

Promises to Keep

The poet Robert Frost was right. We do have promises to keep. And miles to go before we sleep. Thank goodness. We tend to like the prospect of those miles.

Sometimes the miles seem to go on forever, though. I remember when Alice and Richie, our first twins, were nine months old. I was staying at home taking care of them. I had made the commitment to be a good, caring mother to them and to my wife Celia when they were born. I remember standing over a sink full of soapy water, holding a dirty dish in one hand and a blue sponge in the other, so exhausted that all I could do was stand there and cry. I had never thought I could be so exhausted. I just wanted to run away, to where I could get some sleep! But because of the promise I'd made – a promise I have also broken, renewed and reinterpreted a thousand times since then – because of that promise, over time I gradually learned to do things I'd never known how to do, like how to be patient, how to restrain my angry reactions, how to give up a little bit of control. I learned a little about how anxious I was and some things I could do to moderate that. And I grew more as a human than I had thought possible, especially in what I understood "love" to be. Over time, I realized that love wasn't a feeling as much as it was how one behaved.

Promises, commitments are important. Cornel West went as far as to declare, "that there cannot be relationships unless there is commitment, unless there is loyalty, unless there is love, patience, persistence."

But promises not just important to each of us as individuals. Mutual promises between members and the congregation as a whole are important, too.

Rev. Alice Wesley Blair, who has written and preached extensively about covenant, put it succinctly: "The center of the free church, the heart of the whole thing, is a promise of fidelity, a covenant, which each person freely makes upon joining."

Historian Conrad Wright wrote, "For churches like ours, it is the covenant – not the words of any particular covenant, but the covenant relationship of mutual obligation."

Now, how many of you remember the promises you made when you joined this church? I'm glad you don't, because you didn't make any!

No, we don't have a covenant here, at FPUU. Not an explicit one, at least.

We can be a stronger church, we can have more impact on the world around us, and upon the lives of our members if we take what implicitly binds us together, and make it explicit.

We know from the promises we make in other areas of our lives that there is something very powerful about naming how we wish to be with each other, about making mutual commitments to be together in these ways, and bearing witness with each other that this is indeed what we are committed to. In doing something like this, we lift up our values and place them in the concrete world, creating greater opportunities to live lives of integrity. We also make ourselves

vulnerable, giving our covenant partners the responsibility to help us stay in covenant, and accepting the responsibility to help them.

One of the most powerful moments in my life was when Celia and I made our promises of mutual commitment, our vows, at our wedding in 2004. Our four children were 11 and 8 years old. We had been together for 16 years. We knew each other well, our flaws and strengths. And we had been through drought and famine in our relationship as well as times of the fatted calf. But the *process* of working out our explicit promises to each other gave us a chance to sort out, again, what we valued, what we wanted in our relationship and lives, and what we wanted to give. And saying them in front of others really brought it home.

I promise that I will always keep my heart open to you

I will love and honor you

I will be faithful to you

I will grow with you as we learn to better understand ourselves and our world

I will stay by your side through good days and bad

In sickness and in health

From this day forward until the day I die.

Part of the power of that day was having witnesses to our promises, affirming the relationship that we had. Part of the power of that day was having our children see all the witnesses, and be held in the strength of affirming community. And part of the power was simply in the clarity of the commitments we made, some of which were more than a little intimidating to make. But after saying them – promises I have also broken, renewed and reinterpreted a thousand times since then – I felt stronger, clearer, committed.

At its heart, a covenant is about admitting that we are not self-sufficient, that we need each other to become as rich and vital as we have the potential to be... that we want to grow in our ability and understanding of what it means to live out our values of love and freedom. It says, we need each other to learn what it means to be free; we need each other to learn what it means to love with greater depth and greater understanding. To me, this is the heart of what Unitarian Universalist churches gather to do, they help us live lives of integrity where our values permeate our lives, and we help heal the world.

Covenant is probably not a concept that many of us are familiar with these days. It means a mutual promise, really. It goes back to the ancient middle east. In fact, “covenant” is central to Judaism; the history of the Jews is the history of covenants – made, broken and renewed – between the God and ‘his’ people, Israel.

Ancient covenants could also be between *people*. Unlike a contract, covenants established a durable and personal bond between the two people involved. Violating a covenant was not a simple legal infraction; it was a breach of faith. The sanctions against breaking a covenant were not those of the courts, but the internal witness of one's own moral failure.

Covenants were not important in Christianity until the Reformation movements of the 16th century, which showed up on these shores with our early faith forebears, the Puritans and the Pilgrims. The Pilgrims, who settled the Plymouth Colony in Plymouth, Massachusetts, gathered their first church in England in 1607 and it was radically different from most contemporary churches. It was not “constituted by obedience to hierarchical authority (bishop or King), [or] by assent to a set of propositional statements (a creed), [or] by confession or transforming experience [offered through the sacraments administered to church members.]” Instead, Alice Blair Wesley writes, “this church was constituted by a promise, a covenant to venture together as individuals in the ways of the Spirit, with entire integrity.”

The first church covenants in New England were simple. The very first one, that of the Plymouth church, was written in 1620. It went,

“We, the Lord’s free people, have joined ourselves into a church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all his [Jesus’] ways, made known or to be made known, according to our best endeavors, whatsoever it should cost us, the Lord assisting us.”
(Plymouth’s 1620 covenant, first.)

