

The Character of 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 Reading

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama

We can reject everything else: religion, ideology, all received wisdom. But we cannot escape the necessity of love and compassion.... This, then, is my true religion, my simple faith. In this sense, there is no need for temple or church, for mosque or synagogue, no need for complicated philosophy, doctrine or dogma. Our own heart, our own mind, is the temple.

The doctrine is compassion. Love for others and respect for their rights and dignity, no matter who or what they are: ultimately these are all we need. So long as we practice these in our daily lives, then no matter if we are learned or unlearned, whether we believe in Buddha or God, or follow some other religion or none at all, as long as we have compassion for others and conduct ourselves with restraint out of a sense of responsibility, there is no doubt we will be happy.

Reading

Rev. A. Powell Davies

I become more and more certain, as the years go by, that wherever friendship is destroyed, or homes are broken, or precious ties are severed, there is a failure of imagination. Someone is too intent on justifying himself, or herself, never venturing out to imagine the way things seem to the other person. Imagination is shut off and sympathy dies. If we know what it is that makes other people speak or act as they do, if we know it vividly by carefully imagining all that may lie behind it, we might not quarrel. We might understand. Often we could heal the wound.

“The Character of Covenant”
A Dialogue Sermon by Rev. Shawn Newton and Doug Buck

Shawn:

Conflict is often thought of as a gift. If that’s true,
then our congregation has been wonderfully gifted over its past 170 years.

Edith Burton, our archivist emerita, tells a story from our history¹:

When First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto was founded in 1845,
its first home was a wood frame building down on George Street,
but by 1852, the congregation and its second minister, Reverend H.A. Dall,
were planning to build a permanent home on Jarvis Street.

Mr. Dall visited congregations in Montreal, the New England States,
and England, to solicit funds.

By promising that First Unitarian in Toronto would not incur any debt,
he was successful in fundraising.

This later became a problem, though:

Joseph Workman, who is credited with founding our congregation,
and known as “The Father of Canadian Psychiatry,”
bought four Members’ promissory notes worth \$100 each;
then he requested approval by the Board of Trustees
for his \$500 total to be paid with interest, which would mean debt.

Rev. Dall was absent from this meeting and he took the news badly,
saying it was a blot on his word as a moral man,
as well as putting First Unitarian in poor favour with other Unitarians.

Harsh words were exchanged between Messrs. Dall and Workman.
Four of the Trustees resigned, and Mr. Dall resigned in June, 1854.

¹ Edith Jasechko-Burton, “The First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto @ 160 years, 1845 - 2005”

Doug:

In 2015, our membership is still composed of wonderfully complex human beings.

Today, the Healthy Congregation Team is offering a new behavioural covenant called “To Dwell Together: A Covenant.”

It was published recently in First Light and is included in today’s Order of Service.

I’m here to provide reasons for bringing a covenant forward, and to explain the benefits that could come from adopting a covenant.

Why do this? What’s the need we see? Conflict occurs at First. But anger, sadness, and fear are also normal, and healthy, human emotions. It’s all in how they’re expressed.

In our lives, we have three spheres of behaviour. One is governed by law, such as paying taxes.

Another is governed by free will, such as how we spend our leisure time.

In between, there is a third sphere: how we behave with one another, including our kindness to others. We could call this the law of love; in churches, it’s sometimes referred to as “holy manners.” The Healthy Congregation Team’s goal is to expand kindness.

Our society is not always conducive to kindness and cooperation. Outside of this congregation, our world has become increasingly competitive and entitled. We’re more individualistic, less cooperative.

If you doubt this, drive on Toronto streets, or listen to Question Period in Parliament. This community, dedicated to kindness, is striving to be counter-culture.

Kindness is not always easy.

In any deep relationship, such as marriage, there are risks of failure.

This includes when we are deeply engaged in congregational work.

For example, I have a lot of opinions; some of them are even informed.

However, twice in the past six months,
I've needed to apologize to another First member,
because I've expressed frustration, or said something that felt unkind.

