the little boy says, "But I want God with some skin on him".

That's what we are in community: God with skin. We give to each other the comfort of care and connection in our covenant with each other, in faithfulness to the ways of love.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Hymn #360, Here we have gathered.

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, feeling very strongly our ties to one another and our sense of belonging together. May we find the desire within us to be generous to this beloved community that the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island might be a strong and growing presence for love and justice. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.