

**Being a Covenantal Community**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Robert L. Morriss**  
**September 18, 2005**

Often, when people ask me what's different about Unitarian Universalist Churches, I mention that we are a people bound together by a behavioral covenant, rather than by a creed. The more I have thought about it, the more I have realized that my "standard answer" is not as complete as I want it to be, which accounts in part for the concept of covenantal community being the topic of today's sermon. (Actually, I would challenge any of you who want to clarify your thinking on a topic to volunteer to preach on it. It's amazing what having to congeal one's thoughts into a coherent 15 minutes of talking will do for the quality of one's ruminations.)

In reality, virtually all churches and synagogues are covenantal communities and I'm sure they would all hasten to point out that there are definite behavioral components to the covenants on which they are based. The concept of behavioral covenants is an ancient one, one that predates the Biblical writing on which most western religious covenants are based. The majority of early covenants seem to have been designed to regulate behavior between distinct political or social units, a form of international treaty often sworn to in the name of all the gods and natural elements recognized by either of the parties as a way of invoking divine retribution if they broke the covenant. While most of these covenants were made between vassal states or communities and their more powerful neighbors the concept of covenantal relationships changed dramatically with the advent of Mosaic Law.

Changing the object of these early covenantal relationships from duties to a flesh and blood emperor to obligations to a supreme and unique deity brought about a religious revolution - for it placed moral obligations above political and economic interests in the scale of religious values. From this point on, in Hebraic life, the existence of political and economic institutions were always subject to being judged by a set of ethical norms prescribed by their understanding of their God's will. Much of the rest of Jewish history was written in a way that reflected an understanding of a covenantal relationship that emphasized that all would be well with the people as long as they obeyed God's law, and that when things didn't go well, it was because God was visiting upon them His just judgment for their lack of faithfulness to His law.

Since, during most of this time there was no sense of an individual's living on after death except through his or her children, there was a strong commitment to laws governing communal behavior as it related to the people's faithfulness to God's law. Events that were perceived as God's punishment - wars, plagues, or weather related disasters - were as likely to fall on the whole community as they were on the individual. According to this way of understanding life, while the individual might well be judged and punished by God with sickness or an accident, it was the responsibility of the members of the community to root out offenders in their midst and bring them before

their leaders for judgment, as the whole community might be subject to catastrophe if they allowed unrighteousness to persist in their midst.

This way of understanding life took on particular significance during the Jewish exile which took place during the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.. During this period the majority of the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem were forced to migrate to Babylonia. In exile, it was increasingly difficult for the Jews to see themselves as a specially chosen people blessed by an all-powerful God, and so this time of exile gave rise to a remarkable period of prophetic and literary activity. What emerged was an understanding that this period of exile was to be understood as God's judgment, which if accepted by faith, would be a revelation of God's love and commitment forever. Out of this experience would issue a new covenant born of divine judgment to bind the people to God in the role of servant and witness to the world of his universal sovereignty.

Of particular importance in the development of the concept of church covenants is the way in which this period of Jewish history laid the foundation for what was to become the theology of the cross. As the early Christian church wrestled with the crucifixion of their spiritual guide and teacher, they quite naturally turned to the writings that had emerged during the period of the Jewish exile for understanding. What developed was an understanding that Jesus' death was a necessary act in which God could satisfy once and for all, the requirement of "just punishment" for those who had violated his laws, provided people were willing to accept this on faith and respond to God's love in the way in which Jesus had taught – loving God with all one's heart and one's neighbor as one's self.

Thus the new covenant that emerged in the early Christian church was one that emphasized love. Of course Jesus was not the only Jewish rabbi to emphasize the importance of love of one's neighbor. The Talmudic sage, Hillel, who lived slightly before the time of Jesus, when asked to summarize the teachings of the Torah responded, "What is hateful to thee do not do to thy fellow human, this is the whole Torah; all else is commentary."

