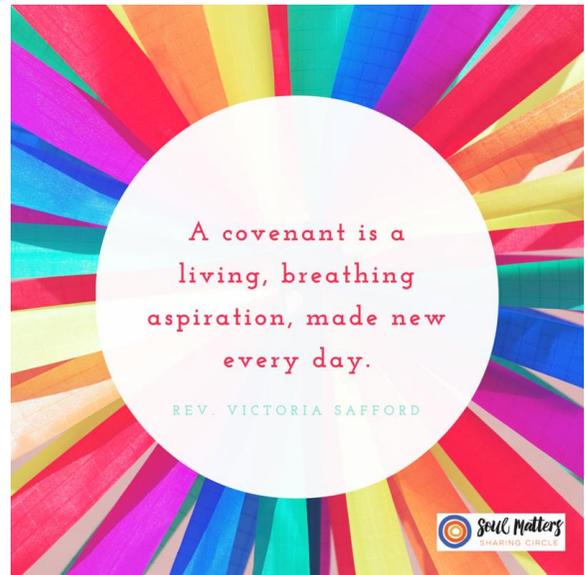


Soul Matters

A kaleidoscope of thoughts, images, stories, poetry, podcasts, and videos to engage hands, hearts, and minds.

SEPTEMBER 2016

What Does It Mean To Be A People Of Covenant?



Covenant is one of those words that can initially sound kind of stuffy, academic and out-of-date. But when you unpack its meaning and its practices, covenant holds a whole vision for how to live in this complicated, beautiful and broken world. It is a vision that says we are most human when we bind ourselves in relationship. But not just any relationship – relationships of trust, mutual accountability and continual return.

This is not what our culture teaches us. Our culture teaches us that what it means to be human is to be an individual – self-defined, self-determined, separate even. But our UU covenantal theology affirms that being human comes down to the commitments we make to and with each other – the relationships we keep. We become human through our promises to and with each other.

And even more than that: covenantal theology doesn't just say that we become human through our promising, but also when we break those promises, and yet somehow find ways to reconnect and begin again – when we repair the relationship because we know we need each other, even when we think the other isn't doing enough, even when the other is annoying us, or isn't listening well, or isn't doing things the way we want them done – even then. When we realize right then, that we are still connected, and we can't give up – and so we return, and begin again. This beginning again, says our faith, is when the holy and the human meet.

Let me tell you right now, sometime in the next year, maybe in the next few minutes, the people you most believe in and care about are going to disappoint you. Your church is going to disappoint you. This world is surely going to disappoint you. Like, all the time. We all are walking wounded and weary from the way this world can – and does – break our hearts.

And what our faith asks of us, what our faith imagines for us, is that somehow, right at that moment when our hearts break, we will find our way to see through that heartbreak. We will stay put – not close off, not run away, not hurt back – but keep on being in relationship, doing what we can to repair the world and each other, keep on opening our hearts with greater love. And, right then, our covenantal faith says – we will feel not only most human, but also most whole and most at home.

Rev. Gretchen Haley, *Senior minister of our Soul Matters partner congregation, Foothills Unitarian, Fort Collins, Colorado*



This Soul Matters packet was created by Rev. Carie Johnsen at Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta, ME.

Thoughts within were gleaned from the Soul Matters Network, the UCC Resource Circle, and other sources. If you would like to share your experience and wisdom for future packets, please email minister@augustauu.org. To receive an electronic copy please email info@augustauu.org. To learn more about Unitarian Universalist Community Church, please visit our website www.augustauu.org.

QUESTIONS TO WALK WITH



Below is a list of questions to open the mind's gateway to reveal the wisdom that is right below the surface of our ordinary, everyday lives. Pick one question, any, the one that grabs you and won't let go, then walk with it.



1. What promises have you made to those who have gone before?
2. What promises have you made to those who will come after?
3. Have you kept your promises to yourself?
4. Have you made a covenant with the holy? What promises have you made to Life itself? To God? To your inner voice?
5. What is the most life-giving promise you've made?
6. Many congregations recite these lines for their chalice lighting: *This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.* How might you adapt this in your own relationship with yourself or with the universe? Perhaps you might finish this sentence: "This is my great covenant: ..."
7. Has society ever broken its promise to you? How have you responded when you've witnessed society breaking its promises to others?
8. Some of us preempt heartbreak by leaving relationships before others have a chance to break their promises and our hearts. What is keeping you from the risk and pain of covenant?
9. Covenant rightly calls us to work on repairing relationships and "sticking in there" even when it is hard. But sometimes one's covenant with self requires us to put up boundaries and know when to leave a relationship. Is it time for you to put your covenant with yourself first?
10. If you're a member of your congregation, what promise did you make when you joined? You probably had a sense of what you'd get, but were you clear about what you promised to give?
11. Theologian James Luther Adams names the foundational covenantal nature of the universe as "the love that will not let us go." How do you experience this love? Has it kept its promise to you? How? Have you kept your promises to it?
12. What's your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what the theme is asking from you, spend your days listening to hear it.

Spiritual Practice - Deepening Experiences

A new way of being for all ages

Option A: **Return & Repair**

In this month's introduction, Rev. Haley writes:

What our faith asks of us, what our faith imagines for us, is that somehow, right at that moment when our hearts break, we will find our way to see through that heartbreak. We will stay put – not close off, not run away, not hurt back – but keep on being in relationship, doing what we can to repair the world and each other.

