

## Covenants of Strength and Love

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

September 20, 2009

By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

One of the most unexpected roles of the minister is to find oneself as the boss. My last job before the ministry was as an office worker. I was a bit of a slacker who tried to get away with as much as possible. Yet when I became a minister I was now the boss I always was trying to get around. Here at First Unitarian Church I have a wonderful staff, and we get along quite well. Things have been going pretty well this past year with one exception: the night custodian. You all may have seen our night custodian helping Terry out on Sundays after church or if you have stayed late for the committee meeting. In the short time I have been the minister here we have gone through three of them.

Oh it was the typical sort of stuff that comes with being an employer. One quit because things just didn't work out, another had to quit because he got hurt at home and couldn't come in anymore. So toward the end of last year we were advertising for our third. I was joking that this was becoming our "Defense against the Dark Arts" position. (Ask a Harry Potter fan!) So we tried advertising on Craig's

List instead of the newspaper; in no small part because it was free. As a result we hired Charles, our current night custodian.

He is a young guy; I am finally not the youngest on staff anymore! He had a stellar work record. He would come in on time, the building would be locked and the lights shut off. If this sounds like a low bar to clear, you are right! But that is where our expectations were. Then Terry would show up to our morning staff meetings with near glowing reports of his work. This was perhaps the most impressive part of Charles work. Terry dared to take a day off, then a Sunday off. He is currently in the middle of a two week vacation. Every time we asked a bit more of Charles he met or exceeded our expectations. At one point I turned to Marina and I asked her, “Do we dare to love again?”

Our experience with our new night custodian illustrates our worship theme for this month: trust. With so many difficulties and problems in the past it is hard to see someone new for who they are. In a way it took us a while to see Charles as Charles; we were too used to seeing two or three night custodians back. Trust is something that is earned over time, and when Charles earned it, the veil over our eyes fluttered away.

Our DRE Catherine Williamson earned our trust a long time ago. Indeed, today’s covenanting ritual is more a recognition of the foundation of trust that has already been built up over her two years here

than it is a declaration of something new. Covenant is an important concept in Unitarian Universalism. Some might say it is the core or essence of Unitarian Universalism. A covenant is simply a relationship in which the participants have made promises to each other. The covenant most familiar to you is probably a marriage. What do you do when you get married? You take vows; promises to the other person on how you will relate to them throughout your life. “Love honor and obey” are the classic vows, but obey has fallen out of favor in modern times. The covenanting ritual we had earlier this morning consisted of verbalizing our promises to each other.

Now one could argue that this is unnecessary. We have a contract of employment with Catherine, she has a job description, the CYRE Team has a mission and a specific group of tasks that they are expected to perform. What is the point of making promises? Missions, goals, and job descriptions are useful tools, but they are just pieces of paper. Of course they should all be consistent and in harmony, but we do not live our lives on pieces of paper. We live them in relationship with each other. Covenant addresses the question of “how will we be with each other in sickness and in health, in good times and bad?” For example, we recently had the church painted. We had a contract with a company to do the work. If they had not or done a poor job, they would have been fired; the contract breached. A contract differs from a covenant in that a covenant has a foundation of trust that a contract lacks.

If we are in disagreement with Catherine, then that is part of the dance, the back and forth of being in relationship and living by those promises we made. If marriage were a contract, then it would be broken at the first marital argument. Just think how high the divorce rate would be then! Under those circumstances, most marriages probably wouldn't last past the reception! One tiff over who ordered the wrong bride and groom statue over the wedding cake and that's it. Fortunately covenants of strength and love are built on trust. Trust is the glue that holds us together in an interdependent web and yet allows for difference and uniqueness and peculiarity between people. With a covenant of trust, then those differences are OK because the foundation is solid.

Perhaps nowhere do we hear more about the idea of a covenant than in the Old Testament; particularly from the prophets. Next Saturday is Rosh Hashanah which marks the beginning of the High Holy days in Judaism. Of course in Judaism the covenant refers to the relationship between the Jewish people and God. The promises are the Ten Commandments and other laws given to Moses. According to the Bible, God's end of the bargain is that I will be your God, listen to your prayers, and you can have this land. The people of Israel promise to follow all the rules and ethical codes, not worship other Gods, and make appropriate sacrifices and rituals. Both parties say "I Do," you may now kiss the bride (which by the way is an allegory used in another part of

Hosea), and I now declare that “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

That is how the first five books of the Bible describe it. Sadly, as in many relationships, things don't always work out so smoothly. By the time of Hosea and Jeremiah, Israel is on the brink of crisis. The Assyrian Empire is about to invade and capture the northern kingdom in Hosea's day, while in Jeremiah's time it was the Babylonians who were about to invade the south. That would be particularly devastating because it would mean the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple to Yahweh. All those promises God laid out to Moses assumed that there is going to be a Temple in Jerusalem. Without one, the whole relationship could fall apart. The promises made in the Mosaic covenant at Mount Sinai have obviously been broken. The prophets usually blame the people of Israel for breaking it. For both prophets, a crisis point is reached in which the trust shown in the initial covenant is weakened.

