

Thus Do We Uphold this Covenant
April 11, 2010

Sometimes there are Sunday morning services that stay with me a little longer than others. On certain Sundays, something about the sharing that happens, the grace, the given, lived testimony of you all to being in beloved community, it just shines, and in those moments, I know I am blessed to be among you.

Last Sunday's Easter service is one such Sunday that seems to have left within me that residual sense of hope and community, renewal and peace. There is something exceptionally beautiful about witnessing, as I did at that service, two people stepping toward each other, and offering to each other the flowers that they have discovered, chosen, found themselves able and present to exchange.

And the more I think about the beauty of that scene, about that Easter service ritual of the flower communion, the

more I see how similar it was to two other events I also took part in, in the past week or so. Just the evening before Easter, up in Salado, I officiated at a wedding of a young couple, Justin and Rebecca, who exchanged their vows and their rings before a witness of loving friends and family. And exactly a week before the Easter service, down in Kyle, I had the honor of officiating at the wedding of two of our very own Wildflower members, Katie and Kevin. Katie and Kevin, too, exchanged vows, exchanged rings, exchanged the gift of offering themselves to each other as partners, as sacred souls, as, in the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, “two solitudes” who “protect and border a greet each other....”

I thank every one of you—Justin and Rebecca, Katie and Kevin, every single one of you who stepped up last Sunday, took a flower, and gave it away, in exchange for receiving another—I thank every one of you for allowing me to witness

the beauty of what it means to be vulnerable, to bring your best, most giving self forward, and to keep your commitment to being in loving relationship, whether with your partner, with your family, or with the entire Wildflower community.

As a community, we too, some time ago, took a vow, wrote and exchanged words of commitment to bringing our best selves forward, and to bringing our vulnerability with us, *into* community. You may not remember it, and I've been remiss in reminding you of it. But, if you can believe it, it's been about seven months since over sixty of us Wildflowers gathered at the Shady Hollow Community Center last September to spend a day working on the creation of a church-wide covenant of right relations. It's been about *four* months since, at our December semi-annual congregational meeting, we voted to accept the covenant, as conceived by the congregation, compiled by a collection of Committee on

Ministry members and workshop facilitators, and given final edits by one or two Wildflower members at the semi-annual meeting itself. Since voting to accept this covenant as ours, we have posted it on the website, we include it in our monthly newsletter and, thanks to the children, we now offer it as a bookmark to the people of the congregation. We have, in more ways than one, figuratively and literally framed our vows and hung them on the wall, so as to remind ourselves of who and how we want to be with one another.

Now, today, it is time—actually well *past* time—to give our covenant some real Sunday morning attention, and to remind ourselves again that we created such a covenant in order to call ourselves to do our best to live by it.

Yes, for many of us Unitarian Universalists—for many of us free spirits and free thinkers—having a covenant at all is not completely palatable, because it reads dangerously like a

list of instructions, and some of the first instructions many of us came across in our religious lives were ten such ones called the Commandments, and the Commandments tend to be attached to some religious traditions that are very doctrinal, very creedal—whereas we pride ourselves on living not by creed but by deed. You follow?

In other words, we Unitarian Universalists don't like being told what to do. We want to live by that fourth Unitarian Universalist principle, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And I say, by all means, yes, we need to live by that principle. And yet, on the high wire of religious life, it never hurts to have a net—or a *network*—of support. The six other principles are in many ways a network of support for living our individually and collectively free and responsible searches for truth and meaning.

But while all the seven Unitarian Universalist principles have extraordinary value, and can be studied and interpreted as a means of asking ourselves how to bring our best, and least armored selves forward in community, to create a covenant of right relations specifically for the members of Wildflower Church is to provide for ourselves an opportunity to be *explicit* about the exchanges we are willing to make with one another, in order to remain in mutually committed, loving relationship.

So, without me resorting to going down the list of items one by one—listing being a sermon format I have never, ever enjoyed from the perspective of the pew—let me begin with the first point in the covenant we created. I can tell you that it was easy for us to agree this should be the first covenant we meet. It reads, “We, the members of Wildflower Church, covenant to

extend the welcome, hospitality, and acceptance at Wildflower Church that we would wish to receive.”

Think about the first time you walked through our doors. Indeed, Wildflower Church is a special place in regard to welcome, hospitality, and acceptance. Honestly, while acceptance has always been a key player in most Unitarian Universalist churches, it is not always the case when it comes to welcome and hospitality. In fact, some people seem to get a little behaviorally dyslexic and end up practicing if not an actively, at least a passively aggressive “greeting people is not something I do” hostility to those who come through Unitarian Universalist doors. I’m not sure why that’s the case. It may have to do with our New England, Puritan roots. It may be that many of us Unitarian Universalists lack the faith that we actually have something in common, something to offer those seeking the very thing we possess.

Our covenant to “extend the welcome, hospitality, and acceptance at Wildflower Church that we would wish to receive” says to me we know we’ve got something really wonderful happening here, and that we’re not about to keep it to ourselves as if it were some secret stash of candy of which there is only so much to go around. No, we know, having once been the stranger ourselves, that the warmth we offer *is* not, *need* not, and *must* not be limited to the few, the established, the already accepted. We—yes, even the shy among us, even the introverts, even the self-proclaiming awkward—we are called to extend the welcome, hospitality, and acceptance in this beloved community that we would wish to receive.

