

Sunday Service at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, February 26th, 2017
Interim Minister, the Rev. Fran Dearman

This morning's service precedes the Annual General Meeting at which the congregation elects officers and members to the Board of Trustees for the following year and receives accounts of the work and life of the church for the past year.

Accordingly, our Sunday Service themes this morning are democracy, leadership, and covenant.

WELCOME

On this last Sunday of February let us be mindful of things past yet to come. Behind us lie the month of February as Black History month, also the UUA's "Thirty Days for Love" campaign affirming equity in social relations, "Standing on the Side of Love"—a rainbow covenant. Another annual February event for Universalist and Unitarian churches of the Canadian Unitarian Council is the CUC's "Sharing the Faith" programme, a time of mindfulness for our sister congregations in Canada.

Also coming up soon:

- Vancouver Public Library tells me we are entering "Freedom to Read Week", a time of mindfulness and re-affirmation for Intellectual Freedom and the Arts;
- Mardi Gras, aka Fat Tuesday, and Ash Wednesday March 1st indicate the beginning of the season of Lent, during which those who worship in the Christian tradition enter a time of mindfulness and reflection, a time of fasting and forbearance perhaps, but also a time for joining action to intention—not just giving something up, but taking on some new endeavour;
- March 3rd is also a "World Day of Prayer"; there will be an ecumenical gathering at Meadowbrook Fellowship, 219 Talbot Road East, Leamington, at 2 pm Friday March 3rd;
- Wednesday March 8th will be International Women's Day

STORY FOR ALL AGES

Our story this morning began with some general comments on democracy.

Let us recall that of the 7 principles which the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote, the fifth is "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process".

Rev. Fran lifted up her practice of writing to Members of Parliament. A letter of response from the Member for Leamington was read out as the story. MP David Van Kesteren's letter of reply affirmed Canada's commitment to welcome refugees and immigrants. Rev. Fran noted that in Ontario the voting age begins at eighteen, and that a career in politics is an honourable calling, existing within a circle of election, communication, and accountability.

INVITATION TO MEDITATION:

“Tall Trees”, Rev. Fran

I was born and raised on Vancouver Island. We have trees there: great maples by the tide-swept beaches, fir and hemlock up the slope, gaunt Garry oak eking out the droughts of summer in their grassy meadows. I see trees on a skyline, or windmills lined out along a ridge, and I know where I am.

When I think about leadership, I often think of tall trees, daring to stand out above the rest and show us the way, and I am grateful for their courage and steadfastness. At the same time I remember some lines from the old Roman poet Horace:

Horace Odes 2.10.9-12

*Saepius ventis agitatur ingens/ pinus et celsae graviore casu/
decidunt turres feriuntque summos/ fulgura montes.*

The tall pine is more often shaken by the wind, the lofty towers fall more heavily, and the topmost mountains bear the thunderbolts.

In other words, when a person steps into a leadership role, a person steps into the zone where the lightning strikes. That's the risk you take, when you make things happen. Consensus would be nice, but it doesn't always happen. A healthy, constructive ease with courteous confrontation is important for leadership; learning to do confrontation well is important for community. And most of us would rather go to the dentist for a root canal.

Leadership is necessary to any enterprise; things happen because someone makes it happen. How that comes about is always interesting. Change is challenging, but change is also a sign of life. And life demands decisions.

The lesser of two evils is not a difficult choice to make, though it may be difficult to live with. And discerning that a good idea is better than a bad one is not so difficult either. But when two good ideas try to occupy the same space, then truly it is difficult to choose between them.

Moreover, sometimes we are not so much choosing between ideas, as choosing how power will be applied, or how fear will be addressed. And always, always we may ask ourselves: Where is hope in this? Where is love? Where is the holy?

The task of leadership requires effective communication skills. Inevitably there will be conflict. The folks who accept the call of a leadership role learn to engage conflict constructively. And with any luck, all of us will know that we have been heard. We won't always get our own way, but we do need to be heard, to be respected, and to be fairly treated.

I have seen that here in Olinda you have learned to do this well. All of you who have ever accepted the call to leadership, all of you who show up, you are a tall tree. Please accept my personal thanks.

