

“Our Great Covenant”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation

“We Belong” by Wayne Arnason

Spirit of Life, gratefully we gather in this community of common purpose and aspiration. The belonging that we feel here despite differences of belief and practice helps us remember the larger Belonging that surrounds and holds us:

We belong to the awe inspiring process of life – from the stars we have come, across millions of years and light years we have come to this planet, to this place;

We belong to the human family – from oceans and jungles we have come, come to consciousness, to learning and growth, to plan our crops and build our cities, to reach back towards the stars;

We belong as well to each other – from tribes and nations we have come, recognising that no human being can find fulfilment without companions of place and time;

Yet our hope, our prayer this day is that the belonging we feel in this community might become a feeling that transcends all barriers of tribe and nation.’

And that this world in which we live, teetering on war, struggling with the evil that hatred and injustice can create,
Will ultimately be a world in which we can say, “Everyone belongs.”

We pause in silent witness to this hope.

Reading

An Excerpt from *Caring & Commitment: Learning To Live the Love We Promise* by Lewis B. Smedes.

I am not a hopeful person by nature. When things get tough I am easily tempted to believe that the jig is up. I foreclose on the future all too soon. If my team is not ahead by at least two touchdowns in the final five minutes of play, I hear defeat blowing in the winds.... Out of my private struggles with despair, I have come to see that hope is the final secret of all commitment.

... When the innerspring of commitment is care ... there are possibilities in the toughest situations. Not certainties. But possibilities. Not possibilities of things being all we've ever wanted them to be. But possibilities of things becoming better than they are. Good enough to make the future together.

... Commitments live on hope. Not on duty, not on what we are obligated to do, but on hope for what we can do. And for what others can do for us. Hope is the alternative to the seductions of the uncommitted life. Hope is energy. Hope is energy to cope when life gets tough. And, when you get down to brass tacks, it is the energy we need for commitment keeping in a world where somebody, at any moment, may rain on your parade.

Sermon: “Our Great Covenant”

I know many of you have heard it before, but I’ll risk asking again:
How many Unitarians does it takes to change a light bulb?

The old punch line goes something like this:

We choose not to make a statement
either against or in favour of the need for a light bulb.

However, if on your own journey,
you have found light bulbs work for you, we affirm your choice.

Even more, we invite you to write a poem
or compose a modern interpretive dance
about your personal relationship with your light bulb,
and we encourage you to present it, next month,
at our annual Light Bulb Sunday Service, in which
we will explore and celebrate the diversity of light bulb traditions,
including incandescent, fluorescent, 3-way, long-life, and tinted,
all of which we regard and affirm as equally valid paths to luminescence.

It’s good to poke fun at ourselves from time to time,
and this joke certainly has a lot to say about tolerance in our faith.

But, the question truly on my heart, this morning,
isn’t how many Unitarians it takes to change a lightbulb,
but how many Unitarians it takes to change the world?

Now, let me say that this isn’t so much a question about quantity—
though it certainly can make a difference—
as much as it is a question of quality, at least a certain quality of being.

This morning, we have welcomed eight new members
into the life of this congregation.

Eight people who have added their signatures
to a list of thousands of names stretching back to 1845.

Eight people who, bringing their struggles and their gifts,
have committed themselves to uphold our covenant:

which proclaims love as our doctrine,
the quest for truth our sacrament, and service our prayer.

As Unitarians, we are bound together not by a set of common beliefs
that take shape in timeless creeds, but rather,
by a covenant to live together in enduring religious community.

While there are important theological implications to its every line,
our covenant isn't a creed with a crystalised list of required beliefs.

Instead, it is an agreement about
the aspirations that guide us into a shared future
and the commitments we make to honour and cherish
one another along the way.

When we join a Unitarian congregation,
it is the covenant of the congregation to which we are signing on.

The covenant we use here is adapted from a version from 1933.
Called the "Covenant for Free Worship," the original reads:

"Love is the doctrine of this church
the quest of truth is its sacrament,
and service is its prayer.

