

FAITHFULNESS: OUR COVENANT WITH SELF  
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, March 11, 2007

In this first of three sermons on the linked ideas of faithfulness and covenant, I want to check and see if we're all on the same page when it comes to the definition of these ideas.

What's a one-word definition, for you, of covenant?

Of faithfulness?

In this series, I want to expand on our understandings of those two familiar words and help us think about them in terms of our religious faith as Unitarian Universalists. We will consider three covenants in our lives that have particular significance in our free faith: our covenant with our selves, our covenant with our faith community, and our covenant with the universe, or God as you understand God.

What is a covenant, and what does it mean to us? Your definitions reflect much of what my American Heritage dictionary says: a covenant is a formal, binding agreement, a compact, a contract, a bargain, a deal.

Religious covenants are a little different from this; a religious covenant is often unspoken and resonates with expectations and hopes about how the religious community will be together. Covenants, in religious life, mean promises, commitments, vows, pledges. We think of a marriage covenant, of a pledge to love, honor, and cherish.

Faithfulness, too, has dual implications, from mundane meanings such as "accurate" and "true" and "firm adherence to a policy" to meanings with a more reverent or ethical essence: loyalty, devotion, fidelity, trustworthiness, reliability.

One of my favorite old hymns from my Baptist upbringing was “Great is Thy Faithfulness”. We sang it a lot and when my mother died, we chose it as a hymn for her memorial service. And as I led that singing, on that beautiful June afternoon, the words suddenly meant something new to me.

Some of those old words go like this: “Great is thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness, there is no shadow of turning with thee, thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not. As thou hast been, thou forever will be.” And “morning by morning, new mercies I see. All I have needed thy hand has provided, great is thy faithfulness unto me.”

My mother’s face filled my mind as we all sang these words. If ever there was an example of faithfulness, it was my mother, I realized. All these words applied to her as well as to the God she felt so close to.

My mother and I had had our differences. She died in 1994, a lady with an uncommon amount of spirit and life, a lover of nature, of people, of God. A wife loyal beyond death, she never remarried after my father died, though the twinkle in her eye still attracted many an elderly swain.

As an oversensitive teenager, I vividly remember walking with my mother on an Oregon beach and cringing as she flung her arms wide to the grey sky with a line from Edna St. Vincent Millay, “O world, I cannot hold thee close enough”. Without a concern in her head about how cute guys might view the daughter of such a maniac, she loudly sang her joy to God, she smiled and talked to every passerby, she clasped my hand to her cheek in saltwatery ecstasy.

When I grew older and moved away from home, her letters exhorting me to remember my childhood faith annoyed and troubled me. My childhood faith had metamorphosed drastically and her insistence was embarrassing. In vain, I exhorted her in return. She should examine the inconsistencies in her own beliefs! She should see how honest and true I was in my reworked faith! She should leave me alone!

Twenty years of infrequent visits ended in November of 1990, when the call came from my sister, “Mom’s had a stroke, it doesn’t look good. Can you come home?”

When I walked into the hospital room in Vancouver, WA, her snowy hair was tousled on the pillow and she was paler than I thought possible. One side of her body was floppy-looking, as though the starch were gone. Green, unfocused eyes regarded my approach and then snapped to attention. A brilliant half-smile illuminated her pale face: “Oh, Betsy” was all she could muster.

She wanted to die. Over the next few days, with gestures and tears, she told me wordlessly of her anguish. She could not talk intelligibly. Three or four words might emerge before nonsense syllables elbowed meaning aside. She was embarrassed by her weakness, ashamed of her need for constant supervision.

And my father, her lover, was waiting for her. Beyond her crippled human form, she knew that his long arms were outstretched, ready to enfold her again. Impatience and frustration flashed from eyes which could see him there, just beyond the bar.