What I thought I was doing wasn't important in that moment.

The important feelings are those of the one who feels the unkindness.
It's their experience that has to be taken seriously.

And when we're not at our best,
we need to know that our sincere apology will be accepted,
that we will not be marginalized, shamed, or demeaned.
We will be forgiven.

Shawn:

There can also be a problem when we're in the right.
There is a brief prayer, source unknown, found inside an old cookbook
a friend of a friend inherited from his late mother.

It says: "Lord, when we are wrong, make us willing to change.
And when we are right, make us easy to live with."

It's not always easy to live with others, or to dwell together in peace.
And this is especially true in religious communities.

We invest a lot of emotion in them,
and we can develop very firm ideas about what should be done,
and how it should be done, which can bring clashes and hurt feelings.

In a congregation, unlike the workplace,
we don't have the same behavioural constraint
of possibly losing our job if others find us too difficult to work with.

Often, there's a feeling that we can act out
and that nobody is likely to fire us,
or perhaps even tell us that our behaviour is hurting others.

Over the years of our history, some members have cut their ties with First Unitarian due to conflicts with one another, or with First as an institution.

In our storied past, ministers have resigned in anger, behaved badly, or been made to feel no longer welcome.

All of these conflicts were sad and demoralizing and damaging.

With help in time, many of them could have been resolved, or at least processed in a less hurtful way.

Doug:

Dealing with conflicts quickly and openly is less difficult for people who are mature emotionally. For many, however, this isn't easy. Emotional maturity eluded me until I was in my mid-50's, and I still work on it. Maturity allows us quickly to notice our missteps, then to sort them out face to face. Delay permits them to fester and become harder from which to recover.

For those who are shy, it would help to learn to speak out more — this not easy in a congregation of self-described introverts, but I can't stress enough the importance of finding courage to go to the person who has offended you, or whom you may have offended, to sort out the issue.

If it feels too hard, someone from Healthy Congregation Team will be glad to accompany you. That's our job. On the other hand, if you're normally outspoken, you may need to learn to pause before replying to find thoughtful words to express your views.

Shawn:

Our own Ariel Hunt-Bronwin, Youth and Young Adult Ministry Development staff member for the Canadian Unitarian Council, has simple, direct language to describe younger Unitarians' approach to defuse hurt. She calls it, "The Sacred Oops and Ouch."²

² Hunt-Bronwin, Ariel; Canadian Unitarian Council: "The Sacred Oops and Ouch: What UU Youth Have Taught Me About Covenant."

She says:

“Simply, this offers a way for a person to alert others that they have been hurt by something that was done or said by saying ‘ouch.’

To which ‘oops’ can be replied as a way into acknowledging and apologizing. For simple misunderstanding or mis-speaking it offers a quick way to ‘call someone out’ (hopefully) without putting them on the defensive or for someone to apologize while saving face.”

This sacred oops and ouch is important because when we don’t speak up, hurt and anger get buried, and, as they say, what’s buried gets carried. Yet, what we try to bury within us can often leak out in unpleasant ways.

Repressed anger is hard to hide; what can follow is cynicism, distrust, plastic smiles, and fragile “pseudo-community,” not real community. Leaked anger, when not handled in healthy ways, spreads and becomes toxic.

Doug:

Miguel Ruiz, in his “The Four Agreements,” cautions us “Don’t take anything personally.” That’s good advice, but it doesn’t mean that there’s no need to examine our own behaviour. We need to steer a course between, on the one hand, self-blame, which helps no-one, and on the other, denial that there’s anything amiss in our own behaviour. Often, it is not those who lack information who cause problems; it’s those who are convinced that they are in the right.

Some congregations have an unspoken agreement that, because they are a “beloved community,” members’ anger is not admissible; anger is seen as evil. This is a trap, especially for religious communities. In fact, speaking out is both a form of self-care and a declaration of openness and honesty. Positively-expressed anger is the energy needed to move us forward. Often, conflict is trying to tell us something, and that can be a gift.

