



RETURN TO THE HOME OF YOUR SOUL SERIES

THE TIES THAT BIND

SEPTEMBER 28 | REV. BETH DANA

Whether you have returned to this church community again and again and again or have come here today, perhaps for the first time, we do so seeking solid ground in a time when everything is shifting. Seeking something that abides when it seems all is impermanent, seeking truth and wisdom when what we had trusted we cannot always trust anymore to be true. Seeking a place to call our spiritual home. When the places and spaces and communities and nations we called our home do not always feel like the home that we have known. The strength of this community comes from its covenants, the ones that we've inherited and the ones that we make by pledging to one another, trusting that these will hold us through good times and bad times, through times of deep connection and meaning and times of disappointment or brokenness.

Surely, I am not the only one here who feels like things around us in the world are absurdly broken right now. Am I right? Things that many of us took for granted, the basic covenants of being human and being American or global citizens, are crumbling. Freedom of all kinds, diplomacy, democracy, love of neighbor, human decency. This week, the thought crossed my mind, there's no more need for satirical media like The Onion because mainstream media has become indistinguishable from The Onion at this point. Windmills pumping babies with massive horse vaccines, Tylenol causing autism, and elevator conspiracies, oh my.

The thing is, loss of trust and broken covenants are not new. There are many for whom things have never felt free or just or safe or trustworthy. Racism and oppression have been breaking covenants for centuries, and goodness knows none of us is perfect in our relationships with family and friends and communities of which we are a part. We make mistakes, we break promises. This past week and in the coming week, Jewish communities around the world hear the sound of the shofar. A ram's horn

trumpet sounded for the high holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The shofar, I've heard it described as an alarm clock to awaken the soul, calling people to return to themselves, to each other, and to God. It's a call for repentance and repair, for returning to the home of your soul and beginning anew. We can join in this spiritual work of awakening, tending to what is broken, returning, and beginning anew.

In this time of profound brokenness, our religion, the root word of religion being religio to rebind, our religion calls us to tend to the ties that bind and the covenants that call us again and again into community. Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal faith, not a creedal faith. Covenants are shared promises, and practices are what bring us together, not shared beliefs as in some other faith communities. Our affirmation that we say every Sunday is a covenant. Thus, do we covenant with each other? Small groups and committees, and classes in our church, make their own covenants about how they will be together. Unitarian Universalist theologian, Rebecca Parker, offers an important reminder about covenant, and that is, we inherit covenant before we create covenant, or in other words, we receive who we are before we choose who we will become. "We most often speak of covenant," she says, "as a verbal statement of promise between individuals who exercise their power to choose and thus bring community into being."

We see this, of course, in things like the covenant of marriage or in the many ways that we create covenant in church. This understanding of covenant reflects the individualism that is at the foundation of our society and of our religious tradition, but Parker suggests instead that covenant-making must begin with the question, what have we been given, and what is the covenant that we are already in? Another way of asking this question is, whose are we? This is a deeply theological question. Each of us has people who carry us in their minds and hearts, and there are people who are in our circle of concern. Each of us has our people, whether tied by blood or culture or faith. Each of us has those to whom we are responsible and accountable. Each of us is called by a still small voice within or beyond, and each of us is held by something larger than ourselves.

Covenant is our human response to the question, whose are we? It requires profound humility to acknowledge the reality that, as free, independent human beings, we are not ourselves alone. Even at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin said to the delegates, "We must all hang together, or most assuredly, we shall all hang separately." A sinister statement understood in the context of a country that in various eras has literally hung those who didn't fall in line or who were on the margins of society, but understood another way, it's a hopeful statement about our interdependence. Covenants are declarations not of independence, but of interdependence. We are born not as isolated individuals, but as beings interdependent on all of creation. In the words of Parker, as human beings, our lives begin and never leave the soil of this earth that shapes us through blood, kinship, genes, culture, associations, social systems, networks of relationships, and extended communities.

Even when we do not directly know the people whose lives are linked with ours, our lives unfold in relationship to theirs. This is, I think, what she means when she talks about inheriting or receiving covenant. The covenants that we then create in church make visible this gift that we have received.

Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams, described these covenants we create as a response to a divinely given creative power, a sustaining power, a community-transforming power, a power ultimately not of our own making, and thus by tending these covenantal ties that bind. We are partnering with a source larger than ourselves, larger than our individual will and choice. It is a place where the human and the holy meet. Covenant is a gift that was given to us by our religious ancestors.

It goes back to the 16th-century England, where the free church tradition emerged in resistance to the corrupt hierarchical power of the Church of England and its ties with the aristocracy. The Puritans, so-called because they sought to purify the church and its practices, developed their own alternative forms of church polity, asserting the power of the people to self-govern and self-determine within the container of covenantal community. Their practice of covenant was to build a life, a church, and a world that reflected their hopes and vision. The Puritans believed that people must gather regularly to learn and worship together in order to make what they called the spirit of mutual love real in their community.

The Bible, they said, was about the free and covenanted social practice of love expressed through the covenant between God and the people in local congregations since the time of Jesus and the disciples. The communities and congregations that were formed by the Puritans strove to be true to this vision. Many of the Puritans left England as the religious and political situation worsened and traveled to New England seeking a place to freely practice this new way of doing church. Once there, they developed what is called the Cambridge Platform, which is the basis for our church's polity today, for how we organize as a congregation and relate to other congregations.

