

Three Vows

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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.

Being in a theological college means that you automatically get to hang around with a very churchy crowd. Ministers, pastors, and priests... oh, my! They are in every classroom and hall; they're your teachers, guides, mentors, supervisors... colleagues. Often, you forget that they're ordained, or you only find out later, to everyone's surprise.



One memorable meeting was with a guest speaker: an Anglican monk who was visiting Montreal. My first surprise was learning that there are protestant monks, but the greater surprises came as he described his life, and he showed us that—as different as a monk's life is from that outside an abbey—it is far more similar to ours than we realize.

He gave us a frank and laid-back rundown of the monastic life: studying, working, praying; Sabbath days with friends or family. As he spoke, I caught a glimpse of his wedding band, and wondered how that fit into his life as a monk.

Before I had a chance to ask, he pointed at his ring finger and explained its significance. No, he didn't have a sweetheart at home, though he had exchanged vows over a ring ceremony.

Joining a monastic brotherhood is a lot like dating, he explained. First you make a casual call, see how things are like, what you have in common. You share your passions and see if there's a common vision. At some point, you might get a feeling that you're "in like" with each

other. Then, things get a bit more serious, you might spend the night together, maybe even shack up for a while. And at some point, if you find that that you can make a commitment to each other, you exchange vows and rings, in what may well become a lifetime decision.

His vows were slightly different than what we now usually hear at a wedding. In his case, they are vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience. They live a rather simple life, with minimal luxury; they will not marry anyone... beyond the holy church, of course; and they have committed themselves to respect the hierarchy of authority in their abbey and in other church structures.

As he spoke, I could tell that my colleagues were thinking of asking the same question: which vow is the hardest?

Perhaps knowing that everyone was too polite to ask, he preempted us and gave us an answer: it's not celibacy, he declared with a knowing smile, acknowledging that he is asked that question quite often. Obedience, in fact, is usually the most challenging of all, as it encompasses the essence of the others.

At the time I was a busy ministerial student: deeply in debt, chronically single, and at the mercy of the ministerial credentialing office. I remember thinking: if I were to take those three vows today, would my life be *that* much different?

As it turns out, my colleagues and I found that, indeed, we had taken on some incarnation of those vows without fully realizing it. Our monk guest explained: the three vows may be *called* “poverty, celibacy, and obedience”—and we have some idea of what each of those things mean—but then he looked at all of us in the eye and proclaimed: these are all ways of relating to matters of money, sex, and power; and in our line of work, these are the very things most liable to get us in trouble.

The implications began to dawn on us: yes, we had taken those vows; it became clear that—even if we sought healthy compensation packages; even if we were partnered and fruitfully multiplied; even if we made ample use of the congregational freedom of the pulpit that UU ministers enjoy—all ministries require a careful consideration of our

relationship with matters of money, sex, and power. These are the high stakes of congregational life, wherein a breach of trust can be overwhelmingly damaging to the health of all in a community of faith.

When you think about it, each of these realms is a space in which we can find ourselves particularly vulnerable, wherein lie elements of sustenance and security, pleasure and pain, helpfulness and helplessness; where the opportunities for creativity and damage stand precariously close together and a few careless moves can jeopardize otherwise powerful work.

Poverty is not a condition for ministry in our tradition. Our ministers can seek out reasonable compensation for their work. Commentary about the Intern's stipend aside, a minister's shared ministry with a congregation does require an eye for frugality, and for responsible stewardship of the funds with which a congregation must work to carry out its ministry.

Like many spiritual leaders in the protestant tradition, Unitarian Universalist ministers do not take a vow of celibacy. We can get married... or not. And whether we are married, single, or in any other kind of romantic relationship, that status does not preclude our vocational trajectory or ordination.