This exercise asks you to do the work of return and repair. Pick a relationship of heartbreak in your life. Maybe it involves a friend or family member, maybe even someone who is no longer living. Maybe a neighbor. Maybe even an institution, like your church or our government. Whoever or whichever it is, make time this month to return to that relationship and work on repair. Simply ask yourself “Where have I withdrawn, been betrayed or broken something myself?” Your heart will know the answer. Listen to what it says. Then open your heart one more time and lean into relationship once again, doing what you can to repair what you can.

Option B: **Live in the Plural**

UU minister and writer Victoria Safford writes:

We are bound by covenant, each to each and each to all, by what theologian Rebecca Parker calls “freely chosen and life-sustaining interdependence.” The central question for us is not, “What do we believe?” but more, “What do we believe in? To what larger love, to what people, principles, values, and dreams shall we be committed? To whom, to what, are we accountable?” In a tradition so deeply steeped in individualism, it becomes a spiritual practice for each of us to ask [these questions], not once and for all, but again and again. ... The life of the spirit is solitary, but our answers to these questions call us to speak, call us to live, in the plural.

Full article here: <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/bound-in-covenant>

What might it be like for you to live “in the plural?” For this exercise, get out a big sheet of paper and write “ME” in the middle of it. Then start adding the people, principles, values, and dreams you’re committed to. Draw lines of connection, creating a mind map of the network of covenant you live in.

When you’re done, set it aside for a few days. Then come back to it and notice what stands out for you and, also, what is *missing* in your web. What covenantal relationships do you have in your life? How might you more intentionally live in the plural? Bring your mind map and your insights to your small group.



Other Wise Words...

Let us covenant with one another
to keep faith with the source of life
knowing that we are not our own,
earth made us.

Let us covenant with one another
to keep faith with the community of
resistance

never to forget that life can be saved
from that which threatens it
by even small bands of people
choosing to put into practice
an alternative way of life.

And, let us covenant with one another
to seek for an ever deeper awareness
of that which springs up inwardly in us.

Even when our hearts are broken
by our own failure
or the failure of others
cutting into our lives,

Even when we have done all we can
and life is still broken,
there is a Universal Love
that has never broken faith with us
and never will.

This is the ground of our hope,
and the reason we can be bold in seeking to
fulfill the promise.

~ **Rev. Rebecca Parker**

Opening Words

We can join one another only by joining the
unknown . . . [The union] is going where
the two of you — and marriage, time, life,
history, and the world — will take it. You
do not know the road; you have committed
your life to a way.

~ **Wendell Berry**

Closing Words

Let us covenant with one another
to keep faith with the source of life
knowing that we are not our own,
earth made us.

~ **Rev. Rebecca Parker**

A contract is a matter of law. A covenant is a matter of love. A contract speaks this way: if you do this, and only if you do this, then I will do that. It is hedged, cautious, risk-averse. Its most basic principle is “no surprises.” A covenant speaks this way: you and I will do whatever is needed to achieve our shared purpose. We will remember that our covenantal relationship is more important than any particular action we take or fail to take to serve its purpose. If either of us fails to honor this shared commitment, the other has permission to call the one who fell short back into covenant, to ask what is happening, to be demanding and supportive at the same time. In a covenantal relationship, there is an understanding that no one fulfills his promises each and every time. Sometimes you make a doubtful promise, and then put your heart into it, and then fail, and then you and your covenantal partners pick yourselves up and ask, “how shall we recover from this failure? How shall we keep going?” In a covenantal relationship, the message you get from your partners when you fail is as just as much an affirmation of self-worth as if the promise had been fulfilled.

~ **Rev. Preston Moore**

One of the most important lessons I learned in seminary, I learned from a three year old boy. . . . My wife Sandy and I were visiting with Jeffrey and his parents for dinner one evening. As we sat down at the table, Jeffrey looked around at us expectantly. . . . Now, I expected that they would say some form of grace, but I was surprised. Jeffrey was our leader. He had all of us hold hands while his father lit the chalice at the center of the table. Jeffrey then had us recite their family covenant. . . . *Love is the doctrine of this family, and service is its law. This is our great covenant, to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.* Covenant as a personal spiritual practice. . . . taught to me by a three year old Unitarian Universalist. Amazing.

~ **Rev. David Pyle**, “Covenant as Spiritual Practice” *full sermon here:*
<http://celestiallands.org/wayside/?p=900>

PODCAST: “Breaking the Gender Covenant” by Joy Ladin, from On Being (podcast and transcript available)

“Did anyone ever teach you to be true to yourself?” a therapist once asked me. I had come to her in the midst of what I call my gender crisis — the physical, mental, and emotional breakdown I experienced after 40-plus years of living as the male I knew I wasn’t. . . .”

<http://tinyurl.com/h2egz3d>

VIDEO: “The Mandate: A Call and Response from Black Lives Matter Atlanta”

A powerful two and a half minute video about how our societal covenant has been broken and how Black Lives Matter leaders are proclaiming a new mandate. The context of the video: “On July 13, 2016, members of Black Lives Matter Atlanta organized civil disobedience to amplify the call for long standing local demands in light of the police killings of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and Jerry Williams. Heavy police and state surveillance and presence attempted to halt and block the organizers. These Black leaders would not falter.”

<https://vimeo.com/174684690>