That being so, what else are we called to do? To explore that, let us move down to the rest of the bullet points of our covenant. Now, I said I won’t go down them one by one. If I were to do so, I could imagine some of you counting how many

bullet points there are, and counting—“OK, now she’s on 1; now she’s on 2...” and so on. Instead, I’m going to trust that you are responsible and mindful and caring enough to study each point on your own and in conversation with others. But let me say that in your studies, in your conversations about our covenant, one tool you may wish to bring with you is a set of scales. For you will discover that at the heart of our covenant of right relations is a spirit of and calling for balance. Whether we are called to balance care for community with care for self, to balance care for asserting *our* perspectives with care for listening to the perspectives of others, or to balance care for honoring other people’s *leadership* capacity while honoring that we too are and must be leaders in some capacity, the scales of balance are immediate indicators of where and how we stand in relation to ourselves and to one another.

Should you ever find yourself feeling you're standing on the wrong side of the scale, that the scales have tipped in such a way in which you are either heavily weighed down or unsettlingly ungrounded, there is one other part of our covenant I do want to hold up this morning, just as I would hold up to a couple during their wedding ceremony the challenges that their love might face. And that is the part that reads that we covenant to "engage in direct, respectful communication and active listening, particularly in times of conflict and misunderstanding." Speaking for myself, growing up in a dysfunctional—good at heart but dysfunctional nonetheless—family, growing up in a marketing and consumer-centered culture, growing up with events like Watergate being among the first of my political memories, I can't say that learning to "engage in direct, respectful communication and active listening, particularly in times of

conflict and misunderstanding” has come as second nature for me in my life. And I would add that, as opinionated and free thinking as Unitarian Universalists like to be, conflict *avoidance* is often the path many of us would prefer to take, both as individuals and as religious communities.

But you all know that avoiding conflict doesn't make it go away, anymore than does plowing through conflict by striving to annihilate, humiliate, or blame the other party. Remember the words of James Vila Blake which we heard Joan read earlier: “If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good. Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.”

Conflict is inevitable. Throwing out love the minute conflict arises need not be. So in times of conflict—and there will be many, as we continue to seek a home of our own, as we

continue to grow, as we move from one Board of Trustees to another, as we each strive to balance our personal lives with the lives of the community—in times of conflict, let us keep love with us, and practice direct and respectful communication at all times.

Finally, let us come full circle, to the final part of our covenant, which calls us to “honor and celebrate our differences.” As I recall, when composing this last part, we took some time searching for the right words. We didn’t just want to *tolerate* each other’s differences; we didn’t even want to merely *accept* each other’s differences. Enough of us know what it’s like to be merely tolerated. And to be told we are accepted falls just a bit short of feeling *loved*. Don’t get me wrong: Acceptance is a beautiful, *absolutely necessary* step in the right direction. But acceptance is the gateway, while honor

and celebration make manifest the very garden of beloved community itself.

I look back on the consultations I've done with couples who are wishing to marry. One of the first questions I ask each person is "What is it that you love, what is it that first drew you to your beloved?" In their answers, sure, there is always something about the beloved that the person sees as a reflection of him- or herself. For instance—and this is a very light-hearted for instance—with the couple whose wedding I officiated last Saturday, when I asked Justin what first drew him to Rebecca, he beamed and said, "She's a redhead." Justin himself being a redhead, he was proclaiming he'd found his soul mate. But of course he then went on to expound upon all the beautiful, unique and wonderful things about his beloved that did not reflect, but complemented who he was and is.

We here at Wildflower Church have just such an opportunity—to both *reflect* for one another the beauty and the worth each of us carries, and to *complement* one another with our own unique and wonderful parts of ourselves, which call others out of themselves and stretches others to see beauty and worth and dignity in a new light. Whether I'm gay and you're straight, whether you're an octogenarian and you're a young adult, whether you're a card-carrying atheist and you're a Jesus loving theist, whether you're a tax cutter and you're a tax increaser, whether you're a pacifist and you're retired military who knows you made sacrifices for the safety of this country, whether *you* all say we should clap after every piece of music and *you* all believe silence to be our best, most holy response, *whatever* our differences may be, these are what make Wildflower Church a *holy* microcosm of humanity. These, in the words of Unitarian Universalist minister

Kathleen McTigue are what help us to “remember the wholeness of our lives...” These are “the weaving of light and shadow in this great and astonishing dance in which we move.”

Now, speaking of dancing, when I officiate at weddings, I usually don't stay to witness the first dance of the newlywed couple. But I know how important, how meaningful that first dance is. For, from that point on, that couple is committed to weaving the light and the shadow of their lives in an *ongoing* dance that is the dance of vulnerability, the dance of trust, the dance of joy, the dance of challenge, the dance of laughter, and the dance of love. To dance together is to step toward one another, offer a flower, and receive one in exchange.

Whether the dance we Wildflowers dance is the dance of friendship, partnership, parenting, companioning, or community, or a little bit of all the above, let us do so in the

garden of beloved community. As the hymn says, “Bless the earth and all your children, one creation make us whole, interwoven, all connected, planet wide and inmost soul.” So let this Sunday, and all Sundays be, a Sunday to remember. So may we uphold our covenant, filled with grace overflowing, learning always to live in peace.

Amen.

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