But it might come as a surprise to you that we do take a vow of chastity of sorts. We don't call it that, of course; properly speaking, it is more accurately described as: "adhering to the norms and ethics of appropriate sexual conduct of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association". Evidently, to call it a "vow of chastity" sounds, well, sexier. Chastity, in this case, being an intentional commitment to respect boundaries regarding romantic and sexual relationships with congregants, and most importantly, with anyone who is particularly vulnerable. Above all, it is about seeking to maintain healthy relations with all we must serve, and to do so professionally.

Because of this, I think my monkish friend was right, vows regarding power are probably the most difficult ones. The difficulty is not so much in the will for obedience; but navigating the realities of power is simply very tricky. Aside from deference to the authority of a congregation and its governing bodies, and respect for denominational guidelines, the real challenge is in recognizing the different

manifestations of power that are ever-present in every human interaction: being mindful of the nuanced histories of each individual and the groups in which they interact; staying sensitive to differences in privilege, painful pasts, words that mean more than what is said.

What is so special about these aspects of life, that they warrant such high sounding vows?

In all of these, good faith is paramount; to be able to have the confidence that all who carry out a ministry may be trusted in matters of money, sex, and power, so that their creative potential may be shielded from the damage of which they are also capable.

And with good reason:

Money is, after all, a major unit by which we keep ourselves materially sound: well fed, well housed, well educated, and secure in our prospects amid an insecure world. Through proper management of money, we might improve our opportunities to offer proper nourishment, of different kinds, to all who need it. A vow of proper financial stewardship is a commitment to nourish ourselves and others as well as we can.

Matters of sexuality require special care, as it is an instrument of affection and of violence. It is because of this, that all of us who work in high trust ministries are required to take safe steps to ensure that those we serve may feel secure in as many environments as possible, within and without the walls of our congregations.

Human relations are complicated, and because of this being mindful of the kinds of power we hold on each other is also important to maintain the trust in our communities.

Later today, this congregation will be ordaining Carly Gaylor, recognizing her ministerial vocation and witnessing her solid commitment to these pledges. I had the opportunity to work with Carly early in my ministerial internship, as we were both co-chaplains at a Young Adults retreat. In light of this, I see it fit to note that Carly is already a minister, and has carried out ministerial duties now for some years; today is a recognition of the vows she has already been following as a lay person and which she will now be carrying into ordained ministry.

Because here is the neat thing: these vows are not the exclusive domain of monks or ministers, but yours as well! as followers of a faith that pledges to affirm and promote dignity, justice, compassion, and the interconnectedness of the interdependent web of which we are a part.

Your commitment to be responsible stewards of wealth is affirmed in your contributions to this congregation and other worthy causes; in your choices of products and services that you wish to support and which espouse, as closely as possible, your own social justice priorities; and in looking for wealth beyond that which money can buy, searching for ways in which your relationships with others may enrich the life that we share together. It is a commitment to nourish each other, physically and spiritually: to feed and learn.

As a community, we have made a commitment to respect and celebrate our sexual diversity and the many manifestations of love that we can have for each other outside of sexual contact. We have pledged to honour the different kinds of family that represent our realities, and to hold appreciation for lifestyles that are different from our own. More than anything, it is a pledge to stand on the side of love.

In our covenants, we have promised to affirm and promote relationships with each other in which we recognize our different histories; in which we recognize our different ways of privilege and lack thereof; in which we pledge to give justice to our place in life, that we may be just to those who accompany us in it. Above all, it is a covenant to right living.

My friends, today, as in any other day in which we remind ourselves of our faith, we are taking sacred vows.

We take these vows as we seek to nourish each other, promote spiritual growth, and commit to learn what it means to live a life of faith.

We take these vows as we seek new ways to show kindness and find it in others; when we pledge to respect the fragility and the power of human relationships, and choose to stand on the side of love.

We take these vows when we look into each others' eyes and seek to know each other better, to reach out in our shared brokenness and wholesomeness to strengthen each other and remind us of the power that is within us to live that life.

My friends, we take these vows whenever we remember the covenant: To learn, to love, to live.

So may we vow.