

We Begin Again in Love – The Rev. Renee Ruchotzke ©2011

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.

Covenant of the church of Dedham, MA 1638

In 1637 a group of about 30 Puritan families had moved to the newly-chartered settlement of Dedham, Massachusetts. Unlike the Pilgrim settlers in Plymouth

or the earlier Puritan settlement in Salem, this faithful group did not know one another before forming their new community.

They came from different parts of Great Britain, and some had previously settled in other areas of this then-new world of North America.

Their first order of business was to quickly establish how they were to fairly divide the land so that they could plant their crops, build their homes and fence their pastures.

Once they had taken care of their food and shelter needs, they were able to turn their attention to forming the *religious* part of their community.

120 years earlier, Martin Luther had put the Catholic Church on notice by nailing a list of 95 complaints on the cathedral door

in his town of Wittenberg, Germany.

In his heresy trial 4 years later,

he claimed that the authority of scripture

and the clear reasoning of his own conscience were to be trusted over the pope or councils of bishops,

who had often been in error or had contradicted themselves.

The 17th Century Puritans in our story,

using their own consciences and Biblical scripture,

were looking to live in the world in a way

that they believed put them in right relationship with God. They had the opinion that the bishops in the Church of England didn't act all that differently from the Catholic hierarchy

and they intended to live in a way that resisted such corruption.

So the good people of Dedham

looked to form their religious community

on a model that was introduced 50 years earlier

by an English Separatist named Robert Browne

and adopted by the earlier Pilgrims and Puritans.

This congregational model was based on Luther's claim

that each individual's reason and conscience

cannot be excluded from their religious understanding.

At the same time, Browne and his followers understood that—just like the bishops—

each individual is susceptible to error and contradiction,

but, as a group, the faithful could together

discern their religious truths through communal study, reflections and discourse.

This idea of the truth being discerned

by a thoughtful group of people was not new –

it had been around for centuries in the form of juries used in discerning the truth in legal matters.

Alice Blair Wesley, expands on this story in the Minns Lectures she gave over a decade ago, a story that I will briefly share:

The members of the fledgling Dedham community approached their communal religious life with seriousness and intention.

They scheduled a series of meetings over the course of a year, held every Thursday evening, taking turns in the homes of various families, with all of the townspeople invited to participate.

As part of their intentionality, they adopted a few simple rules:

Rule 1: They would decide before leaving each meeting what question to discuss next week.

That way people were more apt to share *considered* thoughts.

Rule 2: Each week the host of the house would begin, speaking to the agreed-upon question.

Then everyone else could speak by turns.

Rule 3: Each one could, as they chose, speak to the question, or raise a closely related question and speak to that, or state any objections or doubts

concerning what any others had said,

"so it were humbly & with a teachable hart

not with any mind of caviling or contradicting."

In other words, Rule 3 was: Here we speak our own understandings or doubts. No arguing. (or nit-picking)

The record reports that all their "reasonings" were "very peaceable, loving, & tender, much to edification."¹ (or learning together)

¹ *Our Covenant: The 2000-01 Minns Lectures: The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of our Covenant* by Alice Blair Wesley

This is not all that different than the process that our congregations use today in small group ministry such as Covenant Groups or Chalice Circles.

What I find really fascinating, and instructive for us today, are the kinds of questions that they started with.

The questions weren't about the Bible or what they believed. They were about what kind of society they wished to create. What were their highest values?

How did they wish to be together?

Did they even need to create a church?

Couldn't they just live those values as friends and neighbors?

For the seventeenth century these were radical questions.

Even these weekly house meetings could have gotten them arrested or even executed back in England.

After a year of careful discernment they decided that the society they wanted to create was going to reflect their understanding of creating the Kingdom of God on Earth, what we might call the Beloved Community, a society that promoted justice and peace through reasonable laws.

Their highest value was Love...

as in Love is the doctrine of this church.

In order to create this kind of community, the casual bonds of neighborliness would not be enough.

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They believed that if they wanted to live their doctrine of Love, they would need deep commitments and accountability to the lived practice of Love.

