

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Our Great Covenant

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The first reading comes from John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts, from his address in 1630 to a group of Puritan immigrants, sailing to New England aboard the ship, the "Arabella."

Now the only way to avoid ... shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. ... We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body.

So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace...

The second reading comes from Charlotte Preston, who joined this church in 1993 and served as President in 1999. She wrote this for a Sunday service here in 2008.

I light the chalice in honor of our straight allies, those who know and cherish us, who stand with us and shore us up for the unexpected activist work we LGBT folk are so frequently thrust into.

A segment of my work life includes facilitating a group of small business owners. Earlier this year, I was taking this group to tour an out-of-state manufacturing facility that works in precious gems and metals. I knew we would be subjected to tight security. When I received their security instructions less than 48 hours before I was to fly, I was stunned to see the wording of one restriction – visitors were to limit personal jewelry worn to "a watch" and, I'm quoting, "wedding ring, **if legally married.**"

My partner and I have worn our rings 23 years. Federal and state law gives no room for us to be legally married. I felt gutted.

In addition to talking with my partner, I called a straight WBUUC friend. In that moment I needed to be valued absolutely, to have my friend see the immediate absurdity (that a non-legally married person who is wearing a wedding ring is a security threat), and to give me wise council in my attempt to keep my business commitment **and** hold my integrity. My friend heard me, shared my swirling emotions of incredulousness, anger, sadness, and fear, and helped me to regain my equilibrium.

I was able to run the meeting at that facility, and to make an outreach after the fact to address the statement and the implication in the policy. To jump to the end of the "unexpected activist" part of the story, when I contacted the CEO after the meeting, he immediately made sure the security statement was changed.

But in the difficult middle, when I checked into my hotel emotionally exhausted, I found waiting a gift from my church ally and friend – flowers, joyful, celebratory -- and I remembered every moment I was there that I do not stand alone.

Our Great Covenant

When and where are you reminded that you do not stand alone?

Our readers shared a powerful story told by Charlotte Preston, Charlotte who was herself powerful, a past president of our congregation and also vice-president of the Mid-America Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and a leader in her professional field. She was powerful but she was thrown off course, off her center, on a business trip one time, by a homophobic stipulation, which was hard not only because of the hateful, hurtful language about “legal” and “unacceptable” wedding rings, but because it pressed her yet again into what she called “unexpected activism.” Far from home, and all alone, she called a friend from church, a straight ally, who stood with her across the miles, bearing witness, sending flowers, and Charlotte wrote, and shared with us here soon afterwards, “I remembered every moment I was there that I do not stand alone.” That’s a story about friendship. It’s also a story about the covenanted community within which the friendship grew.

Where and when are you reminded that you do not stand alone?

Every Sunday we speak the words of James Vila Blake, Unitarian minister in Illinois in the 1800’s:

Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

It sounds simple, it sounds easy, but it’s not.

This church is anchored in the free faith tradition, descended from congregations established by New England Puritans in the 1600’s, people with whom we have so little in common theologically, it seems, unless you think of governance theologically- which I do. This church is anchored in the free faith tradition of showing up and standing up and walking forward arm in arm, in a stronger faith together than we ever have alone. The Puritans said (literally), *we covenant to walk together*, across our differences, across our disagreements. We will hold each other up.

You know that when someone asks what kind of church this is and what it means to be a member, I often talk about a river, a river of history. This church has its own story dating to 1956, and that story is carried within the larger, older history of Unitarian Universalism,

- which flows from two separate streams, each a strong tributary of the river of American congregationalism,
- which flows out of the Protestant Reformation in Europe and in England,
- which branched off from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century,

- which in turn was one stream running down the centuries from the waters of the early Christian church in Alexandria, Jerusalem and Rome,
- which of course flowed from the mystical headwaters of the ministry and teachings of the man Jesus of Nazareth,
- whose life and spirit flowed directly out of Judaism,
- but whose later influence was shaped not only by his own origins but by later interpreters, some of whom were Jewish disciples but some of whom were Greek – and another mighty artery flows in.
- Christianity, like Islam, flowed out of Judaism,
- and Judaism flowed out of the desert -

- out of nomadic bands of wanderers and wonderers, people who stopped their caravans at night and gathered round small fires, casting questions into the embers and up to the stars, *Where do we come from? What are we? What is our purpose here? Who travels with us? Where are we going in this life?* And by those questions they were bound to everyone, everywhere and always, every people on this earth asking questions round their fires.

That's the river of religious history out of which we come. It is a powerful story of religious freedom, freedom of conscience, and radical love. Conscience and love are not uniquely Unitarian or Universalist, but our history has flowed in such a way that when either of these is constrained or compromised or diminished (freedom of conscience or radical love), we've always been among those who have broken off from the main stream and flowed freely in a new direction. Whenever someone joins here, signs their name into the book, it's not as if their story (your story, the little stream that is your story) is washed away in the great current. Rather, the course of the whole river, the direction and flow of our church here and of our whole tradition, changes just a little, simply by your coming. You affect how it will go, how we will go. This history is lively, living water, made holy by your presence. There is a sense here – *there is assurance* - that the questions you carry, and the answers you've honed over all your years of living, are a kind of sacred text. And in a house like this, they meet and are expanded by the questions and the answers of other people, those present, and those gone before, those whose voices we hear in music and in poetry. You honor them, they honor you, by listening, and thus we are transformed: we become part of something larger than ourselves, a larger story.