Our congregation can’t thrive without the continuous adaptation and change that come from new ideas — and the friction that comes with these. Evolution, a concept well-understood by Unitarians, is not conflict-free.

Nor is emotional blandness the goal. We will never lack opinions. We are, after all, Unitarians.

Shawn:

Trust allows community. Where there's no trust, there's no community.

In the course of our history, one of the places where trust has been an issue is the relationship between the congregation and the Board of Trustees.

We are not an Athenian democracy where citizens assemble to vote on every issue. We are a representative democracy wherein, except for major decisions, our Board makes decisions on our behalf.

Not every decision is popular, or easy. Problems can arise from a lack of transparency or poor boundaries, from a failure to follow policies, or for a lack of needed policies.

Sometimes members have not informed themselves sufficiently before having a very strong reaction.

And, sometimes, people have just not liked the Board's decisions.

You can understand why people are often reluctant to serve on the Board!

Instead of "power over other people," though, what we seek, at our best, is "power with, shared power."

"Power over" breeds resentment and fear.

"Power with" invites trust, and trust is the foundation of love and community.

Without trust, love withers and cynicism takes hold.

It's why many of us distrust corporations, politicians, and governments.

Yet, with so much at stake in our troubled world, it makes it all the more important that we seek, starting from this place, to create an ever-expanding island of trust, and love, and community.

Doug:

As Shawn points out, Unitarianism is a covenantal religion, not a creedal religion, and, indeed, we have many covenants at First. Our choir, staff, board, and RE volunteers all have behavioural covenants. Each Sunday, we say in unison a Covenant, so why create another?

It's because our Sunday covenant sets out our aspiration: "To dwell together in peace," but it offers no suggestions on how to work toward that peace. In naming this new covenant, "To Dwell Together," we are hoping to connect them.

So this new covenant is not intended to replace or displace our Sunday Covenant. This behavioural covenant is designed to offer reminders to all of us about how we might come closer to that aspiration more often. At the Sunday, February 1st meeting of our congregation, this covenant will be presented to you, we hope, for your adoption.

Other Unitarians benefit from covenants. Here is a quote from the Rev. Sue Phillips, District Executive of the UU District in Massachusetts, writing about the behavioural covenant that she and her fellow employees try to live by:

"I see that a deep covenant is the midwife of grace. Real grace, earned in the muck of everyday work.

"Love grows in the midst of that grace. And that's what I think people notice about our staff team. We love each other. Not because we're best friends, or because we agree on everything, or because we're perfect co-workers. But because we've struggled together, and tried hard to be the people we want to be, and failed in front of each other, and because we've glimpsed the beautiful, graceful, hard-earned love that we can only create together." End quote.

Shawn:

This is what the Healthy Congregation Team hopes we can achieve as a congregation: the beautiful, graceful, hard-earned love that we create together.

We are working towards grace around here—
not perfection, ever, but grace most of the time.

Every interaction we have within this community is a potential pathway to grace. Our covenant is intended to help guide us as we travel together on this never-ending journey.

Doug:

If it's to be successful, the covenant will need to be taken into our hearts. If it feels imposed, it won't work. We have tried to write it in a positive, hopeful tone; it is deliberately not a list of "don'ts." It is also deliberately brief. We hope to meet you at 12:15 today in Shaw Hall to talk about it and the work of Healthy Congregation Team.

At First, we have taken sexuality out of the closet. We have begun to take asking for money out of the closet. Let us, also, take anger out of the closet. Can we all please practice saying "oops" and "ouch?" Seriously, let's practice right now: "OOPS," "OUCH."

Shawn:

We can all be better at "being the people we want to be."

To realize the gifts that come with belonging to a community—to know deep affection and genuine bonding—there is, as always, some very hard work to be done.

But great rewards await us — after all, the only heaven some of us can aspire to with any certainty, is the heaven we are seeking to create, right here on earth.

Doug and Shawn: May it be so.