

The Foundation of Our UU Tradition©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
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Two weeks ago I had the privilege and the honor of marrying a couple at Chico Hot Springs. Only a few family members and friends were in attendance so I had a chance to meet and chat with most of them. After the ceremony was over, while family photos were being taken, I had a conversation with a fellow who said that he had never heard of Unitarian Universalism. That is something I have heard from more people than I can count. Because I have had considerable experience in such situations I anticipated the next question—a question I would guess a good number of you have been asked. “So what do Unitarian Universalists believe?”

Those of you who have had such a question presented to you know that it can be difficult to answer in an accurate and meaningful way. Unitarian Universalism is difficult, if not impossible, to explain in a sixty-second soundbite. I paused and took a deep breath, realizing that the assumption underlying this fellow’s question meant that what I was about to say might not fit neatly into the his understanding of what is essential or foundational to a religious tradition. I began my answer by informing him that holding a common belief or professing a specific creed isn’t necessary for a person to be a Unitarian Universalist. I could tell by the questioning look on his face that I was correct, this wasn’t fitting well within his understanding of a religious organization. I then shared with him that within Unitarian Universalism people who hold an wide range of beliefs come together to worship and work together as they strive to honor and respect one another and seek to make the world a better place for all. The questioning look on his face intensified so I decided to try an approach that I thought might be part of his mental framework. I told him that Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal faith not a creedal faith and covenant was the original basis of the Jewish and Christian religious traditions. I mentioned the covenants that God made with Noah and Abraham hoping this would match up with the perspective he held. I let him know that what matters more than belief in Unitarian Universalism is how people agree to be with one another and how we strive to live our lives. His matter of fact response was, “Oh, so you are a social club.” A question immediately popped into my mind. Did this fellow also view the marriage that just took place to be nothing more than a social club? Certainly the covenant that these two people had just made with one another was more important than whether all or even most of their beliefs were the same. Thankfully my discernment prevailed that afternoon and the question remained unspoken. Our discussion eventually came to an end and I left feeling disappointed that my attempt at answering his question hadn’t been successful in the way I had hoped. Later I wondered if it might have been better to respond to his question with a quote by the sixteenth century Unitarian, Francis David. David asserted that “We don’t have to believe alike to love alike.”

As I am sure all of you here are well aware, we do not believe alike. I am very grateful for that. I am grateful that common belief is not the foundation of our religious tradition. In my estimation if we all had to share a common belief in order to be in religious community together our ability to learn, to grow and to thrive would be seriously compromised. I am also grateful for our religious forbears who had the wisdom to recognize that common belief was and is not a sufficient foundation for a religious

organization. In particular, I am referring to the forbears who gathered in the meeting house in Cambridge, Massachusetts in August of 1648. This was a gathering of elected lay and ministerial officers from across New England. These elected officers worked to create a document that laid out what they perceived to be most important to both the organization and good functioning of religious communities. That document is known as “The Cambridge Platform.” Those in attendance affirmed a commitment to make covenant the preeminent factor in the organization of the church. Here is a short statement from that Platform.

“The comparing of each particular church to a city, and to a spouse, seems to conclude not only a form, but that that form is by way of a covenant. The covenant, as it was, that which made the family of Abraham and children of Israel to be a church.... This voluntary agreement, consent or covenant—for all these are taken for the same—...puts us in mind of our mutual duty; and stirs us up to it...”

“This voluntary agreement, consent or covenant—for all these are taken for the same—” continues to be what our UU faith tradition is based and built upon. To see this all you need to do is look to the sentence that precedes the list of our Seven UU Principles and Purposes. That sentence states, “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote.” I notice that on the back of our Order of Service some of the words from that sentence are present but some are missing. Covenant is missing. This makes me wonder what the reason for its omission might be. I am aware that the word “covenant” has connotations which leave some people feeling uneasy. It is my hope that we can find a way to move beyond the restrictive concepts of covenant which may be uncomfortable to some. My hope is that we can come to view covenant the way the authors of the Cambridge Platform did, as a “voluntary agreement, consent or covenant—for all these are taken for the same.” We are, after all, each here voluntarily and we each agree and consent to work and worship together.

In the introduction to the Contemporary Reader’s Edition of *The Cambridge Platform*, the Unitarian Universalist minister, Alice Blair Wesley, writes the following.

“These Congregationalists understood the Bible to be mainly about the free and covenanted social practice of love. As they understood church history, the ‘substance’ of a free church has always been the same, the holy spirit of mutual love.”

She goes on to state,

“The one end of everything the gathered members do, says the Platform, is ‘edification,’ that is, mutual learning and teaching concerning the many and complex ways of love.”

And who among us has learned all there is about the many and complex ways of love? In our Story for All Ages this morning it was evident that Dionysius had a considerable amount to learn about love. The love that was the friendship bond

between Damon and Pythias both baffled and amazed him. It opened his eyes to a new way of perceiving others and the world around him.

The many and complex ways of love is what makes covenant such an important element of our faith tradition. Love is not a belief and can not be fully contained within the mental construct of a belief. Love is an emotion, an experience—something that involves not only the head but the heart and body as well. And when love includes another person it involves agreements and commitment. Here is where covenant demonstrates what it is capable of and what it offers us. Unlike creed, covenant cannot simply be written, remembered and recited. Covenant, like the love between people, is mutually created and consented to. It is lived out on a day to day basis. And it calls us to continually reassess and reconfirm our bond to and with one another. Covenant, like love, is not something that remains unchanged. To stay alive it must grow and change. Covenant, like love, requires attention, intention and ongoing practice to stay vibrant and meaningful. Covenant, like love, provides an ongoing, ever deepening means to discover truth and meaning in our lives. Covenant is something that provides us with a foundation to build on in an infinite number of ways and forms. Adherence to a particular belief, on the other hand, restricts what can be explored, discovered and created.

At this point you are hopefully getting a sense of the importance the concept of covenant holds for our faith tradition. Covenant isn't, however, just important to our history or our national Association. I would assert that covenant is important, and possibly even essential, to this congregation and each one of us. As I say this I recall what we heard from James Luther Adams about the perspective of his professor, Dr. Richard C. Cabot. Here I quote Adams; "He summed up the good life, then, in these three propositions: the good life is to make agreements, to keep agreements, and to revise or improve agreements in view of new situations...." Dr. Cabot's third proposition seems to me to be very relevant to the situation this congregation is currently in. With the recent acquisition of a church building of its own as well as a change in minister it would seem that this could be a very appropriate time for this congregation to revise or improve agreements in view of these new situations.

I think it would be safe to say that all of us would hope to live a "good life." If Dr. Cabot is correct, the agreements we make, keep, revise or improve are the path to achieving what it is we hope for. I would suggest that we look to the words of our forbears who wrote the Cambridge Platform as we think about the idea of covenant. For them "agreement, consent or covenant...are taken for the same." With this concept of covenant in mind I will be asking us to consider the agreements, the covenants we have with one another. I will be inviting groups of people such as the Board, committees, working groups and task forces to put their agreements into spoken and written words. I will encourage us to look to the agreements we enter into to as guides that will assist us along the sometimes challenging experience of walking, working and worshipping together in, as Alice Blair Wesley states it, the "spirit of mutual love." I believe that walking, working and worshipping together in such a manner is an endeavor that is worthy of our effort. In my estimation it is the agreements we make, keep and revise or improve that makes us more than just a social club. In covenant together we are a vibrant, growing and continually evolving religious community.

So it is and blessed be

