

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan
Rev. Andrew Frantz, contract minister
July 26, 2020

Living in Covenant

Granting each other freedom of mind and spirit, we commit to this community of mutual care. In that spirit of caring, we pledge to be mindful when speaking of and to one another. We will walk in the ways of truth and loving-kindness that we and our children may always be fulfilled. So that the world may be fulfilled, we dedicate ourselves to the work of justice and peace, seeking always to soothe sorrow and to inspire joy.

-UUFCM Covenant

When you hear the word “covenant,” what do you think of? I guess this really dates me, but I think of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. In that classic 1980’s Hollywood film, of course, the ark they are talking about is the ark of the covenant, and the covenant refers to the idea in the Hebrew scripture of an agreement between God and the Israelites. It is, in other words, a very old-fashioned religious term.

The second thing I think of when I hear the word covenant is “covenant group.” As a member of a Unitarian Universalist fellowship about 15 years ago, I was part of a covenant group, and this meant a small group with fixed membership that met for discussion regularly – and the *covenant* part, of course, was that we had an agreement for how to treat each other and for how our meetings would run.

“Covenant,” then, is a term with religious connotations that refers to an agreement among people. The covenant of this Fellowship, which Chris just read aloud for us, is what I want to talk about today – why do we have a covenant, and what does it mean to live in covenant?

Nearly every week when I lead the Sunday service, I include the words of the Fellowship’s mission: *To be a religious community, guided by love, transforming our lives and our world*. My interpretation of this mission is that what we say we want to do is to create more love and justice. It’s a loose interpretation. But if that is *what we want to do*, then the covenant is *how we agree to do it* – or how we agree to be with each while we try to achieve our mission. And if we are trying to create greater love and justice, we have to act with love and justice within the Fellowship. Again, that is a loose interpretation of the covenant. “We commit to this community of mutual care....., we pledge to be mindful when speaking of and to one another.We will walk in the ways of truth and loving-kindness.” These are the actual words of the covenant.

My message today is that how we treat one another matters, and that our actions within the Fellowship should reflect the world we are trying to create in the larger society – one of love and justice. I will give some examples of how best to deal with conflicts in a covenantal relationship, and how we are working to create best practices in this Fellowship.

As we talk about this, let’s recognize that any group of people is going to have conflict--or in the terms we are using today, people are inevitably going to break covenant with one another. This is true in a family; this is true in a work setting; it is certainly true in a religious community. We are humans and we are going to fail.

The most concrete part of our covenant states, “we pledge to be mindful when speaking of and to one another.” So let’s take that as an example – and let’s acknowledge that there will be times when we’re *not* mindful speaking to one another, or speaking of one another. We will break this covenant. And I would like to explore three ways to come back into covenantal community after we break covenant with each other.

The first and best way is for someone to catch themselves breaking covenant and to own their mistake. For example, yesterday when I was stressed I snapped at my partner...and then a minute later I stopped and said, "I didn't mean to snap at you." In the same way, if we break our agreement with each other in this Fellowship of speaking mindfully of and to one another, we can stop ourselves. Perhaps this is a lot to ask, but I don't think it is too much to ask. I think we can be self-reflective. If we are at a committee meeting and we think we might have said something hurtful to someone else, we can check with them. It might sound like: "Hey, I said this yesterday at that meeting and then later I realized that it might have been insensitive. Did it bother you?" I think we can say that. Even better, if the answer is, "Yes, that bothered me," the next question could be, "How can I make it better – how can I heal our relationship and get back into right relationship?" This is key because the covenantal relationship is what we are trying to maintain.

The second example I will give would be if I say something that bothers you, something insensitive or offensive, and you confront me about it directly. This takes courage and trust, but I think we can do that in this community. Even if that's not what you are used to in other groups, such as your family, your work place, your rock band, or whatever, I think we can do that here. You can say to me, "I feel like you broke our covenant when you said this or did this." And ideally, I can be mature enough to say, "Yes, I see that what I said hurt you, and how can I make this better?" Let me unpack this situation a little more carefully. First of all, the person who has been harmed, who feels like the covenant has been broken, should be direct but not blaming or shaming. There is a huge difference between *calling out* and *calling in*, and it is a subtle difference. It may be a difference of tone. *Calling out* is about blaming someone, catching them doing something wrong, and punishing them. *Calling in* is totally different. Calling in means I feel that you've done something wrong, but we are still part of a sacred relationship, and I want to heal that relationship. I care about our relationship enough to have this difficult communication, and I want you to remain in this community. I'm not shutting you out. Let's acknowledge that in the real world there are going to be feelings associated with any time someone feels like covenant is being broken. We can make space for feelings and acknowledge feelings without the feelings overwhelming the process. Finally, in any situation like this where someone breaks covenant and someone feels harmed, the way to restoring right relationship is to heal the harm. The person who has been harmed can say if an apology is enough to restore right relationship, or if something else is needed.

I talked about first someone catching themselves at breaking covenant; second I talked about someone directly communicating with someone else when they break covenant. Thirdly, there may be times when a third party is called in. If the breaking of covenant is ongoing or is severe, this may be appropriate. Since the Fellowship now has a full-time minister, it is appropriate to involve me with these situations; and we have a new structure in place as well.

A few months ago, the Fellowship formed a new committee called the Committee on Shared Ministry. It has four members: myself, and three people whose voices you have heard this morning. Carolyn Hancock, who shared the opening words; Guy Newland, who shared the reading for contemplation; and Chris Bailey, who shared the UUFCM covenant. Then name of the committee, Committee on Shared Ministry, reflects the idea that *ministry* is not only something that a minister does. We all *minister* to one another in a congregation such as this one. The work that Kendra does, teaching classes to our youngsters, and the work of the religious education committee that supports her, is a *ministry* to our children and youth. The work of the Arms Around team that gives rides to people for medical appointments and other such needs is a *ministry* of care. The role of this new committee, then, is to look at all the ways that we minister to one another in this congregation and to strengthen our shared ministry.

And, one specific role of the Committee on Shared Ministry is to help the congregation deal with conflict. We do so very much in a way of calling people in: healing relationships, bringing congregants into community—not calling out bad behavior, and certainly not punishing anyone.

There is one more thing I want to share today about living in covenant and breaking covenant dealing with conflict in a religious congregation like this one. The national office of this denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association, has published some guidelines and best practices around this that are worth mentioning.¹ These guidelines are based on years of experience with many UU congregations. One thing that they say is that in a healthy congregation conflict, disruptive behavior, and breaches of covenant are addressed directly. In a healthy congregation there is a fair process to hear what happened and to restore relationship.

In an unhealthy congregation, on the other hand, conflict, disruptive behavior, and breaches of covenant are ignored. An unhealthy congregation lets things slide—maybe because they are being too nice, or they are afraid of conflict. Clearly that is bad for the people in the congregation, if conflict or disruptive behavior is unchecked—and it's bad for newcomers too. For example, if you were new in a fellowship and someone was behaving in a disruptive way during coffee hour, and no one said anything about it and just let the person be disruptive...you might not want to join that fellowship and it might not feel safe.

I end today with these words:

I am calling you in today: into a more sacred relationship. This is not the ancient covenant of God and the Israelites. This is the covenant between human beings – beautiful and flawed human beings – who choose this as their spiritual community. Even if we have never been in a sacred relationship (in our families or work places or sports teams) we are in one now: we call each other into right relationship again and again.

May it be so.

¹ Unitarian Universalist Association, "Safety as an Embodiment of Covenant," <https://www.uua.org/safe/handbook/covenant>