I share this story of the church in Dedham because it exemplifies the free church tradition that we Unitarian Universalists so proudly claim. Being a free church does not mean that we believe whatever we want.

It means that we come together in a way that creates a space and an intention that calls forth that which is worthy of our ultimate commitment and then helps us hold each other accountable to that commitment.

The container that holds the free church, that keeps it faithful, is covenant.

Our covenants remind us that as a religious people, we have a commitment to something that is greater than any one of us, greater even than the whole of us. The Dedham covenant called that something God, but we Unitarian Universalists have agreed to disagree on that naming.

Our covenants also remind us that we seek answers together. Our discussions must be grounded in listening, in curiosity, in sharing doubts as well as sharing insights.

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We trust and invite one another to notice and name our failings (such as the metaphorical limp in our reading),²

not so that we see ourselves as sinful or broken,

but to enable us to see our blind spots.

We make space for disagreements, mistakes and inconsistencies

and use them as learning experiences.

It is telling that during each theological shift in our history,

from the Transcendentalists to the nontheistic humanists,

to the consolidation of the Unitarian and Universalist denominations

to the inclusion of pagans in our congregations,

we have stayed together where creedal denominations split

at the drop of a doctrinal hat.

400 years after those first congregational churches were established,

modern American philosophy and theology caught up

and paralleled the process of congregational practices. American Pragmatism,

the school of philosophy of William James and John Dewey,

described a universe that was unfolding

and a human consciousness that was part and parcel

² Though I'd had several knee surgeries, I was unprepared for total knee replacement: intense rehab, painkillers, and three days using a walker. Among the many unexpected gifts of the surgery are the friendships I've developed with the physical therapists in rehab. (I joke with them that it is "Stockholm syndrome," wherein prisoners befriend their captors.)

During one session they retaught me how to walk and pointed out how off kilter my gait was as a result of years of compensating for a bad knee. Without knowing it, I had developed a limp. I worked hard that day to correct it, but as I was headed out the door, I had already reverted to limping out of habit. "Hey, walk right!" the trainer yelled.

I wondered if anyone else had noticed my impaired stride before the surgery, so I asked a few friends. They all said I'd been walking that way for years. Amazed that I had so little sense of my weaknesses, I asked my friends to let me know of any other "limps" they saw in my life.

It was a little frightening to trust them to reveal my broken places, but I knew they had my best interests in mind.

A few weeks later one of those friends took me up on the request: I had shared something with him in confidence, and he called and said he felt that my need to keep the issue quiet was a sort of limp.

I knew what he said was true. Pride and ego were my reasons for silence.

I have since asked other friends, my wife, and even my children to say, "Walk right," to me if they notice a bad habit. I'm looking forward to working out a few more limps.

-Stu Graff Phoenix, Arizona From Readers Write "Paying Attention" The Sun, Aug 2011

of the direction of that unfolding.

Human learning is as dependent on mistake-making
as it is on successes.

As an aside...John Dewey grew up in the congregational church and in the town hall meeting
tradition of New England.

Following pragmatism came Process Theology,
where Unitarian Universalist theologian Henry Nelson Wieman described a process of creative
interchange between humans as they engaged with each other
and with the object of their Ultimate commitment.
But that's a topic to explore another time.

I bring it up to highlight that this idea of covenant
providing a container for congregational discernment
goes back to the earliest European settlers on this continent, and the idea of humans needing to
make mistakes
as a part of their learning has been reinforced
by some of the greatest minds of the 20th century.
Somehow, along the way, many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations lost these critical
insights.

We were able to stay together, yes,
but at the cost of losing some depth
and a compelling level of engagement with
and commitment to shared ultimate values.
And along the way we lost individual members
whenever we didn't have the capacity to deal with
societal shifts around race, class, gender
and other post-modern identity-based realities.

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But my friends, we have been having a covenant renaissance. Back in the late 1990's the UUA board laid out a plan to reinvigorate our congregations by reviving the practice of covenant, by reconnecting to our highest values, and by recommitting ourselves to a purpose greater than our collective selves. You may remember—it was called fulfilling the Promise. Slowly at first, and then gaining momentum, we have been renewing our faith with this old but essential part of our very own heritage. We were asked to renew our covenants as congregations and between congregations. Of course some people resisted, thinking it was a new gimmick. Others misunderstood and misapplied the process.