To dwell together in peace,
to seek knowledge in freedom,
to serve human need,
To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the divine
—thus do we covenant with each other and with God."

Today, the Covenant for Free Worship
is used in Unitarian Universalist congregations throughout the world,
though most, like us, have altered the text through the years
in small but significant ways to fit local theological tastes.

That's just as it should be,
and it's just as it has always been for this congregation.

In January 1846, shortly after the founding of First Unitarian,
our forebears adopted a constitution

that declared “the privilege of worshipping God according to the dictates of conscience...an inherent right...”

Our founding charter goes on to state that the members unite in forming a “Society for the purpose of public worship,” guided by “the free exercise of private judgment in all matters of belief, and the rejection of all tests, creeds, or formal declarations of opinion.”¹

Our by-laws today echo that same language, and in some cases use even the same words.

While we are right to cherish the radical religious freedom offered by this faith, it is the strength of our shared covenant that makes it possible for this community to not only exist, but endure.

That is why our covenant is so very important.

That is why we have gathered today to renew our covenant, with our commitments of volunteer and financial support.

And, that is why our covenant is a constant element of our worship.

Though the readings, hymns, and sermons vary from week to week, the covenant is for us a touchstone, in both the familiarity that comes with repetition and in its lofty call to make its words real in the living of our lives.

To proclaim love as our doctrine is a bold statement.

It’s no easy feat. No modest ambition.
But, there it is. We say it every week.

But, is it our doctrine?
Is it our lived experience?
Is it what the world sees of us?

It’s one thing to be loving in our personal lives:
toward our family and our friends,

¹ Phillip Hewitt, *Unitarians in Canada*, 65.

perhaps even our coworkers, classmates, and fellow congregants.

But to uphold a doctrine of love asks something more of us.

It calls us to live out our lives in such a way
that our faith is made clear in our words and in our deeds.

It calls us to respectful engagement across our differences,
not only here within these walls, but beyond them.

It calls us out into the world to work for justice and peace,
all in the name of the transformative power of love that we profess.

It is a high and worthwhile calling—
and it makes us responsible to a higher standard
than that to which most people or institutions are bound, or even aspire.

Of course, the world would be a very different place if were it otherwise,
but the fact is that such a doctrine is not
what guides the work of politics, the meetings of corporate boards,
or the deliberations of university faculty.

And, it's not expected to be.

Though the majority of CEOs and MPs and professors
are no doubt loving, and accountable for acting ethically and responsibly,
they are not necessarily required to act lovingly.

That is, of course, unless they are members of this congregation,
who regularly pledge to do so. . .

Now, if the weight of this daunting responsibility
has never really dawned on you prior to this moment,
it may be helpful if I offer a few images to convey
a bit of what I think we mean when we speak of love in this congregation.

David Anderson tells of the time
someone struck a match and destroyed his church.²

² David Anderson, "Love on the Rocks" from *Breakfast Epiphanies*, 130-33.

He says that by the time he got there,
the whole sky was lit up orange.
Flames shot through the arched roof of the parish hall like a pyre.

He stumbled around the building,
finding a clutch of his parishioners huddled out front,
where they watched the horrific scene until the fire chief
moved them off the property because it was no longer safe.

When the roof of the sanctuary collapsed,
he stopped comforting his congregants and began to wail himself.

When he could cry no more,
someone got a chair for him, and he sat down.

After the fire, everything was different.
The staff worked out of the old rectory
and the congregation worshipped across the street in a school gymnasium.

Eventually bulldozers crawled off flatbed trucks and made quick work
of everything but the heavy stone walls of the 19th century church.

When the demolition crew began piling up little hills of leftover stones,
a congregant who knew the minister had forever
been planning to build a deck off his home
suggested he take a load of the salvage stone and build a terrace instead.

The minister agreed, knowing that it would be a fitting memorial.

A week later, some six tonnes of precious stones
slid off a truck and into a pile in his backyard.