When we say, *we are bound by covenant and not by creed*, we mean it. What we believe, or believe in, one by one by one, matters less to the church than how we behave, how we will be together, as a people. What matters is the plane of conduct where we agree to meet. *You need not think alike to love alike*, said Francis David, a Unitarian centuries ago, which is not to say there are no creeds and no convictions here - there are many, maybe an infinite number, and they are tested in practice, lived out (we hope) as much as spoken. What matters more, from the standpoint of the institution, is the *covenant*, the way that we will walk together, the principles that bind us. "Freedom of belief" is one of them. "Compassion" is another, what the Buddha

meant by “lovingkindness,” which was not all warm and fuzzy, sweet and simple, but difficult and complicated, a deliberate orientation of the heart, defying logic, sometimes, defying common sense, and sometimes defying even rules of justice, when mercy hovers as an option. We wrestle with these principles together, and in so doing may discover, each of us, what we believe most deeply about God, or mystery, or love, or death.

In 1630 the puritan John Winthrop stood squarely in this same tradition, standing on the deck of the *Arabella*. It’s a good image to hold as you watch the news these days: a boatload of bedraggled and bewildered immigrants fleeing the homeland of oppression for new hope in a new world. They sailed from England, where their religion was illegal, where they were put into prison, or beheaded, or burned. They were coming, they believed, to establish a “city on a hill,” a new Jerusalem, and Winthrop told them,

Now the only way to avoid ... shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. ... We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other

- “delight,” of course, not being a word you expect in the Puritan lexicon, with all their harsh language of damnation and their dour puritanical clothes and funny hats – but there it is: **delight** in one another-

make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, for we are members of the same body...

It was an extraordinary declaration of *dependence*, or what Rebecca Parker, a UU theologian recently called “freely-chosen and life-sustaining *interdependence*.” Despite their stone-cold reputation, their caricatured intolerance, these were people who promised to bear each other’s burdens as their own, to subvert their separate, private interests, their “superfluities,” for the public good of all. Humbly, gently, patiently, they would serve a vision larger than any single eye could see; they would hold a larger hope. And no one would compel them. They would be a voluntary church.

The organizing statements of the early Universalist and Unitarian congregations in New England echoed this Puritan ideal. The theology changed –Unitarian beliefs about the nature of God, Universalist beliefs about the nature of human beings - but the essential premises of covenanted community, the foundation of their polity, did not. Those English migrants were convinced that congregations built upon the rock of mutual consent – free conscience – would be better, stronger, more faithful, even, than churches anchored in coercion. That is the free faith tradition, the small / liberal church. Members join by choice, not because a bishop or a magistrate or scripture or doctrine has forced them, and each church stands alone and independent, just as each member is autonomous joining together by choice when such unity will strengthen each and all in the work of growing their souls and serving the world.

All of this is honored, believe it or not, whenever the members are called to a Congregational Meeting, as you were today. It's why we take it so seriously, why I become such an insufferable stickler for detail, a pokey Puritanical parson checking the bylaws, the quorum, the Membership Book. Governance is theological. Even when you're voting on something as seemingly secular as authorization to raise money to pay down the mortgage and replace the old furnace – these are the means to much more significant, beautiful end. By your vote, you are directing your Board and your Minister to lead us all in support of the thriving of this church in this moment– a church in the free faith tradition in a world that needs its message of radical hope and its vision of justice more than ever before.

People say, *Do I really need to come, all that way, on a sunny weekend, just to vote? Can't I vote absentee? Call it in, click on-line?* The whole idea of governing this way is that we stand up, show up, for each other, to hear each other's questions and opinions, and maybe be made wiser, maybe deepen, maybe grow, maybe even change our minds. The whole idea of covenant is that we walk together, open-minded, open hearted. It is old-fashioned, centuries old, and it is radically new.

When we welcome babies in our church, when we welcome new members into the community,

when we celebrate the love of beaming couples,

when we ordain new ministers,

when we are standing on the side of love for racial justice, for the endangered planet, for homeless youth and people in prison, or in poverty,

or with those who are struggling, who are sick, who are weary or worn - which will be any one of us on any given day),

when we reach out across the miles to a powerful friend who is laid low, frightened, angry or hurt in a hotel room far away. and prove by fierce kindness that ours is a living faith,

we are testifying to our promise that no one stands alone.

*We will walk together with you, friend;
we will walk together with you, child;*

we will walk together toward the lives we mean to lead, toward the world we mean to have a hand in shaping, the world of compassion, equity, freedom, forgiveness, joy and gratitude. Our great covenant is the work of intimate relationship, with one another, with the holy, with this whole wide world.