It took me a long time to really understand how important covenant was to our heritage and to our future. But people much wiser than I—and that I trusted—invited both lay and ordained leaders to re-explore the possibilities that covenant offered us. And it was in the context of covenant groups, small group ministry, that I first experienced the sacred possibilities that creating a container of deep trust and engagement could present. In my congregation we had a social justice committee that was full of passionate activists, but they tended to talk across each other

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without ever really listening to one another.

They were unable to accomplish anything as a group.

Then they re-formed using a covenant...

actually they called it a right relationship agreement...

and it transformed them in a way that enabled them
to work together in amazing ways.

They learned how to speak in turn and to listen deeply.

They learned how to question with curiosity rather than criticism.

And they learned how to pay attention

to where the energy was as a group

and used that energy to discern their purpose

and to accomplish some pretty impressive projects.

So, in the past 10 years we have been re-learning

the practice of covenant as in

how to be in right relationship with one another.

We can handle the horizontal relationships.

But what about the vertical relationship?

If we are committed to being a faith community

with different theologies,

including theologies that can't include God

or some variation wherein,

can we have a shared ultimate commitment,

a shared purpose—a *religious* shared purpose—

that provides a tent that is big enough

to hold all Unitarian Universalists

and to guide our engagement with the rest of the world?

I believe that we do...and it's the same lived doctrine

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of the faithful people of Dedham almost 5 centuries ago.

I believe that we are called to find ways to manifest deep love
within our congregation's walls
and share those ways with the rest of the world.

This is a common thread in both
our Unitarian and Universalist heritages
and still calls to us today.

I think this is one reason that
the Standing on the Side of Love campaign
has been so successful.

It plays on the heartstrings of our deepest longings and commitments.

Why else would so many of us be willing to wear those golden yellow t-shirts that don't look good
on hardly anyone!?!

Let me share another story:

Back in 2011, we had a number of Unitarian Universalists participating in civil disobedience in
Arizona

in response to the new laws affecting undocumented foreigners.

(SB1070) I want to hold up that

not every Unitarian Universalist agrees on this issue,

but I think we can agree that those who went to Arizona

did so in response to their own consciences.

Almost all of the Unitarian Universalists there

wore the golden yellow Standing on the Side of Love T-Shirts and the sea of yellow was
impressive.

When Peter Morales went to the press covering the event,

he introduced himself as the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Ho-hum, so what? Who are they?

But then he introduced himself as the leader
of the yellow shirt people.

Oh the Love people! Why didn't you say so!?!

The Love People.

For those of us who remember the 1960's,
this may have some other connotations,
but we are in a different era
and can re-engage with the call to deep Love
with a renewed sensibility.

In our free church tradition,
we are free to claim Love as our supreme value.

We are free to discern together how to manifest that love,
in the form of openness, in the form of inclusivity,
in the form of humility, in the form of accountability,
in the form of forgiveness and renewal.

When we choose to embrace the gift of covenant
from our ancestors,

we can create faith communities
that offer both creativity and purpose.

I think our biggest challenge to embracing the spirit of covenant
is a pervasive culture of perfection.

Like our Pug in the story for all ages³, we might have a history
of everyone around us making us feel unlovable.

We may be afraid of showing a weakness lest it be exploited,
of keeping our game face on, no matter how we are feeling,
of feeling shame whenever we make a mistake.

³ [Unlovable by Dan Yaccarino](#)

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Forgiveness is something that we bestow on others,
not that we ask for ourselves.

The liturgy in our Protestant theological tradition
hasn't always addressed the fact that we humans make mistakes
and we need a way to renew
our covenants and commitments regularly.

The Jews have Yom Kippur,
the Catholics have confession,
the Muslims have Tawbah.

In the past couple of decades we Unitarian Universalists
have adopted a litany of restoration that I wish to use
to conclude this exploration of covenant.

I invite you to open your teal hymnals to 1037.

I invite you to think about our implicit and explicit promises to one another as we sing together...

We forgive ourselves and each other...we begin again in love.