But this is a covenant, not a contract. If we were talking contract than that would be it. It would have been broken as soon as someone violated one of the commandments. But instead both Hosea and especially Jeremiah say, “Wait. Let's try this again. Let's stay in relationship, but make new promises to each other.” Jeremiah puts it particularly well. God has forgiven us. The law will not be on some piece of paper or on a tablet. Rather the covenant will be written in

people's hearts. We won't need to ask if you know God; you can't not know God! Now regardless of whether you personally like the theology of that, you can surely appreciate what a powerful shift in perspective, what we might call a reframing, the prophets are proposing here. By altering the covenant, they sustain trust with God.

The Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams was inspired by this new interpretation that Jeremiah presents. But he applies good old fashion Unitarian pragmatism to this discussion. What if we take this down to a more human level? How would this translate to you or me just trying to live an ethical life filled with meaning? How could we live that kind of life as a community?

Adams says that we define who we are as people and as a community by the agreements, the promises, the covenants we make. I am a husband because I made promises to my wife at our wedding. I am your minister because I made promises last year at my installation. In both cases promises were made to me in return. These commitments help give my life meaning and definition. Granted they are not the totality of my being, but they are pretty important. They allow me room to be unique and particular as an individual, yet provide a foundation of trust that cements each relationship.

Rob Eller-Isaacs takes Adams even further. He says that covenant is the sacrament of Unitarian Universalism. Whereas Catholics and

Protestants make the sacred present among themselves through reenacting the life of Jesus in Baptism or the Eucharist, Unitarian Universalists stand in the presence of the sacred when we make promises to each other. We are, he says, a covenant making, covenant breaking, covenant re-making people.

I think there is much to this. I have been a part of Unitarian Universalist churches for a long time now and have met some pretty, oh let's say unique, people. I came to a UU church when I was in college and it made a powerful first impression on me. Over the course of my first couple of months I would just observe what people looked like. I saw men and women dressed to the nines, college kids with purple hair and nose piercings, men dressed in skirts carrying matching handbags, and the husband of the congregation's President who often came to church almost every Sunday in shorts and a fanny pack as if he were a tourist on vacation. As a visitor it starts to teach you that yeah, we are inclusive of people where they are in life. And yet there is something that holds them all together, that is deeper than those differences. That unique relationship is our covenant.

And I have seen evidence here at First Unitarian Church that we too are a covenant making, covenant breaking, covenant re-making people. I had the great pleasure of being a part of the Christmas Eve services last year. It was a very moving service, the sanctuary was decked out in holiday decorations. And I so loved the tradition of our

former children and youth who are now young adults in college coming to church with their families on Christmas Eve. We had tons of folks in their early twenties all over the place. Rev. Barbara and I were in the back of the sanctuary before our 11 PM service began, greeting people as we usually do. We met a lot of these young people. One couple was holding hands and, as my mom would say, making “googly” eyes at each other. Barbara and I joked that they might just start making out in the back of sanctuary.

As the service started and Barbara went up to the pulpit to deliver the invocation, I happened to look up to the balcony. Low and behold I saw our smitten couple was sitting in the back row at the top of the balcony all over each other just as we were setting this reverential tone for the evening. No one seemed to notice them. But of course there is one key difference between our sanctuary and a movie theater. Rev. Barbara and I are looking at all of you the whole time. Only she and I could see this vigorous public display of affection going on while we talked about the baby Jesus being born.

Now granted we might be hard pressed to call this a “breach of our covenant” and if we do it is a pretty minor one. I have never explicitly asked the people sitting in the back of the sanctuary to promise me that they shall not snog while the minister is talking. I suppose I would have to promise to say things more interesting than the man or woman sitting next to you so that you are not tempted. But even if we did, we are a

covenant making, covenant breaking, and most importantly, like Jeremiah, a covenant re-making people.

The re-making part is important. The prophets called Israel back to the covenant, but they called them to reinterpret it in light of their new experiences. In Hosea and Jeremiah's case they would have to go so far as to call it a "new covenant"; a term the Christians pick up as they reinterpret the covenant with God to include Jesus as the Messiah or Christ. So too Adams tells us that the role of the prophet is to alter our perspective of life. It is to make us look at something that seems so familiar to us, in a new light with new implications. Charles our Night Custodian did this without even realizing it. Catherine, our DRE, does it all the time.

One of the things I most appreciate about Catherine is that she asks uncomfortable questions. That may seem like a weird compliment, but it is actually high praise. This past year our Program Staff would meet together, and Catherine would ask us, "How can our worship be more multi-generational?" or "Why does the Executive Team do things that way?" Oh gosh, I say to myself. Why do I have to think about that? Why can't we just cruise along in peace? And so we chew on Catherine's question for half an hour or so, and when we came to the end, I would realize that my thinking about multi-generational worship has been transformed into something different and exciting. Some of her questions about why the church runs the way it does has directly lead

to some of the new restructuring of our church. Catherine has a knack for the prophetic; for looking at our church through a particular lens and then has the courage to speak that vision to us. And as uncomfortable as it might be to have to look at something again in new light, I have seen that more often than not it is a transformative and energizing process. Catherine, I hope I am not the only one you ask uncomfortable questions of. Keep asking your questions of me, of the CYRE team, of our parents, kids and youth. You are a prophet that calls us to be our best selves and our best as a community.

My friends, trust is the thing that makes that possible. It is when we trust Catherine and the relationship we have with her, that allows us to see her questions as a new vision for our church. This is how covenantal relationships are supposed to work.

May we be open to the uncomfortable questions, and see them as doorways to new understandings. May our covenants of love be ever strengthened. May trust always increase. Amen Blessed Be.