

“The Promises We Make”

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 27, 2026

One unique aspect we share in our Unitarian Universalist faith is our individual theological journeys. We are agnostics discovering God, Christians finding humanism, Buddhists exploring earth-based spirituality. We arrive questioning or curious or wounded or confused and find a shared faith and a shared people committed to journeying together.

Let me share a little of my own journey. For more than two decades, I was a staunch atheist, deeply critical of organized religion. I inherited this from my parents. Yet fifteen years ago, I walked into my first Unitarian Universalist church as an agnostic. I was searching for faith because I was trying to make sense of death. I was met with a congregation whose beliefs were as plentiful as there were people. Through the relationships I formed, the conversations I shared, and the worship I experienced, I embarked on a deep theological journey. I prayed. I meditated. I worshiped. And through these practices, I began to understand what divinity meant to me—an entity of love far greater than I could ever comprehend. A budding theism gave new depth to my life as I created a relationship with what is sacred. I came to understand myself as an insignificant yet intentional piece of all that is—a small part of something infinitely greater, held within an essence of love that makes life all the more precious.

And then I entered seminary. One requirement of my theological education was a two-year internship at a Unitarian Universalist congregation. So, my husband and I packed our bags and journeyed to Minneapolis—to intern at a congregation with deep roots in Unitarian Humanism—a history that was still very much alive. It was alive in the language they used - “talk” instead of “sermon,” “assembly hall” instead of “sanctuary.” My newly theistic self was surrounded by people who were adamant that there is no greater entity, nothing beyond this life or after death—that what matters is the secular here and now. In many ways my own theology was entirely antithetical to what this congregation believed, and I was met with some critique. Yet we worshiped together. We learned together. I came to admire a theology that focused on

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creating heaven here, now, in this realm – for there is no other realm. I was challenged. Others questioned me. My balance was thrown off. Ultimately, my theism grew even stronger. It was through these contrasting theologies, held together in a shared faith, that I came to understand my own beliefs more deeply. What tied us together—and what strengthened my own faith—was how we were in the world that needed no promise of shared belief, but of shared values. We journeyed through life as one committed community, bound by promises and covenant, guided by our shared vision of how we want to be in the world.

Today it is this – covenant. In our shared faith, covenant is the promises we make to one another. It is how we want to inhabit this world together. It's a way of being in a shared relationship. We are not bound by theology, but by an embodiment of shared values. We are earth-centered, we are atheist, we are Christian, we are Jewish. Through all of our theological differences, we choose love. Justice. Community. We remain bound by our shared values of equity, interdependence, justice, generosity. We choose, each day, as a shared faith community, to belong to one another. To commit and recommit ourselves to one another. To promise how we want to be together in this beautiful and broken world.

James Luther Adams was a highly influential Unitarian theologian in the 20th century. His faith was not bound by a set of subscribed beliefs, such as God or heaven or hell. His faith was about freely chosen commitment and freely chosen relationship. Humans become fully human through our promises and through our commitments, he writes. Our interconnected, interdependent, interwoven and reciprocal relationships with one another. This is the human need for covenant. And Adam's sentiments were deeply impactful on our own faith tradition. Adams further spoke, reflecting on the words of Martin Buber, that we are, quote "promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creatures."¹ This imperfect, deeply human practice is at the heart of covenant. Covenant is not about promising that we will never fail one another. It is about choosing to freely enter into relationship, choosing how we want to be together, and choosing—with each new day—to continually renew those commitments.

¹ "The Five Major Ingredients of Covenant" by James Luther Adams

So where does our commitment to covenant come from? To understand that, let's turn to our history. Both Unitarianism and Universalism are shaped by Christianity as we have questioned long-held doctrines. Christianity has long used creeds to articulate shared theological belief – theological beliefs such as God or creation or salvation or humanity. It can be a theological foundation for Christians. The Nicene Creed articulates what Christians affirm about the trinity. The Apostles' Creed is an ancient statement of Christian belief. A creed creates theological unity and, often, establishes a shared authority. Unitarian Universalists took a different path. We did not simply replace one creed with another. We turned toward covenant. Covenant is about creating together; it is about journeying as one. Covenant instead of creed meant that I, a theist, could sit beside a lapsed Catholic who cringed at the very word "God"—and we could still belong to the same faith community. It was me, whose God was life giving, next to him, whose God elicited deep pain. We still joined together at the Planned Parenthood rally, shared joy at the church's solstice celebration, and expanded our minds by attending small groups focused on meditation. We grew together in body, mind, spirit, and intellect. Perhaps this is one of the great gifts of our tradition: we are not bound together by theological uniformity, but by the promises we make about how we will be together.

Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, warns us that it is not the absence of creed that defines us, as many of us profess. Our religion is not simply a non-creedal faith. We could do that anywhere – even fully alone at home on a Friday evening. Religious freedom in and of itself is not community. Theological questioning is not community. It is covenant that creates community. This is what upholds our very faith tradition. Covenant calls us to seek love, wisdom, and understanding together—and to put our shared values into action in the world.² Unitarian Universalists showed up en masse to Standing Rock in solidarity with the Water Protectors. I still smell the burning sage and hear chants resonating in my ears. We showed up en masse to Minneapolis after murders at the hands of ICE agents. Together. This is covenant: we become something greater than our individual selves, and our commitments to love and justice ripple outward into the world.

² "Bound in Covenant" by Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

Former UUA President and Unitarian Universalist minister John Buehrens reminds us that, in a non-creedal faith, our freedom can sometimes come without a clear sense of responsibility.³ But a covenantal community requires both freedom and responsibility. People sometimes say that anyone can be a Unitarian Universalist. But many of us argue, that's not true. We have freedom, but there are limits to this freedom. You cannot be a Unitarian Universalist if your values are antithetical to our own. And it is more than this. When we become part of our faith community, we become part of our covenant. And with covenant comes responsibility to one another and to the community we create together. It is our shared responsibility to live our faith's shared values — not simply to name them, but to embody them.

So, what do we bring to this space? To this time of shared worship, joined in covenant? We bring our questions. We may ask, how can we find hope in the midst of terror? How can we connect with an all-encompassing love when we face so much pain? What is God's role in my life? Some of us are wounded by previous faith traditions, and we carry these specific wounds with us. We bring the wounds of the faith that suppressed our true identity. The faith that scared us into believing in a vindictive God. The faith that commanded and did not ask. We seek healing. Furthermore, we bring our speculations. Perhaps God is not all-powerful. Perhaps my life could be guided by values rooted in love. Perhaps there is more than one way to understand the sacred. And we bring our convictions. Justice is the work of creating heaven here, in this realm. We enter covenant because we are willing to remain in relationship with one another amid our differences. We bring our questions, our wounds, our wondering, and our convictions—and we make promises about how we will hold one another through all of it.

"There is no life apart from life together," wrote Unitarian Universalist theologian and author Rebecca Anne Parker. This may be startling, for we have long been immersed in our country's culture of individualism. Individualism: Protecting our own resources without considering our community's needs. Focusing on what "I" want versus what "we" need. Wanting to be heard without listening. This culture suggests that acting in self-interest is the "way to survive." But, Parker offers, in stark contrast, quote, "life is relational through and through. Everything exists

³ *House for Hope* by John Buehrens

in interaction and interdependence with everything else.” The great question is: how can we use these inherent connections to “uphold and sustain life?”⁴

Parker expands this idea of covenant beyond our Unitarian Universalist faith. She offers, we are connected by the soil that birthed us, shaped by blood and kinship, by genes and culture, by networks of relationship and far-spreading community. I love this line: “Even when we do not directly know the people whose lives are linked with ours, our lives unfold in relation to theirs.” We are in a relationship with the coffee farmers in Ethiopia. With the refugee from Venezuela. With the doctor who saved our grandmother or long forgotten religious forebearers. These interconnected relationships are a form of covenant – a covenant we inherited upon our birth. Parker asks, what will we do with this gift of this covenant? Her answer: We resist oppression. But first we must explore that covenants can fail, covenants can break, covenants can be compromised. What can a failed covenant look like in today's world? It means a disregard for the environment that leads to the climate crisis. A dismantling of welfare programs. Contributing to an increasing wealth gap. Perpetuating devastating marginalization and discrimination. It leads to an abuse of power. It is covenant overpowered by greed and individualism. She wrote of this years ago, and we see it so poignantly surrounding us today. Our shared covenant with this world that birthed us, and with all who came before us, calls us to resist the oppression that arises when covenant is broken—when our responsibilities to one another and to the world are forgotten.⁵

I was intentional in bringing you this sermon at the start of the church year. I invite us to begin together anew, embraced in the covenant that gives us breath and life. We are a covenantal community—held together by promises that ask not for perfection, but for intention. When we falter, as we inevitably will, we do not have to abandon our covenant. We can return to it. We can renew our promises. We can begin again.

⁴ *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the 21st Century* by Rebecca Anne Parker

⁵ “What They Dreamed Be Ours to Do: Lessons from the History of the Covenant” Rebecca Anne Parker

This September, I want us to consider not only what we believe, but how we want to be together in the months and year ahead. How do we want to be in relationship with others? What are we willing to promise one another? How can we embody our values beyond these walls? How can we engage with this beautiful and broken world, not alone, but together? How will our covenant call us beyond ourselves? And what might become possible if we choose to walk into this aching world together? Covenant is the steady, persistent, quiet promise: I am here, and I am here with you. Let us journey through life together. For, together, we become something far greater than any of us could become alone.

May it be so, and Amen.