But as days passed and she got stronger and more able to care for herself, my mother gradually conceded her defeat. This was, apparently, not “it”. And she began to take delight in life again, roaring with surprised laughter on Thanksgiving night as kids and grandkids and nieces and nephews conga-ed into her room to the tune of “Over the River and Through the Woods, to Grandmother’s house we go”.

Again, tears and gestures and, this time, a determined set of the jaw communicated her intent: God hadn’t wanted her to come yet; He must have more work for her to do here on earth.

My mother was my lesson in faithfulness to the covenant with self.

What is the very first covenant we experience at our birth? I think we are born into a covenant with life. We are born with the will to live; instinctively we struggle to stay alive, against all odds. No matter how tiny the baby, once it is born alive, its mission is to live, to continue to breathe, to request what it needs through that most poignant of expressions, the cry of a tiny child.

Concurrent with this covenant are other innate and involuntary agreements---to learn what one must do to live, beyond breathing; to be a member of a family group; and, possibly, to be a participant in a religious group. These covenants we inherit at birth; living is instinctual and we learn, as children, without thinking much about it. Our family group, whatever it might look like, we manage with the learned behaviors that have kept us fed and comfortable as we grew. And our religious group, if our family is so inclined, is inherited at birth. We are born into Catholicism, or Hinduism, or atheism or whatever our parents’ belief system might be.

We discover our covenants with life and their meanings and consequences gradually and we may move in and out of them as we grow older.

In our reading by Wendell Berry, the protagonist, Jayber Crow, confides that his being taken in at age three by Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy after his young parents died was a blessing he did not fully know until later. Their faithfulness to him forged in him an unbreakable connection to living fully.

And Theodora, in our story for all ages, lets go, for awhile, of her covenant with life because of the chilling effects of the magic mirror, which had convinced her that she was worthless. When she relinquished the mirror, her faithfulness to her covenant with life was restored.

My mother, even with grief and worry over a recalcitrant daughter, was faithful to her covenant with life, living out of her innate drive to love, to use the talents she was born with, to express her joy and gratitude for life in a thousand ways, whether those ways were wild and demonstrative or sedate and proper.

How are we doing with our own personal covenants with life? By now, our covenant with life has grown beyond the breathing, eating, drinking, and eliminating stage. We have taken all we've learned and we've made some conscious choices.

We may have consciously diverged from the early patterns that we inherited at our birth, our learnings about surviving in the world, our family expectations, and our religious upbringing. But the grooves are worn deep from those early years and we may still be affected by them.

It's been pretty well established by science that patterns in families tend to be present over several generations. Family systems theory holds that addictions, for example, may be present in a family going back several generations. The evidence points not to genetics as a cause but toward patterns of deeply ingrained behavior, inculcated over generations, that encourage repetition of a harmful behavior.

Additional research shows that traumatic events in a person's life can create wounds that take years to heal and may never heal unless the person is able to acknowledge the wound and take steps to heal the hurt. Even more interesting is that traumatic events in a parent's life will likely, unless treated, cause children and grandchildren to reflect the pain that occurred in their elders' lives, perhaps decades ago.

Unexpressed grief, for example, grief for which there has been no comforting compassion, no outlet, goes underground and emerges again in the lives of children yet to be born. Some of us may know someone, or may have experienced personally, the loss of a parent in childhood. Such a loss leaves a hole in the heart and, unless grieved adequately, can affect one's relationship with one's own children, because one's covenant with life has been violated, one's trust in the goodness of living has been shaken.

We as Unitarian Universalists have as our first guiding principle the affirmation of that covenant with life, when we say to each other and to the world that we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We as a religious tradition are committed to assisting individuals live out of their inherent worth and dignity.

We recognize that many persons with inherent worth and dignity squander that essential resource over a lifetime, and yet we believe that it is there at birth, and we are committed to lifting it up, helping others see it, and repairing that damaged sense of worth and dignity if at all possible.

Where others may see hopeless, sinful behavior and exhort the sinner to repent of whatever it is---homosexuality, for example---we find acceptance to be more promising, more life-giving, more loving.

