

# FREELY WE COVENANT TOGETHER

A Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Needham,  
Unitarian Universalist  
Association Sunday, October 3, 2010  
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting                      First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist

*In covenant with one another and all we hold sacred  
we answer the call of love —  
welcoming all people into the celebration of life  
searching for truth and meaning and striving for justice and compassion —  
to nourish and serve each other, our community and world.*

Responsive Reading 591                      *I Call That Church Free*                      James Luther Adams

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence,

*That sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands.*

It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority.

*This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death as well as life.*

I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship.

*That protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom;*

*That yearns to belong to the church universal;*

It is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship.

*It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.*

The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing.

It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit

“that bloweth where it listeth . . . and maketh all things new.”

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This year marks the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this congregation. Back in 1710 there were only forty-five households in all of what is now Needham and Wellesley. Just what became of the Native Americans who had lived here is another story – one I'll tell next week. But this area was part of Dedham. Forty citizens living on this side of the Charles River submitted a petition to the Great and General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and to Governor Dudley. They said that it was too far to go to church in Dedham. They asked relief from paying taxes in support of the Dedham parish church, and permission to form their own. The next year they did just that.

They did so by covenant. You see, as I never tire of telling folks who think that religion means having to believe certain must-be-believed propositions, we come from forebears who long ago decided to use their religious freedom in another way. They had fled the bishops and creeds of the Church of England, and exchanged the credal question, "What do we all believe in common?" for the more profound covenantal questions: "What hopes do we most deeply share? And how shall we promise to help and treat one another spiritually to live toward those hopes?"

To paraphrase a later minister in our tradition, "Belief is many things, and so is disbelief. But for us religion is what happens to us, when we open our minds to greater truth, our hearts to deeper compassion, and our conscience to the demands of justice." [A. Powell Davies]

But this year is not just a big anniversary for our particular congregation. It's also an important anniversary for our whole family of faith. It was fifty years ago, in May of 1960, that the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America each voted to consolidate and form the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. They celebrated with a huge service in Boston's Symphony Hall. The choir from First Parish in Needham was part of the great combined choir that sang that day. Betty May and Buffy Duhig were both there. Among other things, I'm Chairing the UUA 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Task Force which is planning the major celebration for next year's 50<sup>th</sup> UUA General Assembly, and Molly is helping to put up a portion of the UUA website devoted to gathering documents, photos, memories, hopes, and aspirations for the occasion. And this is Association Sunday, when the more than 1000 congregations in the UUA are asked to ponder what it means to be in covenant with one another.

It's fitting that we honor Sue King today, since, beyond to her local work on our behalf, she has long been one of our most faithful delegates to the annual UUA General Assembly – more faithful than even I have been since I became a *former* UUA president. Several years ago Sue and Allen marked their 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary with a great party at which they renewed their commitment to one another. Today I want to suggest that perhaps we should do something similar, both as a local congregation and as a member group in our larger association.

This summer, even while I was on leave, I presided at a record number of weddings. Serving as I do as co-chair of the national effort to extend the right to civil marriage to all citizens, gay as well as straight, I'm very aware of the many legal protections and benefits that marriage involves. But when I talk to a couple – especially if they're both lawyers, as was the case with one couple I married – I'm at pains to point out that a marriage begins as a covenant, not a contract. Contracts are all about distrust, what-ifs, even penalty clauses. Covenants start in gratitude for trust, for loving kindness, and mutual respect. The formal covenant begins when a couple says publicly, before God and everyone, we now promise, with your help, to do everything we can to keep this relationship continually grounded in that same spirit of mutuality.

This week the news reported that for the first time in American history, more young adults between the ages of 25 and 35 are unmarried than married. Ninety per cent of all people with college degrees eventually marry, but the percentage goes down lower levels of education and income. It's also lower among young people whose parents divorced. More young couples than ever before are living together, even having children together, without ever entering into the covenant of marriage. Their break-up rate is higher than that of couples who marry, but some relationships, God knows, do just fine without a formal covenant.

Now when I heard that report, I immediately thought about this congregation. Despite our heritage, we don't have a formal covenant. We used to. Although the congregation was gathered in 1711, they did not get around to signing a formal church covenant until 1720, when they had persuaded 22 year old Jonathan Townsend, a recent Harvard graduate, to settle here as pastor, “covenanting to walk together as a church. . . lovingly watching over one another . . . and purposing to [attend to] the . . . Religious education” of one another's children. Sounds familiar! Although that covenant also included formulae of the Calvinist, Trinitarian interpretation of the faith that Townsend and his contemporaries had been raised to regard as the only one acceptable.

