

## February Theme for Spiritual Practice:

### **Covenant: The Practice of Sacred Commitment**

*Love is the Spirit of this Church and Service is its Law.*

*This is our great covenant: to*

*Dwell Together in Peace,*

*Seek Truth in Love,*

*And Help One Another*

Unitarian Universalists are a people of covenant. "Covenant" is Latin for "come together" and means a "solemn agreement" or "promise from the heart" regarding a course of action between parties. Being covenantal is fundamental to our Unitarian Universalist identity. Where creeds or doctrines hold other faiths together, Unitarian Universalists are held together by our promises to one another. Covenantal promises provide us with a foundation that enables us to transform our sacred religious beliefs into meaningful actions that serve the wider world.

According to UU Minister Alice Blair Wesley, covenants have been fundamental to our religious movement for over 400 years. Our first congregations in New England rejected the idea of creed as a central doctrine for a religious community. In its place, they adopted covenants – written documents – describing how members of the community wanted to be with one another. Central to each covenant was the idea of the spirit of love working in the hearts and minds of each member of the community.

Unitarian Universalist congregations, and also groups/committees within the congregations, have covenants which help clarify expectations, build trust and create a safe and open environment for congregants. We benefit from a covenant when there is a desire to deepen community and to say we're living our values, and when there is a need and a willingness to set limitations and boundaries in interrelationships and behavior. Commitment to congregational covenants has a purpose essential to the practice of Unitarian Universalism: covenants are a deep, abiding promise to partner with each other and that which is bigger than our individual selves to work for a just and loving world. Covenants are our sacred commitment to one another, and to the larger world.

### **Questions for Discussion and Discernment on your own, or with each other:**

1. How do you use the idea of covenant in parts of your life outside of the church community?
2. What do you consider some of your sacred religious commitments?
3. What might challenge a covenant?
4. What does it mean to break a covenant? How would you go about repairing a broken covenant?
5. What are our faith's most important shared loyalties and commitments?
6. In church community in particular, how do we conduct ourselves in ways that work for everybody?

## Quotes and short readings

“Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind,” writes Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay “Self-Reliance.” With that sentence, Emerson lays the ground work for the way Unitarian Universalists think about the sacred today. Trust in our individual perceptions is foundational to our faith. At the same time, Unitarian Universalists realize that attitudes about the sacred are not entirely private; there is always a social aspect to them. It is not enough to care only about what I hold to be sacred. To enter the realm of the sacred, even within “the integrity of your own mind,” is to experience a sensibility that humankind has protected and cultivated for thousands of years.

We all possess the instinct to set aside something as sacred, to cherish it, and to protect it with our whole selves. We must make room in our world for others to do the same, even when we do not agree. The sacred is something we share, a bond that is varied in its expression but fundamental to our humanity.

*~Rev. Judith Meyer (serves as minister of the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Santa Monica, California)*

Unitarian Universalists welcome worshippers of every age, color, sexual orientation, and religious belief (or unbelief). At First Parish in Cambridge, you’ll sit next to Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Pagans, atheists, agnostics, and seekers of every variety. (No wonder we adapt our hymns!) We have only one absolute requirement: We covenant to treat each other with respect. As we call each other to spiritual growth, we also challenge each other to build Beloved Community—not just in our congregations, but in the wider world. We stand on the side of love—for marriage equality, for immigrant rights, for climate justice.

*~Rev. Fred Small pastor of First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist, 12-23-09 from UU World.*

I call that church free which enters into the covenant with the ultimate source of existence. It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority.

*- James Luther Adams*

We have a principled, spiritual commitment to promoting the welfare of others - other people, even strangers; other living things and the physical environment as well. It's all connected. We can't just do whatever we like and tell ourselves nothing else matters. Well, actually we can and probably do, all too often. But not while we're trying to live up to the ideals we claim to honor.

*~Rev. Tim Temerson, Let the Dancing Begin: Generosity, Commitment, and Love UU Church of Akron, October 11, 2009*

Faith is a commitment to live as if certain things are true, and thereby help to make them so. Faith is a commitment to live as if life is a wondrous mystery, as if life is good, as if love is divine, as if we are responsible for the well-being of those around us....

Faith is a leap of the moral imagination that connects the world as it is to the world as it might become.

*~Rev. Galen Guengrich*

Every religious tradition on which we draw has a reverence for life. We are a part of an intricate web of life. Every tradition on which we draw teaches that the ultimate expression of our spirituality is our action. Deep spirituality leads to action in the world. A deep reverence for life, love of nature's complex beauty and sense of intimate connection with the cosmos leads inevitably to a commitment to work for environmental and social justice.

*~Rev. Peter Morales*

Beauty, when it is not contrived, indeed seems a quality of truth; and real truths, even harsh ones, have the beauty of their realness. Beauty and truth are sacred because of the meaning and ultimacy that they point to. Rituals are the same—while important, they are not sacred in themselves. The occasions they celebrate are sacred: religious commitments, lifelong covenants, and the impulse of the human soul toward the transcendent divine. Long before Keats, Plato said that the good and the beautiful were inherently related, almost interchangeable. What is true and beautiful and good? Music. The fragile interrelationship of every living thing. Tying our hearts to one another, though we know death will part us. Poetry. The impulse toward self-sacrifice and the greater good. Commitment to justice. The Unitarian Universalist understanding that revelation is continuous and beyond mere human abilities to define or create. And so much in nature—from dainty miracles of life to such bastions of awe as the illimitable sea.

*~Elizabeth Lerner serves as the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Silver Spring, Maryland.*

Community means different things to different people. To some it is a safe haven where survival is assured through mutual cooperation. To others, it is a place of emotional support, with deep sharing and bonding with close friends. Some see community as an intense crucible for personal growth. For others, it is primarily a place to pioneer their dreams.

*~Corrine McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson*

The covenant is our agreement to each other. It is the structure within which we can be free to interact with each other safely, openly and clearly. Without it, we each bring our own set of ideas about how we should interact. We have been pretty fortunate to all be somewhat like-minded, but we are not a closed group. We are a living body that must be able to grow and still maintain its integrity. The covenant should provide us each a measure of comfort, knowing that we understand the group's goals, customs, and practices.

*~Covenant Group Faciliator's Manual*

Peace is the certainty that you are never alone.

*~Father Joe in Father Joe by Tony H*