

Rev. Fran Dearman, January 31st 2010, Unitarian Church of Calgary,
in conjunction with Lay Chaplain Installation Ceremony.

Homily: Covenant and Ministry: Let us agree to walk with one another

Rites of passage mark the turning points of our lives:
birth, marriage, death.

In general, congregations call on ordained ministers to lead these ceremonies.

Unitarian ministers in Canada tend to be few and far between.
Accordingly, our congregations often name lay chaplains
to officiate at rites of passage.

The conduct of rites of passage is a profound trust.

Birth calls for welcome, death for a tender farewell;
marriage is a covenant.

The words of installation you will hear later this morning,
lifting up the pledge of trust with the lay chaplains,
are a covenant.

Where does this idea of covenant come from?

Covenant language is found in ancient treaties
inscribed on archaeological artifacts.

The artifacts are called steles,
stele being a Greek word meaning
big rock with letters carved into it.

Scholars find echoes of these inscriptions in biblical writings,
mostly in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

If you were to go to the adult reference section
in the downtown public library,
and seek out the first volume of the Anchor Bible Dictionary,
and look up Covenant Code,
you would find the argument laid out in exquisite scholarly detail.

Let me put it this way:
imagine that you are an Assyrian or Hittite warlord
about three or four thousand years ago.

Imagine that you have just completed a ruinously expensive land war
somewhere between the Nile and the Euphrates,
and you really don't want to go back there for a long, long time.

So you set up a big rock and carve letters in it,
to remind folks of your expectations of them,
and your promises to one another, while you are far away.

You have done this before
and you have a treaty formula at your fingertips:

you remind folks of who you are,
and what great deeds you have performed;

you call on all that is holy to witness,

and you state your expectations about behaviour and boundary keeping.

Your language is vivid and memorable;
to those who keep faith, you offer blessing and prosperity—
for those who break faith, you prophesy disaster,
“the sky over your head shall be bronze,
and the earth under you iron” (NRSV Deut 28:23)

And then you step back and hope for the best—
promises reliably made and honourably kept.

And the words on your rock become the words of sacred stories.

The ten commandments
are modelled in the language of covenant.

The story of Noah includes an image of covenant—
the arc of the rainbow.

Covenant is an agreement,
described in the Oxford English Dictionary
as more than a promise, less than an oath.

As scholar George Mendenhall notes,
the covenant form is merely “a device for communicating values
envisioning human relationships [as]proceeding
along some moral plane higher than coercive force”. [repeat]

When scripture needed language to speak of hopeful undertakings,
the language of covenant supplied that need.
But it’s not the language so much as the intent that creates covenant.
The covenant describes our best selves, and who we want to become.

Sixteenth and seventeenth century religious reformers in Europe
gathered themselves into community with covenant language.

In 1648 the Puritans of New England gathered themselves into congregations
with a covenant that they called the Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline.

Their covenant was not about creed,
but about identity and creating relationship,
with no need for a bishop to watch over them.

They declared “a willingness to walk together in Christian fellowship”.

Twenty-five years ago,
when Unitarian Universalists looked for words to describe
how they would walk with one another,
covenant language was there again.

You many have walked past a framed copy of those words
as you came in this morning:

“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association,
covenant to affirm and promote:
The inherent worth and dignity of every person.....”

I love it that this covenant is a bylaw,
and that there’s not a sky of bronze or earth of iron to be seen,
just promises reliably made, to be honourably kept
—with care and respect.

The greatest benefit of a covenant is not the words on the paper,
but rather the conversation that shaped those words:

Who are we?
How shall we be with one another?
What are the values we share?
Why are we here?

I see in this morning's Order of Service that you have had such conversations before:

"Our Purpose:

The Unitarian Church of Calgary cultivates a welcoming caring community....."

Many ministers have covenants with one another.

As an ordained member of the First Unitarian Church of Victoria,

I covenanted with my minister, the Rev. Jane Bramadat

to preach at First Victoria no more than once per year.

When I accepted your invitation to serve here in Calgary,

I had a care-ful, intentional conversation with the Rev. Meg Roberts, your former minister.

Meg and I were at school together.

We were both deeply mindful of our need to respect

our personal friendship,

our professional standards regarding best practices,

and our mutual responsibilities to the Unitarian Church of Calgary.

Calgary hopes to welcome a new settled minister next fall.
I would suggest you give some serious thought
to a process of covenant between minister and congregation.

In conclusion,
the language of covenant has shaped the history of our living tradition,
from the days of the biblical patriarchs up to the present.

Our covenant to walk with one another
is a story of promises reliably made and honourably kept,
as best we can.

And somewhere, way out there,
is a big rock with letters on it,
that says we are here to love one another,
and heal the world.

May it be so.

Bibliography

For an account of ancient covenant codes:

George Mendenhall's article "Covenant" in volume one of the Anchor Bible Dictionary, 220.3 in the Adult Reference Section, Calgary Public Library, Central Library, downtown. Mendenhall's article is the source of the phrase "promises reliably made and honourably kept"

Delbert R. Hillers, "Covenant Code". Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1969. Exquisite scholarship details the formulaic language of Hittite, Assyrian, and scripture covenants.

For reference to biblical passages resonating with covenant code formulaic language, see Mendenhall and Hillers, also Deuteronomy 5, 6, 10, 28:23-24, 32; Exodus 20: 1-17; Isaiah 1:2; Micah 6:1-2.

See also the entries re covenant in the Oxford English Dictionary.