Listening to this, you can hear how “freedom” was an integral part of these covenanted churches. Free people, joining of their own accord, agreeing to “walk together.” And it is at least as much about loving, for that is the promise of joining together, that is the promise they articulate of “walking in Jesus’ ways.”

But what about our free churches today? Our churches that have no written or spoken covenant or affirmation, do we have any covenant at all?

Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Parker believes we do. She frames it this way:

“We receive who we are before we choose who we will become.
We do not make ourselves.
We are given the gift of life.
Covenant-making must begin with the question
‘What have we been given?’
‘What is the covenant we are already in?’”

Rebecca Parker believes that every Unitarian Universalist church does have an implicit covenant, because

“the free church movement we descend from
emerged in the sixteenth century as part of a reforming movement
that resisted the corrupt hierarchical powers of the church

and the economic alliance between the feudal aristocracy and the church. The making of church covenants asserted the power of people to determine their own lives, and to choose who would govern them.”

“[Church covenants] directly challenged the authority of the oppressors and established alternative communities that put what was hoped for into practice. Most importantly, oppression was finally resisted not by argument, not by protest marches, but by the practices of covenanted church life. ”

Parker tells us then, that we do have an implicit covenant that is to create free communities where our alternative values of love of neighbor and respect for the world are lived out.

She calls the implicit covenant, “resisting oppression.” But, oppression is a politically loaded word for some of us. We can use other words. I think our implicit covenant is that we will try to treat others as if they mattered as much as we do. It means treating each other as if we each really had inherent worth and dignity, and were not objects to be manipulated by another. In other words, our implicit covenant is about loving, in many dimensions.

Parker is right, we do have an implicit covenant, but an explicit set of mutual promises has more power. As Rev. Wesley said, “It is certainly possible for people to be in an implicit covenant without saying so. They just gather and act together, freely, in love and for good ends.”

And yet, Wesley also warns us to make sure our local church isn’t centered loosely around fuzzy abstractions. She urges us to create a church covenant, one that is “as clear and explicit as we can make it, that we may teach it to our children, as the reasonable explanation they deserve of why we do things as we do in this church, and that we may invite others – as many others as will – to join us in making and renewing, again and again, our promise of loyalty to the ways of love that matter most in human life, that we might fulfill our promise.”

The benefits of explicit promises go beyond these of explanation and invitation, however. When we make explicit promises about how we mean to be with each other, and for what ends, we are stronger, and more likely to have the kinds of authentic and loving relationships that embody our values. After all, as someone once said, “if you don’t know where you are going, any road will do.” Since our process, how we live, is our destination, we need to lay out the contours of the road.

By making promises consistent with our values, and working to keep them, we can also personally achieve lives of greater **integrity and wholeness**.

Our promises challenge us to explore what it really means to live out our values, over and over again, and to hold ourselves and each other accountable for our failures (which are as important as our successes, since they give us knowledge of who we are). What does it mean, this morning, to love you when you are upset about something and saying mean things about someone else? What does it mean when I ignore a commitment I made to get a task done? Renewing our covenants when we fail, when someone else fails, we experience forgiveness, grace and restoration of trust.

Now I suspect that some of you are sitting here having a reaction like mine the first time I heard someone preach about covenant. I thought, ‘whoa there! You want promises, commitment? What’s this really about... Is this about money? About pushing me to be someone who I am not? I don’t want someone here telling me they think I am not listening, or not being respectful. I don’t want to be criticized! I came here because I would be accepted as I am!’

I had a hard time with this idea.

I felt that promises could so easily become cages, traps really, whether you carried them out or whether you broke them. The poem you heard this morning gives voice to that perspective – he can’t avoid those broken promises, they sleep in his yard, and *always* they reproach him.

But I am firmly convinced now that we need mutual commitment, mutual care, to really grow. Promises are not cages, but the scaffolding upon which we can build lives of integrity, even if we must at some point disassemble the structure in part or whole. If we want to grow spiritually, we do best to be committed to a way of living and a community that gives us that chance, where we feel committed to hang in there even when we are disappointed or hurt or frustrated, so that we don’t walk or drift away too quickly, losing our chance to stretch and grow.

I have learned more in those promise-bound relationships of parent, and of spouse, than I ever thought possible. I have learned more from my promise to love those to whom I minister even when it is difficult, to have my ministry be always about you and your spiritual welfare, than I ever thought possible. As I learn, I also feel more and more whole, more and more the same on the inside and the out. More able to acknowledge where I have not met my hopes, and to celebrate where I have.

Finally, lives of integrity and greater wholeness means we can come more fully alive, get beyond denial and feel more of our feelings, the griefs as well as joys of our lives, getting rid the numbness that grief denied can entail.

For example, we do not know what we can accomplish in terms of environmental issues, we do not know what impact our work will have over the long run. But by living together and bringing to our awareness the promises our values call us to make to the rest of creation, and committing ourselves to acting together on those – we can feel more whole, we can grieve and rejoice together, and can come more alive to the possibilities of hope.

We know we have promises to keep. They are our values made concrete in our lives together, made in the context of this day and economic reality.

We know we have promises to keep. What do you say they are? Let’s talk.

*A sermon delivered by Rev. Meg Soens at
First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church of Medfield.*