That evening, after dinner, he went out to look at the mountain of rock.
The stones looked pinkish in the light of the setting sun.
They were scraped and scarred, and some were utterly black on one side.

He loved those stones, though, for he knew that there,
in a microcosmic heap lay his church.

But, truth be told, he got much more than he bargained for.

It turns out that six tonnes of battered and burnt stones requires a lot of labour to be transformed into a terrace, demanding of him every bit of energy he could muster.

He knew that if he didn't love this pile of rubble so much, he would be free of it—free from all responsibility for it. “But, I do [love it],” he said, “and so I am not.”

That is the love that we can have for a place such as this.

This may look like just bricks and mortar, but because of those of us who call it home, a building like this is more than its elements.

Love is the only reason that explains why we would give to it a measure of our devotion, our resources, and our lives. It is the cradle of our common dreams.

And like those stones from the burned out church, we come to this place with our own array of life's scrapes and scars, and with mortar clinging to our sides.

And the gift we give to each other here is what Lord Shaftesbury, called “amicable collision.”

“Politeness. . . kindness, compassion, self-restraint, and a sense of humour (are) the final fruits of a ‘polished culture,’” he said.

“We polish one another, and rub off our corners and rough sides by a sort of amicable collision.”³

As many of us have learned here, sometimes the hard way, the practice of friendly polishing, of amicable collision, of gently smoothing each others rough edges, as well as our own, requires of us nothing less than love.

One last story.

³ Lord Shaftesbury, *The Scottish Enlightenment, The Scots Invention of the Modern World* by Arthur Herman, as quoted in “Canadian Unitarianism: An Idea of a Possibility,” by Ray Drennan, *UUMA Selected Essays*, 2004.

Above the River Thames,
hovers the great iconic dome of St. Paul's Cathedral,
which has kept watch over London for nearly three and half centuries.

But, the St. Paul's we might recognise
is not the first cathedral to stand on this site.

The land, the highest point in the city,
once held the Roman temple to the Goddess Diana.

In 604, King Ethelbert dedicated the first St. Paul's,
Built right on top of the old temple.

When it burned down, a new one was built in 680.
After the Vikings torched it, it was replaced in 962.
It lasted until 1087, when the third St. Paul's was gutted by fire.

In its place was built a magnificent Gothic cathedral
with a spire over 150 metres high.

Though it survived the Reformation and much of the Civil War,
it was severely damaged by lightning
and served, for a time, as a stable for Parliament's horses.

When Charles II, back on throne, decided something had to be done,
he tapped Christopher Wren to work his magic
and to bring the cathedral back to its former glory.

But, before he got very far, the old cathedral, surrounded by scaffolding,
burned to the ground in the Great Fire of London.

From the ashes rose the iconic dome we know today.

But, that dome, itself, was nearly destroyed during the Blitz over London.

On the night of October 10th, 1940,
a German bomb struck the cathedral, but the fire was put out
by a group of volunteer women and men called the St. Paul's Fire Watch.

The group was first formed during the first World War,

and reconstituted in the second,
to ensure that every spark and every cinder was promptly doused.

Three hundred people took part of this brigade,
with forty brave souls on duty each night.

Risking their very lives, they climbed the towers and dome
to sit vigil in what was one of the most symbolic targets of the air raids.

I'm inspired by their gallantry and their grit.
But, what moves me more than their courage is their love.

Earlier, I asked how many Unitarians does it take to change the world?

I don't actually know the answer.

But, it has something to do with finding meaning in that pile of scorched rocks.

It has something to do with the way we, rough stones that we are,
polish one another into the gems we might be.

It has something to do with the faith
that inspires people to protect what they love,
even at great cost to themselves.

And, it has something to do with the great covenant
that lives at the heart of this enduring community—
a people so bold to profess a doctrine of love.

On this day when we renew our commitment to our future,
let us make that love real, by going the distance
for this congregation, for each other, and for the wider world.

Amen.