It's because of the Cambridge Platform that we exist as an autonomous congregation in association with other Unitarian Universalist congregations around the country. We have no bishop or hierarchy above us, but rather a democratic process involving the voices of our members, our history of covenant, from its biblical roots to its formalization in the 17th century to its reimagining the 20th and 21st century, calls us to live in ways that embody loving, just, and sustainable community. But as we all know, human beings, we human beings sometimes fail at this. It was the breaking of covenant that brought our Puritan religious ancestors to America. They thought that they had won their effort to reform English society when their ally, Oliver Cromwell, came to power. But once Cromwell gained a position of authority, his economic interests led him to turn on the reformers who had helped bring him to power in the first place.

He did not honor his commitment to his people, and as a result, many of the reformers left for America. The reformers driven away under Cromwell's leadership were disillusioned by broken promises, but they did not give up. They continued searching until they tapped into a spirit of life and love that they realized had never broken faith with them, and which helped them to renew the bonds of covenant that had been broken. That is the purpose of covenant, to make real and evident the bonds of love that will never let us go and to lift us toward the vision we seek. Our religious ancestors practiced in churches, the principles that undergird the democratic government of the United States as we have known it, principles that are now being dangerously eroded, but which we can and must continue to uphold in our churches.

Principles such as the freedom to share your perspective and to disagree, but not to walk away from that disagreement, but to remain in community, to listen to one another's voices, and have a vision emerge from this interchange that is stronger than any one person could put forth. Principles such as the responsibility that we have to each other and the collective power of people when we come together. These are what hold us together when things are falling apart. These principles are as challenging to practice in the context of church as they are in the context of this nation. Remaining in covenant when disagreeing and working through it toward a clear vision to the end that all souls shall grow in harmony with the divine, that's tough stuff.

Loving our neighbor and caring for the earth even when it's not obviously in our self-interest economically or otherwise, that's tough. These practices extend from church and society into the relationships that are closest to our hearts, those with our family and friends. So many of us, myself included, struggle with how to talk with people who are closest to us, who view the world through a vastly different lens. We also make mistakes and say and do things that hurt relationships and cause heartbreak. This is all part of being human, but loving and trusting relationships, whether between two people or a whole community of people, don't depend on perfection. In fact, they're often strengthened by efforts to repair and return to each other when we don't get things right. The word repair comes from two very similar French words, one meaning to restore or mend, and the other meaning to go back somewhere to return as though to a country or to a home. Return again, return again, return to the home of your soul. Through this, we grow and create something new.

Priya Parker, not related to Rebecca Parker, is the author of this wonderful book, *The Art of Gathering*, and works as a facilitator and strategic advisor helping people to, as she says, "Gather well." She talks about groups or communities as spaces where people can both belong and become. Church is a community where you can belong and become. It's a place where you can practice being human in relationship with other humans, where you can grow individually and in relationship to others in the divine. Even if you were born into this faith as I was by virtue of having parents who were a part of it, this is not one of those covenants that we inherit. It is one that we choose, like Victoria Safford wrote in our reading from earlier, "Choosing to be in Covenant here is an answer to the question, which beautiful, clumsy, and imperfect institutions will carry and hold my name, hand and heart." It's an answer to the call to live in the plural.

As I was thinking about this, the biblical story of Ruth came to mind in this story. Naomi encourages her widowed daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to return to their families and homes and gods as she plans to return to her hometown of Bethlehem. Orpah chooses to return to Moab, where she's from, to the roots and relationships that she was born into. But Ruth says to Naomi, "Wherever you go, I will go and wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God." Instead of returning to Moab, she pledges her loyalty to Naomi and to the life that they share and chooses instead to follow her to Bethlehem. I think of Ruth as being like you, who have chosen to be in covenant with these people, with this community. You have chosen the home of your soul. You've chosen this as a place to belong and to become, even if just for this day, but hopefully for much longer.

So I encourage you to reflect on this as you consider the invitation that TJ and I extended to you earlier in the service to pledge your support for this community that we share. A pledge is a promise and an affirmation that these people are your people. It's a declaration of interdependence. It is a celebration of our shared hopes and values, and it is also how these shared hopes and values are made real in our church and in our wider world. What can we do, so many of us ask when we see the news and really take in what is happening. What can we do in the face of fascism and authoritarianism?

Well, one, we certainly cannot give hope. We can practice living our deepest values and shaping a community that reflects them, a community where love is at the center, the use of reason and the search for truth are spiritual practices, and service is our prayer. This is how we give thanks for the gift of life that we have received, how we honor the covenants that we inherit, and how we work toward greater harmony with the divine for all. We do this knowing that what we create and how we treat one another will shape the ties that bind our larger society. Our reading from Sufi mystic Hafez says, "Out of a great need, we are all holding hands and climbing. Not loving is letting go." Listen, the terrain around here is far too dangerous for that. As we navigate the dangerous terrain of these times, let us return again and again to the covenants that we inherit and that we create. Let us tend them, stretch them, and practice them faithfully, embodying the divine love that holds us all and will never leave us. May it ever be so and amen.