



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

This I Promise

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Homily #1: The Rainbow Covenant

I'm going to tell you a story, but I need some help. This is a story that comes from the Hebrew Bible, the Bible of the Jewish People, also called Torah. Throughout the story, I will say, "Torah says." I would like you to respond with, "What does Torah say?"

Torah says...that there once lived a group of people in a desert town, much like this one. But those people were mean to one another and to the Earth.

Torah says...all this meanness, this wickedness, angered God and so God decided to end it.

Torah says...in this town, lived a man named Noah and his family. Noah and his family were justice-loving people. If they lived today, they might have been environmentalists or Black Lives Matter activists—they believed that God had commanded them to love one another as well as all the plants and animals of the Earth.

And Torah says...These beliefs pleased God. So God commanded Noah to build a large ship called an ark where he and his family and at least two of every kind of animal that walked or crawled would be safe from a super storm that God was planning to send in order to get rid of all the evil on the Earth.

Well, Torah says...God sent down a storm that lasted for more than a month, 40 days and 40 nights. Like with Hurricane Katrina, there was so much flooding on the Earth that it took weeks for the waters to subside. After the waters had receded, and Noah verified that it was safe to leave the ark,

Torah says...that Noah saw a rainbow and spoke with God. And God said, "I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life" (Gen 9:14–15, NIV).

And I like to think that just maybe, at the news of this covenant, Noah and his family sang the following song.¹

Homily #2: In Community

While the story of Noah and the rainbow is the first covenant we see in the Hebrew Bible, the remaining books of both the Hebrew Bible and Christian Bible, also called the New Testament, are filled with promises that God makes to individuals, like Abraham and Moses, as well as to the Israelites as whole. In the Christian Bible, we also see the concept of the "new covenant"

¹ Hymn 305 in *Singing the Living Tradition*: "De Colores." (1992). Words: David Arkin, used by permission of Hodgin Press. Music: Traditional Spanish folk. Arranged by Betty A. Wylder.

where through the life, death and rebirth of Jesus of Nazareth, God promises to forgive all the harm we do to ourselves, one another and to the creatures of the Earth; to forgive all our sins.

Citing Rev. Beth Dana and Jesse Jaeger in their Tapestry of Faith curriculum, *A Place of Wholeness*, if we fast forward a thousand years or so, the Puritans of New England in the 1600s, who, after their troubled experiment with the rule of law based on a strict and often narrow interpretation of the books the Bibles came to an end, became early Unitarians and Congregationalists, read and drew inspiration from the examples of covenant in the Bible. These groups decided that they could both covenant with God and with one another.² Both the covenantal theology and the congregational polity that we practice as Unitarian Universalists today have their roots in this Christian grounding.

Covenantal theology is a radical philosophy that rejects some of the traditional Catholic and Protestant hierarchies, routing access to the divine through individual conscience and gathered communities rather than vesting in a specific ordained person or persons who have special connections with God.³ James Luther Adams, one of the most influential theologians on religious liberalism and Unitarian Universalist thought in the 20th century, continues that in the idea of covenant we practice today, “all relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not on coercion.”⁴ Written into our understanding of ourselves as Unitarian Universalists is both an acceptance of and necessity for religious pluralism.

Covenanting is our most profound theological act in this liberal religious tradition. We boldly proclaim that spiritual authority rests with people who freely enter into and leave gathered communities; it resides with people who make and who break promises. While this congregation has no formal covenant, all of our youth religious education classes do, as do many of our committees and adult program offerings. Covenant helps us to see one another as we would be.

If, as Peter Block says, “Community is the structure of belonging;”⁵ then, covenant is the process of belonging. Whether in the form of a rainbow, stone tablet, or written document, a covenant serves to help us to share a vision and dream together about how we would live into a more loving world, a Beloved Community, one gathering at a time. This is why the opening lines of the document that many Unitarian Universalists use as a guide for ethical living, the Principles and Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association, begin “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote.” We believe that together, as an association of covenanted communities, we can help each Unitarian

² <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/wholeness/workshop10/167942.shtml>

³ Adams, J.L. (1976). “Guiding principles for a free faith.” In M. Stackhouse (Ed.), *On being human religiously: Selected essays on religion and society* (pp. 12–20). Beacon Press: Boston, MA.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 14.

⁵ Block, P. (2008). *Community: The structure of belonging*. Barrett-Koehler: San Francisco, CA.

Universalist gathering to work with the whole world to expand the experience of justice, fairness, and beauty.

Homily #3: The Promises We Make

The core of covenant is promise and commitment. It is not enough only to make the promise, but we must also strive to live the promise. The promises we make to one another in this community are many and varied; bold and simple; grounded in love and sometimes in fear. At Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church, we make these promises:

(Responses from the gathered community were invited at this time.)

How we can keep these promises, not if we can keep them is the province of covenant. Agreements that we have with one another both widely known and sometimes only vaguely understood always have an aspirational quality—they are a shared vision of how we might relate to one another. Yet in order to live this dream, we are forced to confront that what we want and what we need do not always line up; or more importantly, that sometimes what we want or need is not what our community is able to offer at a particular time or even ever.

How we understand our promises in these times is the process of belonging, the actual act of covenanting and re-covenanting, if necessary. We clarify our needs or dream together with more clarity or purpose. We hold one another accountable or walk away. We pray together and engage in meditative practice. In covenant with one another and with that which we find most sacred, we find deeply human, deeply spiritual tools to live into the community to which we can all belong; to bring about the Beloved Community.

Homily #4: Breaking our Promises

Roots hold me close, wings set me free, “Spirit of Life” sings in its crescendo. These words, this intention, is a beautiful restatement of our chalice lighting.⁶ They reference “our unity, [...] our common search for truth and meaning, [...] our wish to stay and struggle for those things that we have chosen to share with love and responsibility.” We light flames inside of chalices, candles inside of votives; work for justice together and strive to love one another because of the promises we make.

However, as Rev. Nathaniel Hollister has said, “When I make the promise, I already know I’m going to break it. When you make the promise, I already know you are going to break it.”⁷ We break promises all the time: we run late for an event; we forget to do something our friends or children or spouses reminded us about several times; we’re intentionally mean to ourselves or one another; we forget that we don’t have to do it—whatever that task is—alone.

⁶ “We light the Chalice as a symbol of our unity, of our common search for truth and meaning, of our wish to stay and struggle for those things that we have chosen to share with love and responsibility.” –Efrain Espinosa, President of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Cuba, excerpt from the March 2007 Global Chalice Lighting of the ICUU.

http://icuu.net/mysite/icuu/ICUU_09/resources/chalice_archives/CL%202007.pdf

⁷ Personal conversation, 27 June 2011.

Neither covenant nor community end through the act of broken promises alone. As visionary agreements, covenants take work for us to live out their full meaning. Marriages, friendships, sports teams, social justice groups, and congregations all have agreements that they sometimes or even often fall short of. Again, the province of covenant is how we keep promises not if we can; how do we reconcile, not if; how do we separate in good and loving ways if we can no longer live into our shared vision with all parties involved.

Covenant demands reconciliation; requires consensus; and, assists with growth and change. Its goal, and our goal as a community, is to live into our promises and admit when we cannot. We are always to seek out the ways that we can begin again in love. We only break community and rupture covenant completely when we fail to try to live into it together.