The process of “walking together” in covenant, however, as any loving couple can testify, brings both change, and, over time, a greater acceptance of differences. By 1811, at the time of the church centennial, when the Paul Revere bell was first rung, Stephen Palmer was minister. He was a broad-minded Unitarian. But he didn’t require everyone to agree with him. As he put it, “Every [one] will have a creed of his own. I have mine; but I have no right to impose it upon others, nor have others any right to impose theirs upon me . . . He who thinks he has no more light to receive, has seen but little; and he is not open to conviction is in bondage to himself.”

By mid-century the congregation had Universalist ministers, and when the bylaws were revised in 1905, an “open covenant” was adopted, making it explicit that no affirmation of belief was required for membership. Then in 1944 the church was merged into the parish, and any covenant disappeared entirely. Our bylaws now simply have a legally required statement of purpose, saying that First Parish aims “to provide a community where religious living is fostered through worship, study, service, and fellowship.” We also have a mission statement, adopted in 2004, which is printed on the order of service. Good enough, you may say.

But a purpose and a mission are a product of an implicit covenant, perhaps one that needs to be made more explicit among us. Many congregations, I have noticed, are finding some value in making their covenantal nature more explicit. First Parish in Cambridge, for example, a few years ago replaced a 19<sup>th</sup> century covenant with the one with which we began our worship today. They use it in worship every week. At First Parish in Milton they have done the same. Their covenant reads simply: “Come let us gather. We gather to celebrate the sacred within and among us. We strive to practice acceptance, forgiveness and love. Together we work to build a world with justice and compassion. Come let us gather together.”

One of you, having raised her children in another UU congregation in this region, recalls how each of them learned to say “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.”

Recently I’ve heard parents asking that our worship here begin more predictably, with a simple covenant, one children could learn. And a study group that met over the summer, to study a collection essays by UU leaders on the spiritual underpinnings of our commitment to social justice, came up with the same question: “Why doesn’t our congregation have a covenant to ground its work? The Parish Committee has a covenant it has adopted for itself? Our children develop classroom covenants that speak of how they’ll treat one another. Why not all of us?”

Why not indeed?

All covenantal language, like what is said at a wedding, should be both authentic and inclusive enough to respect differences. When the UUA was formed fifty years ago, finding language that both traditions could agree upon was tricky. By 1985, twenty-five years later, feminists were asking that it be updated. So a new statement was adopted, in which the member congregations covenant to affirm and promote seven principles, and acknowledge that the living tradition we share draws upon a multiplicity of spiritual sources. You can find it in the front of the hymnal. It ends, “Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising one another our mutual trust and support.”

Support.

We are a free and independent congregation. But we freely choose to join in covenant with a thousand other congregations, promising mutual support. And sometimes we forget that. Before I came here as minister, and as we worked together to rebuild the vitality of First Parish, this congregation did not always even contribute its fair share to the basic expenses of the UUA. In recent years, however, we have not only done that, but on these Association Sundays we have been grateful enough for the life we have together, and for the building that we have renovated and expanded, that we have been willing to be generous in helping other congregations in their growth efforts.

A covenant is a promise. And human beings, as Martin Buber once said, are the promise-making, promise-breaking, promise-renewing species. A covenant is just words unless we live its spirit into action.

For the last five years First Parish has had a special relationship with the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of New Orleans. Our Youth Group and their advisors have visited there three times, starting just a few months after Hurricane Katrina. We helped them gut their building and begin rebuilding. We’ve met their people – who have had to rebuild their own homes and lives, as well as their church, and seen how they seem to be involved with almost every good and just cause in that city and region. We have helped them clear space for a new kitchen where meals can be cooked for the homebound elderly and people with HIV-AIDS. Yours truly has co-chaired a national effort to help raise funds to help them, because the UUs of New Orleans have truly done all they can without our support.

Last month they learned that unless they raise an additional \$150,000 by December 31, and complete the much-needed electrical work on their whole building, they will not only lose their contract with the social service agency that will lease their church kitchen, but have to repay nearly \$180,000. This week I got the blessing of UUA Vice President of Development Terry Sweetser for our Association Sunday collection to go to their urgent, specific need.

Covenants are made real in the way we support and help one another. As a concrete way of reminding ourselves of that, I urge you to be generous – for another mark of a spiritual covenant is that it encourages us to serve a purpose that is bigger than we are. So may it be. Amen.