

“Considering Covenant Anew”©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on October 8, 2017

In our reading this morning Rev. Phillips speaks clearly and directly to the significance covenant has in our tradition. She claims that: “Covenant – the collective commitment to and practices of religious community – is how we have stayed, and will continue to stay, together.” And yet just a few sentences later she asserts that: “Covenant may be a predominant metaphor in our movement, but as a practice it is almost nonexistent in associational Unitarian Universalism.” I believe there is a good deal of truth in both of these statements. Before I go any further, however, I want to identify clearly what she is referring to when she uses the word covenant. In this reading covenant refers to the agreements we make and live in accordance with in our relationships, both with one another and with religious organizations which we are a part of, such as this Fellowship and the Unitarian Universalist Association or UUA. From this understanding of the term, it is true that covenant is how we have and how we will stay together. It is equally true that the practice of covenant is almost nonexistent in associational Unitarian Universalism. She accentuates her second point when she claims that “...our collective covenant isn’t worth the paper it isn’t written on, for there is no covenant.” I wouldn’t go so far as to say that there is no covenant at all since there are written covenants. She refers specifically to one you will find on the back of your Order of Service. At the top of the page, in bold type, it states: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote: ...” And there is another covenant in your Order of Service as well, the one we all read together just a few minutes ago.

So is her claim that “our collective covenant isn’t worth the paper it isn’t written on” a false statement? While the statement isn’t completely accurate, I believe there is enough truth in it that we need to consider what she is calling our attention to. For example, if you look closely at the covenant in the UUA bylaws, it is between the member congregations, in our case UUFB as an organization, and the UUA, as an organization. It is not between any one of us and the national organization this Fellowship is a member of. And what about the covenant we read earlier. While it mentions the “Spirit of Life,” it seems to be primarily about how we as UUFB members and friends will relate to one another. But where is the written covenant that guides us as individuals in our relationship with the UUA. And what about the covenant that we can depend upon as we relate to and work with members of other UU congregations. And for that matter where is the covenant between UUFB and other UU churches and fellowships. I haven’t seen any of these written down and it is quite likely that few if any of us know what they are if they exist. In the past there were such agreements or covenants. For example, there was a time when the Fellowships here in Montana had an agreement about how they would work together to hold a retreat each year. And in the distant past, a member in good standing of one Unitarian or Universalist church was assured, by written covenants, that they would be accepted as a member into another like congregation.

Times, however, have changed and covenant, like membership, doesn’t hold the same appeal or significance as in the past. The movement away from both covenant

and membership has some people in the larger Unitarian Universalist community concerned. The concern led the UUA Board to establish the Renewing the Covenant Task Force in the fall of 2015. This Task Force has been given the charge of looking at what is needed today to make covenant relevant and beneficial at the national, regional, district and congregational levels. What they have found and suggested so far is quite interesting. I encourage you to go to the UUA website and read the Renewing the Covenant reports that have been presented to the UUA Board. In their January 2016 report the task force questions some of the basic assumptions related to how our national body, the UUA, and our congregations, are structured. For example, the task force has considered, and questioned, the concept of membership—membership of congregations within the UUA and membership of individuals in congregations. They suggest that the way membership has been practiced in recent history may no longer be serving us well. And they offer an alternative to membership as it is now. That alternative is replacing long-term membership with short-term, renewable covenants. They propose this as an option that could be beneficial for all parties involved.

I know there has been a good deal of discussion here at UUFB about the issue of membership, including how membership works, what membership means, and how some people just don't feel comfortable becoming members. From the discussions I have had the opportunity to be involved in, it seems clear that there is concern within this Fellowship related to the issue of membership. So what if we as a Fellowship were to begin to look into what the Renewing the Covenant Task Force has been finding and suggesting? What if we were to begin considering an alternative to our current way of identifying members and friends? And what if we were to begin using the well tested practice of making agreements or covenants as a way of acknowledging the relationship we each have with this Fellowship? I will admit, I don't know what all this would entail. And I definitely don't have an idea of what the outcome would be. I do have some hopes however. My hope would be that each of us would consider with care what it means to be in relationship with this Fellowship as an organization. That we would consider with care what it means to be in relationship with the individuals that make up the UUFB community. And as our careful considering provides us with awareness, that we would engage in discussions which would help us learn from one another what being involved in this Fellowship means to each other. I am certain that each and every one of us has our own unique experience and perspective regarding the meaning this Fellowship has in our lives. Yet while we will each have experiences and perspectives which are unique, I imagine we will find there is a great deal that we share in common. It is that which we share in common that calls us together and that keeps us together. And it is from that which we share in common that our covenant, our agreement to continue our relationship with this Fellowship can be found.

And as long as we are looking into what the Renewing the Covenant Task Force has been finding and suggesting why not also consider how we, as a Fellowship, are in relationship with other UU Fellowships and churches. This past spring members of the five Montana Fellowships came together for a retreat at the Rockhaven Camp and Retreat Center near Gallatin Gateway. While I was only there for a few hours, it seemed that people were enjoying the chance to meet and share with folks from other congregations. I have heard there was a time some years ago when the UU congregations of Montana held a retreat annually. From my experience at this year's

retreat, as well as my visits to three of the four other Fellowships in Montana, it is evident that we have a lot in common. Holding an annual retreat would be one way for us to get to know one another better and to share what is working well for us along with the challenges we are experiencing. I am sure we have a lot to offer and learn from one another. But there is no reason to limit ourselves to only re-instituting something we have done in the past. We can find new ways to work together. An example that is currently under discussion is having a Pacific Western Region Staff person come to Montana to facilitate a workshop focused on Board leadership and development. At this point it looks like our Fellowship may be hosting such a workshop some time in the spring. Both of these would require our Fellowship to make agreements or covenants with the other congregations that would attend and participate. Both a state-wide UU retreat and workshop on Board leadership and development would give us the opportunity to do more than the “parallel play” which Rev. Phillips refers to. Each would provide us with an opportunity to play, work and grow together. And these are just two ways that we, as a Fellowship, might become more engaged with some of the congregations in our area. I believe there are even more ways we can engage on a congregation to congregation level.

It is apparent to me that we are living in a time when the ways we have been doing things for years are not working as well as they once did. I am reminded of this each time I try to do something that was easy for me when I was in my 20's and 30's. As many of us who are over 50 know, time changes some things and we need to adapt. We need to draw on the knowledge and experience of our lives as well as the knowledge and experience of those who have come before us. In our Fellowship as well as in our larger UU community, we have the opportunity again, to question the status quo and to explore new ways of being in community. It might just be time to return again to that which has made it possible for UU Fellowships and churches across the country to stay together for all these years. It might just be time for us to reimagine and renew our covenant, with one another, with other UU communities, and with our national organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association. The UUA is demonstrating that they are prepared to look at new ways of doing business and of being in relationship. My hope is that we will follow their lead and begin exploring how the practice of creating and living with each other in covenant may provide a path forward during these changing and challenging times. This building lets me know that we are an adventurous and creative lot. We are not stuck in the old way of doing things. Together, I know that we can take what has been tried and true and make it something new. Together we have the ability to make hopes and dreams come true.

Blessed be.