

For All That Is Our Life

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, March 21, 2021

I love the imagery we shared in our Story for All Ages – the idea of our faith as a beautiful mosaic, a charming array of unique, special, sacred gifts, all held together by grout – by our covenant of who we are and how we want to be in the world.¹ The mosaic made up of those pieces of our faith that mean so much to us – a candle stub from joys and concerns or a piece of a teacup from an auction event or a reading found in a Soul Matters packet – beautiful, life sustaining things.

And yet all of these beautiful pieces cannot remain connected without that gritty, purposeful, hardy substance that holds it all together: Grout. Our covenant. That is how a beautiful mosaic is made to last.

Covenant to Unitarian Universalists is our Seven Principles – those ways we agree on how to be and what to be in the world. We further have a covenant within our own church that we read earlier, a covenant on how we as a church commit to interacting with one another.

I wonder about those pieces of identity that can't be a part of a physical mosaic but that nonetheless work to create who we are as a faith – a wealth of religious backgrounds or no religious background, a tapestry of theologies, a patchwork of needs, desires, and expectations, a vibrant bouquet of races, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, physical abilities, state of mental well-being, addicted or sober – here and held firmly together by covenant – by that hardy, dependable, stable grout. In this way, when we commit to our faith, when we commit to this church, we commit to the interconnectedness of it all.

¹ Marcus Hartlief “The Grout”

In my own mind I liken this interconnectedness to a spiderweb. When we commit to our faith and our church – when we intentionally enter into the covenant of Unitarian Universalism – we enter a complex network of overlapping, intentional, threads, put into place, just as a spider does, to sustain life. A thread much sturdier than it seems to the bare eye, stickiness connecting all that it touches. Tug on one stand and all the others react in unison. Connected, always, by our interdependence. We choose this. Our lives are sustained by this.

In Unitarian Universalism and at Channing Memorial Church we have no set of beliefs that one must enter into in order to find one's place on this sticky patchwork of overlapping threads – there is no creed. Instead, there is an agreement of what we commit to – of how we are in the world. Through this thread we are bound together in community – no longer an independent “I” but a holy “we.” We are a network of promises, commitments, and values – this is what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist.

We are meant to tug on those threads when we are questioning or doubting or learning, bringing with us everyone else we are connected to. And we commit to a covenant because living in community can be hard. People get upset and disagreements arise. We need a place to bravely wrestle with challenging ideas. An open and honest community at its core is not easy. This is why we have a covenant. Rev. Susan Frederick-Grey, president of our denomination, reflects that covenant brings us out of isolation. It begs us to step away from our own, selfish concerns. It brings us into greater community. It invites us to live in peace and create a community of seekers. It asks of us to join together to find better ways to live in the world.² Covenant is about embracing imperfection and inviting one another back into the community.

We covenant to “keep faith with the source of life.” Rev. Rebecca Parker writes,

² March 2021 *Soul Matters* packet

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.³

Our covenant is our Universal Love. We are all connected through this sacred love. I appreciate the nuances of her writing – “when” our hearts are broken, not “if.” Our hearts will break. This is inherent to life. And just as certain as our hearts will break, so too will we fail, and so too will others fail. Even when we do all that we can life will break. And yet there is another constant – that Universal Love. Our covenant. This has never broken faith with us, and never will. When we are broken, when we have disappointed ourselves or others have disappointed us, when these disappointments cut into our very lives, we have that sturdy, solid, lasting grout holding us together. When we have different expectations, different wants or needs, that substance of grout – our commitment to our faith and our church and each other – that sacred commitment, our covenant, serves to keep us in community.

³ “Covenant” Rev. Rebecca Parker

We are a covenantal faith. As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm and promote our Principles that shape our values and serve as moral guides. We covenant to see the inherent worth and dignity in every person. To commit to justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. To accept one another and encourage spiritual growth. To journey on a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We commit to the democratic process, to the goal of world community with peace and justice for all, to respect the interdependent web of which we are all a part. To these principles, we commit. To these values, we covenant. This serves to guide our daily lives.

As we speak of covenant, I cannot help but think of a long car ride. My husband Eric and I love when we get the opportunity to go on road trips. Following the winding roads of rural communities, admiring expansive fields and the beauty of nature. Perhaps interacting with a wealth of impatient, fast moving vehicles while traversing highways and interstates. One of the most memorable car rides was our trip from our home in Minnesota to our new home in Maryland. And in many ways, this trip ran parallels to these ideas of covenant in our church. For this trip was largely successful because of our sacred covenant – our marriage vows. Just like our church, we shared common goals, common values, and a dedication to supporting one another in the present moment. We were on a journey, dedicated to making our time together as meaningful as possible. I remember mornings when I woke up grumpy and argumentative. Sometimes, even with the most careful of planning, we got lost on our journey, headed in an unintentional direction, and had to navigate our way back to our goal. I made mistakes, and Eric made mistakes, and yet we returned to our covenant to one another.