The truth of the matter is that when we recite our church covenant each week and begin with: "Love is the spirit of this church and service its cause" we are placing ourselves squarely in the middle of the Jewish and Christian traditions out of which Unitarianism and Universalism grew. Even when we continue with the phrases, "This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace ... and to help others," we are positioning ourselves in the center of teachings which are shared by most of the religious traditions of the world.

What then is different about us? Are there any reasons for choosing to be a part of this congregation other than convenience for those who happen to live in the

neighborhood? Well, to the extent that we do stand apart, I think it is on the basis of that other phrase in our covenant “to seek truth” which is part of our being a not creedal tradition.

Most religious traditions hold the position that they already have the truth - and they approach life from the perspective that if they could only get everyone else to see things their way, then all would be right with the world. When UUs talk about seeking the truth, or when we affirm “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” we are adopting a stance that implies that we don’t yet have all the answers, and that rather than trying to insist that everyone think exactly as we do, we should continue to see what we do have in common upon which we can build a world in which we can live in peace and be genuinely helpful to one another.

By adopting this stance, we are not saying that there is not truth to be found in any of the religious traditions that do have a creed. Ironically, I think that if we all followed the teachings of the Torah, or of Jesus, or the Koran, or the Book of Mormon, or the less authoritarian teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, the writings of the Buddha, or Confucius, or the way of the Tao, or pagan, or humanist thought ... if we all followed any of these traditions the world would indeed be a better and more peaceful place. Problems arise when we assume that because a particular tradition works for a particular group of people with a common cultural tradition, those teachings will work for everyone.

By adopting a stance that recognizes that some truth can be found in all traditions, we establish a position that can more realistically enable people to live together in peace, but we also give up something. In order to maintain a perspective that there are many paths to the truth, we have to give up the sense that we are an especially chosen group.

That might seem like a small price to pay until you consider that most of us – consciously or unconsciously - justify the extreme privileges we enjoy as folks living in this country on the basis of some sense of divine providence. I can assure you that while we may not think about it, decisions about tax policy, how much money we are willing to spend defending our economy and the “American way of life” versus how much we are willing to devote to eliminating poverty on a worldwide basis, or even how much of our dues to the UN we are willing to pay - all of these things are justified in current governmental circles on the basis of our being a specially chosen people and therefore entitled to consume a percentage of the world’s resources which would quickly kill the planet if such conspicuous consumption were practiced by people all over the world.

Acknowledging this creates a tension with other parts of the broader covenant which we, as members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: specifically - justice, equity and compassion in human relations; the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

There are no easy answers to this tension and yet I am extremely grateful for the support of our Unitarian Universalist community as I seek to wrestle with these issues in determining how best to live my life. I know of no better standard to which I might be held accountable, and I can think of no more supportive a process for my growth towards being the kind of person who really lives out these principles than the one I can find within this community.

I know that each year, as I continue to grapple with what it means to live in a covenantal community, I come closer to being the person I want to be. The theological process that supports us in living up to our covenant is not for the faint of heart. As Paul Rasor said in his talk at General Assembly this year (as quoted in the UU World), our theology ... “points us in a general direction without telling us the specific destination. It refuses to make our commitments for us, but holds us accountable to the commitments we make. ... It invites us to live with ambiguity without giving in to facile compromise; to engage in dialogue without trying to control the conversation; to be open to change without accepting change too casually; to take commitment seriously but not blindly; to be engaged in the culture without succumbing to the culture’s values.”

What does it mean to be part of a covenantal community supported by such a liberal theological process? That ultimately, is a question that must be answered by each of us individually, as we seek to find our own path and develop our own way of walking it faithfully on a day-to-day basis.

Things this congregation can offer to help us develop our answers are the multitude of educational and service opportunities, activities, and varied ministries of the congregation, many of which are represented during today’s activities fair following the service. If you have been wondering how this congregation might help you find your path, support you in your development of it, or help you live out the service implications of that path once you have found it, I can guarantee there will be something for you during coffee hour this morning – so walk around and check out the numerous opportunities to become engaged in the many different understandings of what it means to be a part of a covenantal community that you will find represented there.

So May it Be