As individuals, we each strive to maintain the healthiest covenant with life we can attain. We eat well, we exercise, we nurture our relationships, we get therapy if we need it. And we do what we can to heal ourselves from old wounds. We look for ways to find wholeness.

One of the old wounds many of us have deep inside concerns money. Our attitude toward money is often conflicted, uncomfortable, anxious. I know of people who stay home from church when it's canvass season! Obviously, nobody here at UUCWI would do such a thing! But money is a touchy subject.

Take, for example, the adult who grew up with parents shaped by the Depression. I've seen this go several different ways. One may feel desperate to hoard resources, treating others stingily out of fear of deprivation. Another discovers credit card heaven and, afraid that gratification will never come if s/he waits, dives into the world of excessive spending and huge debt.

Most of us fall somewhere in between these two extremes, but many of us bring this kind of experience into our adult lives and struggle with it as we try to navigate our way through the many requests for our cash.

We know our churches need to be financed adequately. We know we can't successfully carry out our mission without folks' generosity and yet we don't want to hear about the congregation's budget needs because it touches something really tender and sensitive inside us. We feel badgered about money even if it only comes up once in awhile. Our personal finances are also a touchy subject; we don't advertise how much we make nor do we tell people how much our possessions or our enjoyments cost us. We're always looking for a bargain or feeling guilty if we don't get something at the best price.

I spoke a few moments ago about how old, even historic, wounds can cause pain generations later. And I'd like to invite us all to take a moment of silence and think back to our earliest experiences with money, how our parents and other elders treated money, talked about it, used it, or even abused it. (.....)

When I thought about my history with money, I remembered how little there was of it when I was growing up, the produce and other gifts of food that subbed for a paycheck sometimes for my dad. And then I went farther back in my family history and remembered that my paternal grandfather had been a railroad worker who shot his hand off while hunting near his Missouri home. That ended his prospects with the railroad, so my granddad turned to moonshining as a way of supporting his wife and seven children.

My dad, when he was 13, got caught up in his dad's moonshining and might have been arrested or even killed while making his deliveries. But his mother wisely shipped him off to Wyoming to live with family friends and work on a ranch, to get him out of the moonshine business.

When my parents met, my mother was a schoolteacher near Payette ID, scraping by on a tiny salary. After their marriage they went to Chicago to attend Moody Bible Institute and train for the ministry, just as the Depression was hitting. The Depression hit this young couple hard. My parents had come from slim pickings already and were thrown into the Depression with nothing to spare.

Surviving seminary on dented canned pears and mashed potato sandwiches, blackening white underwear with shoe polish to hide holes in the seat of their britches, my parents struggled to contain their desire for nice things and found credit awfully tempting when they returned to the Northwest to go into the ministry, though gratitude for their survival was expressed in their regular pattern of tithing.

They managed to provide well for us kids and I grew up not consciously realizing the extent of their anxiety about money, though I quickly came to see that anxiety in myself as my vulnerability to easy credit became evident. It took me a long time to come to the point where debt did not rule my life. And even today, I feel anxious about having enough.

So canvass season is hard for many of us, and I am no exception. I confess to continued (mostly subconscious) anxiety about money and whether I will have enough to live on, even though I know I am pretty much okay, financially.

One of the reasons I am telling you this today is that I want to face my own fears about money, for as our comfort level with money improves, we feel less fearful about money talk; we can ask for what we need; and we can be compassionate about others' fears.

In closing I want to add that I learned, over a period of several years, as I paid off credit card debt and a second mortgage, that when I gave my money generously to the causes I supported, I felt healthier, less fearful about whether I could make it or not financially. An attitude of generosity and gratitude became my tool for healing my anxiety, my overspending, and my need for instant gratification. Being generous makes me feel rich!

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

HYMN # 295 "Sing Out Praises for the Journey"

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, remembering to be mindful of our covenant with life, nurturing and taking care of ourselves, considering our anxieties, and finding healing in generosity to ourselves and to each other. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.