HOMILY

“Covenant: Promises reliably made and honourably kept. Let us agree to walk with one another” Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman

Rites of passage mark the turning points of our lives: birth, marriage, death. In general, congregations call on ordained ministers to lead these ceremonies. Here in Canada, it may be that UU ministers are few and far between. Accordingly, our congregations often name lay chaplains to officiate at rites of passage. As we do here at Olinda. Let us recognize and express our gratitude to Olinda's lay chaplains—past present and future—and express our thanks to the incumbent lay chaplain, Joyse Gilbert.

The conduct of rites of passage is a profound trust. Birth calls for welcome, death for a tender farewell; marriage is a covenant. So if you are in a marriage, you are essentially in a covenant—promises reliably made and honourably kept, as well as we are humanly able, promises to which we return and renew our commitment each day, as we are able.

Covenant is a deeply meaningful word for Unitarian Universalists. Covenant describes how the UU Association of Congregations imagine into being their relationship amongst themselves. Covenant is how UU Ministers serving Canadian Congregations imagine into being their relationships amongst themselves. Many individual UU congregations have a covenant of right relations; it's nice if the covenant is crafted before it is needed.

Individual ministers also create covenants with one another. As a long-time member of the First Unitarian Church of Victoria, a member who happens to be ordained but works elsewhere, I covenant with my co-ministers, the Reverend Shana and the Reverend Melora Lyngood, as I did with their predecessor, now Minister Emerita, the Rev. Jane Bramadat. I covenant to preach at First Victoria no more than once per year, preferably in the summer, if invited, preferably invited

by one of the co-ministers. I sing in the choir, and otherwise keep my big mouth shut. And the co-ministers are very nice to my mother. Win-win.

I also have covenants with ministers who serve or used to serve congregations where I served as Interim. I covenant not to give advice or meddle once I've left a congregation; we all covenant to speak respectfully of one another, and assume good intentions.

There can be a shadow side to covenants. Not all covenants benefit all parties equally.

For example, the Organization "Ducks Unlimited" has a longstanding commitment to protecting the environment, especially ponds and sloughs where ducks stop over during migration season. Accordingly, Ducks Unlimited approaches farmers in ecologically sensitive areas and works with them to craft a covenant whereby the farmers leave the fields un-drained and underwater until the ducks have passed through on their way north.

It's a win-win for the farmers, because the ducks, pausing to feed and rest there, also enrich the soil with their manure. It's win-win for the hunters of Ducks Unlimited, because there are more ducks for the hunters to shoot. For the ducks, maybe not so much....

A similar covenant, perhaps more duck friendly, can be seen in Leamington at the one-acre woodlot park "Carolina Wood", aka "The Heinz Wood". The plaque tells us that part of the wood is on land belonging to the adjacent school, which covenants not to cut down the trees.

Covenants are made between people who live in time and space, and times change. Accordingly it is important to revisit covenants from time to time. For example, when I worked in North Shore Vancouver last year, I got a chuckle every time I took the bus up the hill to the church; I smiled to think what my daddy the logger, socialist, and union man would think of his daughter swanning about the British Properties, which was the name on the bus I'd be riding.

British Properties is the name folks in Vancouver gave to a real estate development in West Vancouver begun in the late 1930s. The municipality sold 4,000 acres of rocks and trees on the North Shore to a Guinness Brewing syndicate, who have been developing the land, to great profit, ever since. Guinness also put money into building the Lions Gate Bridge, so folks could drive to their new homes, rather than swim across First Narrows, or take a boat.

Folks who were white.

British Properties had a strict whites-only exclusionary policy. If you purchased land there, you had to sign a covenant, undertaking not to sell your property to anyone African or Asian—any person of colour. And no Jews either. I got my chuckle because the British Properties bus drives up the hill right past the first Jewish synagogue built in West Vancouver, which is right across from the entrance to the British Properties.

In the 1960s, discriminatory covenants such as those at British Properties were challenged at law, and the rule of law tossed them into the trash bucket. In fact, while I was in North Vancouver last year it was my privilege to lead a memorial service for a member of the North Shore Unitarian Church who had been amongst the rabble rousers who sent Mr. Guinness a lot of letters telling him to get with the programme and cease and desist this noxious, exclusive covenant business at British Properties. Enough, already. Nowadays, a lot of the residents of the British Properties who rode that bus up the hill with me last year were Asian elders, folks whose families had moved there anytime since the 1960's, and especially Asian British Subjects departing from Hong Kong when the former colony reverted to China in 1997. Nowadays, residents in the British Properties may well speak Persian, or Mandarin, and represent a rainbow of ethnicity.

