

## “Down To Earth”

A covenant is an agreement between free and equal parties in which mutual promises are made for the ordering, common good, and governance of the community.

In 1620, the Puritans came to New England to save their lives. They were being persecuted by the English church and state for their religious beliefs and practices. When they made it to the new land, they gave thanks to God that they were free from any authority that could tell them what they had to believe and how they should live. They were also well aware that they could not survive without each other’s help. So what they decided to do was to bind themselves together as a united community by means of covenant. Before stepping off the Mayflower onto Plymouth shore, they pledged themselves to each other with the words of the Mayflower Compact.

We, . . . do by these present, solemnly and mutually in the Presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves . . . into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation . . . And by Virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions, and Offices . . . as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general Good of the Colony.

This covenant was based on the covenantal faith of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In the Bible, religious covenants held both vertical and horizontal dimensions. Vertically, covenantal faith trusted that human beings were made in the image of God; that each soul was good; that each person was loved by God; that each individual was free to choose and reject this faith. Their faith called for allegiance to one God, YHWH. Horizontally, this faith was brought down into EARTH through trust in ethical human actions that were socio-economic-political in nature. Those of covenantal faith were obliged to behave in ways that gave life to the creation that YHWH loved. Those of covenantal faith believed it was their religious duty to obey the Ten Commandments, the prophetic word, and way of Jesus. The locus of authority for this practice of covenantal faith lay within a person’s conscience.

The Unitarian Universalist Association is bound together by mutual covenant. In his paper, “Of Terrorism, Horrorism, Covenant, and Rebellion,” UUA theologian Dennis McCarty named five important characteristics of covenantal faith.

Human beings are at our best when we make solemn promises to one another and try hard to keep them. We are the only animal that makes promises: we are “promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing” creatures. Our very humanity lies in the way we carry out our promises to our families, our coworkers, our neighbors, and our fellow members of the human family.

A covenant must be a “covenant of being.” It’s not just about good words, but about ACTION.

The covenant exists for the sake of each individual as well as for the whole group. It is both a gift and a responsibility. The individual is brought into just relationship with the rest of the group, but each individual is also responsible for what the whole group does. If what my church---or my nation---does is wrong, I share in that responsibility. Again, it’s not just about blaming one person, one faction, or one political party. It’s not enough just to say, “I didn’t know what was going on,” or “There’s nothing I can do about it.” My covenantal duty is to be informed on what is happening, and to act on that information.

“The covenantal responsibility is especially directed toward the deprived.” Covenantal living demands that we pay attention to those who suffer from society’s neglect or injustice, from war and horrorism, *form fearful instinctual over and under reaction* (Rev. A. interpretation), and that we do something about it. There is a difference that can exist between our covenant---our expressed ideals of how we want to live together---and our actions. One task of the covenantal church is to call attention to the gap between our high-sounding words and our low actions.

“The covenant . . . is not fundamentally a legal covenant. It depends on faithfulness, and faithfulness is nerved by loyalty, by love.” In other words, covenantal living is not about obeying the letter of the law while we take advantage of someone. Violation of a covenant is serious not

because it breaks a law, but because it's a violation of trust. It is a breach of faith.

Not all churches are bound together by covenantal faith. In fact, most churches are hierarchical in faith and order. What this means is that the locus of authority for teachings on faith and religious practices lies within the authorized clergy or elected religious leaders. Because most people have not been grown up in a covenantal faith community like ours, where we are equally responsible in matters of faith, I am often asked questions like the ones I received in an e-mail last week.

I browsed your website, but didn't come across some of the answers I was looking for. Some questions I have are:

1. What is your pastor's view on same-sex unions?
2. What does she believe about life after death?
3. Do you believe that salvation is only for a select number?

Ours is a 'down to earth' kind of faith that says: every soul is precious and that life is worth living. In covenantal congregations of faith, the locus of authority for claiming that belief lies within the heart and soul of each member---settled minister, included. The way in which we exercise that authority in community is by making and keeping promises to foster the healing of creation; to take a stand against political powers that oppress; to work for peace and justice . . . to address the issues of the day that affect the good of the community. UUA congregations typically form committees for an annual "Peace Vigil," for organizing anti-war marches, for gathering petitions for or against a bill before National and State legislatures, for organizing a local farmers market or supporting food bank; for study of current issues; for helping their children better understand their sexuality by using OWL curriculum (our whole lives). . .

Unitarian Universalists are down to earth kind of people who know that life is complex, that ethical decision making is messy, that the responsibility for making moral decisions lies within the individual . . .but who also realize that we need each other in order grow into our best humanity. Last week. my four year old grandson, Wyatt,

had a difficult decision to make. Here's the story. The tradition in our family is to have a lobster feast during summer vacation. Now that in and of itself is not a problem except for the fact that somewhere along the line the ritual of letting the children touch and take a look at the lobsters before throwing them into the pot evolved. Sometimes this would result in the "adult" trying to scare the living day lights out of the child. Other times it was just a come and see what a lobster looks like moment. But for Wyatt, it was a great opportunity to make another friend and to say, "I love you lobster." ( You can see where his story is going) At dinner, Wyatt asked: "I love him, he's my friend, why do we have to eat him?" I took a stab at it by saying, "It's a lobster, Wyatt, not your friend." His mother, the teacher, came from a different point of view. She said, "You know how you are learning about the cycle of life? Remember how some of the dinosaurs are carnivores (meat eaters), herbivores (plant eaters), and others are omnivores (both)?" "Yes," Wyatt replied. Then she said: "We are omnivores who eat lobsters and corn on the cob for supper." When dinner came, because Wyatt was sad that the lobsters had been thrown into the pot, he refused to take a bite of his friend. He announced that he was a plant eater only, and that he would have only corn on the cob, salad, and blueberry pie for supper.

UU's gather together to make specific promises to real people for the purpose of learning how to establish faithful relationships. In church, it is in the making, keeping, and breaking of our mutual face-to-face commitments that we make for the common good, commonwealth, and well being of the faith, human, and Earth community . . . that we learn to trust in the goodness in each other, to hope in the future, and to be strengthened by Love.

Friends in covenantal faith, how then shall I answer the faith seeker's e-mail questions about my belief in same sex unions, life after death, and universal salvation as I practice them here at First Church?