We forgave, we offered grace, and we did not punish. I wonder, what would the car ride have looked like if we responded to mistakes and disagreements with animosity? We were stuck in that journey together – literally together within the confines of a car. Just as we are in this space, in our church community, we are all bound to one another. Together in that car for a week, our marriage vows were

amplified. Eric and I were a “we,” not an “I” – we formed a sacred partnership, navigating those winding roads together. Ones needs and desires directly connected to the other – held together firmly by those threads of our web. We could not leave that car – one of us stuck in Iowa while the other continued to Maryland. We could not have abandoned one another on that trip. We had to commit to covenant.

I love this sentence about covenant pulled from the magazine entitled UU World: “A covenant is a living, breathing aspiration, made new every day. It can’t be enforced by consequences, but it may be reinforced by forgiveness and by grace, when we stumble, when we forget, when we mess up.”⁴ We are held together as a faith – Eric and I were held together in that car – not by fearing consequences or punishment but by being provided sacred forgiveness and holy grace. We all stumble and forget and mess up, we have vastly differing opinions and needs – this is not to be punished but to be celebrated in community.

In speaking of community, we need to touch on this sacred community. We each have our own, unique journeys that led us to this church. And in being here, together, we commit to our church covenant. In being here, we commit to being on that car ride.

As a church, we promise to work together collaboratively with a commitment to justice, equity, and compassion. This promise lifts up our aspiration to engage with one another while offering one another kindness and respect; to understand one another and all we bring to this sacred mosaic even if at times we may not necessarily like one another – Universal Love. To truly work to understand one another’s perspectives, intentions, and needs – seeking to understand so we can lean into grace and forgiveness.

⁴ www.uuworld.org/articles/bound-in-covenant

To encourage the timid to speak up and encourage the naturally outspoken to perhaps step back a bit, making room for everyone at the table.⁵

We promise to invite and encourage each person to be open, honest, and engaged. This means we listen to each other, all voices held in equal importance. This means encouraging each other to step out of our comfort zones – take risks, seek help – knowing our own worth and the worth of others. And while encouraging others, taking responsibility for ourselves – taking responsibility for our own words and actions – intentionally working to do no harm and apologizing when we do. If we have a concern for another in our beautiful mosaic – we address them – directly and with authenticity.⁶

We promise to bravely wrestle with challenging issues and discuss fairly, respectfully, and constructively the opinions of others. Our differences add a unique richness to our community! We are a beautiful mosaic filled with different colors and textures born of a wealth of beliefs and backgrounds – not stagnant but living – together. We are “like-hearted” not “like-minded” and we will disagree and that is ok and that holds its own unique beauty when held within the confines of covenant. What we commit to is openness – is that safe space to share ideas and opinions and beliefs – to truly listen. ⁷

Our covenant has always been a crucial part of our faith. Centuries ago, Unitarian minister James Vila Blake wrote of his faith and covenant, stating, “Love is the spirit of this church, 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.” Let us dwell in peace and seek truth in love and help one another through all that we are experiencing!

Let us offer each other grace as we acknowledge this year of the pandemic. We have each experienced loss, grief, trauma, and pain. This can make our car rides difficult. As someone who has lived with

⁵ Channing Memorial Church Congregational Covenant

⁶ Channing Memorial Church Congregational Covenant

⁷ ibid

anxiety for as long as I have memory, I know some of the unique ways the ugliness of this virus has manifested itself. Sometimes all we have experienced erupts in ways we might later regret; in ways we are not proud of. I remind us here of forgiveness and grace – not punishment. If we can live together in our covenant through the trials and tribulations of life we are truly connecting as a church community. When that grout is firmly in place, when we are connected in covenant, we can maintain that unique, beautiful mosaic highlighting and showcasing each of our own, beautiful, unique identities. We can celebrate and cherish the differences we each bring to this community – that is when we truly embrace our beloved community. When we join together by our principles – common values, not common beliefs, covenanting on what we commit to as a people of faith.

Our church covenant closes with a sacred reminder to us all: We make it. We live it. We break it. We recommit.⁸ I end with the words of Kristen Harper, “Each day provides us with an opportunity to love again.”⁹ Each day is an opportunity to center in faith and commit to covenant. Each day is an opportunity to relish in the beauty of our mosaic of a faith – embraced in forgiveness and embraced in grace – held, always, in love. Let us strive each day in this holy work of recommitting. Let us strive each day to live in the wonder of this sacred community.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁸ Channing Memorial Church Congregational Covenant

⁹ “Each Day” Kristen Harper