Covenants have moral content. We need them. And we need to be mindful around them, to revisit them from time to time, to ensure their aim is just, and inclusive.

Where does this idea and word of covenant come from?

Covenant language is found in ancient treaties inscribed on archaeological artifacts. The artifacts are called *steles*, *stèle* being a Greek word meaning 'big rock with letters carved into it'. Scholars find echoes of these inscriptions in biblical writings, mostly in Exodus and Deuteronomy. If you were to go to a reference section in a biggish public library, and seek out the first volume of the Anchor Bible Dictionary, and look up Covenant Code, you would find the argument laid out in exquisite scholarly detail.

Let me put it this way: imagine that you are an Assyrian or Hittite warlord about three or four thousand years ago. Imagine that you have just completed a ruinously expensive land war somewhere between the Nile and the Euphrates, and you really don't want to go back there for a long, long time.

So you set up a big rock and carve letters in it, to remind folks of your expectations of them, and your promises to one another, while you are far away. You have done this before and you have a treaty formula at your fingertips: you remind folks of who you are, and what great deeds you have performed; you call on all that is holy to witness, and you state your expectations about behaviour and boundary keeping. Your language is vivid and memorable; to those who keep faith, you offer blessing and prosperity—for those who break faith, you prophesy disaster, "the sky over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you iron" (NRSV Deut 28:23) And then you step back and hope for the best—promises reliably made and honourably kept. And the words on your rock become the words of sacred stories.

The Ten Commandments are modelled in the language of covenant. The story of Noah includes an image of covenant—the arc of the rainbow; and that promise is to all flesh, not just humans, but cattle and foxes and ducks too.

Covenant is an agreement, described in the Oxford English Dictionary as more than a promise, less than an oath. As scholar George Mendenhall notes, the covenant form is merely “a device for communicating values envisioning human relationships [as] proceeding along some moral plane higher than coercive force”. When scripture needed language to speak of hopeful undertakings, the language of covenant supplied that need.

But it’s not the language so much as the intent that creates covenant. The covenant describes our best selves, and who we want to become. Sixteenth and seventeenth century religious reformers in Europe gathered themselves into community with covenant language.

In 1648 the Puritans of New England gathered themselves into congregations with a covenant that they called the Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline. Their covenant was not about creed, but about identity and creating relationship, with no need for a bishop to watch over them. They declared “a willingness to walk together in Christian fellowship”.

Thirty years ago, when Unitarian Universalists looked for words to describe how they would walk with one another, covenant language was there again. “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: The inherent worth and dignity of every person.....” I love it that this UU covenant is a bylaw, and that there’s not a sky of bronze or earth of iron to be seen, just promises reliably made, to be honourably kept —with care and respect.

The greatest benefit of a covenant is not the words on the paper, but rather the conversation that shaped those words: Who are we? How shall we be with one another? What are the values we share? Why are we here?

You could be at a café, with artistes, drinking lattés and reading the New York Times Literary Supplement! But you chose to come here, today. And I’m glad you did.

Olinda hopes to welcome a new settled minister about a year and a half from now. I would suggest you give some serious thought to developing a process of covenant between minister and congregation about that time.

In conclusion, the language of covenant has shaped the history of our living tradition, from the days of the biblical patriarchs up to the present. Our covenant to walk with one another is a story of promises reliably made and honourably kept, as best we can.

And somewhere out there is a big rock with letters on it, that says we are here to love one another, and heal the world.

May it be so.

Bibliography

For an account of ancient covenant codes:

George Mendenhall's article "Covenant" in volume one of the Anchor Bible Dictionary, Mendenhall's article is the source of the phrase "promises reliably made and honourably kept"

Delbert R. Hillers, "Covenant Code". Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1969. Exquisite scholarship details the formulaic language of Hittite, Assyrian, and scripture covenants.

For reference to biblical passages resonating with covenant code formulaic language, see Mendenhall and Hillers, also Deuteronomy 5, 6, 10, 28:23-24, 32; Exodus 20: 1-17; Isaiah 1:2; Micah 6:1-2.

See also the entries re covenant in the Oxford English Dictionary.

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