

“Trusting Others, Trusting Ourselves”
Rev. Megan Lloyd Joiner
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
April 27, 2014

Opening Words

“Come, Come” — Leslie Takahashi Morris (adapted from Rumi)

Come, come, whoever you are

Come with your hurts, your imperfections,
your places that feel raw and exposed.

Come, come, whoever you are

Come with your strengths that the world shudders to hold

come with your wild imaginings of a better world,

come with your hopes that it seems no one wants to hear.

Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving we will make a place for you,
we will build a home together.

Ours is no caravan of despair.

We walk together; Come, yet again come.

— from [Voices from the Margins](#), edited by Jacqui James and Mark Morrison-Reed

Responsive Reading #591

by James Luther Adams

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence,

That sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands.

It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority.

This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death as well as life.

I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship,

That protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom; that yearns to belong to the church universal;

It is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship.

It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.

The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing.

It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit "that bloweth where it listeth...and maketh all things new."

Reading:

Our reading comes from the 2000-2001 Minns Lecture *Thus Do We Covenant* by Rev. Alice Blair Wesley. The Minns lectures are an annual series of lectures that has been since 1942 an innovative force in Unitarian Universalist thought, and the lectures continue today as a source of creative theological and religious advancement.

Alice Blair Wesley writes:

The covenanted free church is an organization you must freely choose individually, to join.

When you sign the membership book of a covenanted free church, you are not signing any list of propositions, such as make up a creed: "I believe this, that, the other and maybe forty-'leven other things." No. To join a free church is to sign a promise that may sound simple - it should sound simple - but which, if you "keep covenant," brings you into intimate companionship with others who have promised to live with all the integrity you and they can together muster, in all the years of your lives.

No simple matter this. Entrance into the covenantal community summons a lifelong, forbearing engagement of heart, mind and body. So why would anybody ever rejoice to sign such a promise and regard it as a great privilege to do so?

Because we human beings, social creatures through and through, are gifted individually - such is the dignity of human nature - to experience and to learn and to claim as our own these wonderful truths: Ultimately, the only freedom adequate to human dignity is the freedom to do what love asks of us. And the greatest blessings of life come to us and through us to all the world when, with intimate and freely bonded companions, we are trying together to live with the integrity of faithful love.

Reflections: Trusting Others, Trusting Ourselves

A number of years ago, I was the guest preacher at one of our small congregations in upstate New York. It was a bitterly cold Sunday in February, and the congregation at the first of two morning services was sparse – so sparse it was almost awkward. So there we were, the 10 of us, including my husband and myself. I delivered my sermon, working hard to make eye contact with everyone in the room, including a middle aged man sitting in the very last row with his daughter, a girl of 10 or so, next to him.

After the service, I made my way out of the sanctuary to prepare for the second round, and the man from the back of the room caught up to me, *Reverend!* he called out. I wasn't, a reverend, yet, so the title was still novel.

Reverend, he called, *Can I speak with you a moment?* He asked if we could speak privately, and we found a quiet corner. *I need to ask you a question*, he said. *Today is our first time here, me and my daughter.* He took a deep breath and his voice shook. *I haven't been in a church for a long time.* He paused. I waited. *I need to ask if it's okay that I'm here.*

Of course, I said. *We are glad you are here. I'm not the minister here, but I'm sure someone would be happy to show you around...* I launched into my welcome pitch, not listening well enough.

No, he said, slowly. *You see, I'm gay. I haven't been in a church in a long time. And I need to know that it's okay that I'm here.* His eyes filled with tears. And I understood.

Yes, I said, answering as I had before, but this time my eyes filled with tears too. *We are glad that you are here.*

He nodded. And smiled through his tears. *I just wasn't sure. Thank you.*

I touched his arm. *You are welcome*, I said, and meant it.

I think of the trust that man placed in me that February morning. Of the courage it took to call out to me. But I just happened to be the person in the pulpit. He was, in fact, placing his trust in the congregation, in Unitarian Universalism, in the people of that place, and in all of us. I don't know what happened to this man at the churches he had attended long ago. It is clear that somewhere along the way someone told him that it was *not* okay that he was there; that he was not welcome. What courage it took for him to bring his daughter to church that day, to open his heart again, to seek relationship, to offer his full self.

Rebecca Parker writes "all human beings have experienced the impasse and anguish of violated trust." We all know the pain of violated trust, of hurts that feel personal, of betrayal. It is part of the human experience, and it happens to all of us at one point or another.

This is, in part, why what we are doing here is so radical. Alice Blair Wesley reminds us that being a part of a community like this, a freely gathered, covenantal, congregational community is a choice that involves not signing on to a list of beliefs, but it does require a promise. "Entrance into the covenantal community summons a lifelong, forbearing engagement of heart, mind and body." Choosing to enter into covenant with other people in a congregation, to make such a promise, begins with choosing to walk through the doors of a church again for the first time in a long time. It continues when we choose to try again after betrayal. When we choose to trust each other, though each of us knows the anguish of broken trust; when we choose to love each other instead of fear each other.

We welcome each other: *Come, Come whoever you are.* And so we come, each of us carrying our past hurts, each of us asking: *is it okay that I am here? As I am? Can I be my true self, and will you still love me? Can I trust you with all of me?*

The answer is yes, if you are willing to make that promise. The promise that you will love others as you have been loved. That you will engage your heart and mind and body on this spiritual adventure that you undertake together. If you will promise to try, as we are all trying, to do what love asks of us, to live together with the integrity of faithful love.

As Unitarian Universalists, we trace our roots back to the congregations that peppered New England in the mid-17th century. Having fled the domination of bishops in the Church of England, our spiritual ancestors arrived here ready to embark on a new experiment: congregations people attended by choice not decree, places where freedom of thought and belief were paramount, where the way people were together soon became more important than whether or not they all believed the exact same things. Alice Blair Wesley summarizes their experience this way: “They came to experience together, more intensely and richly than they ever had before in their lives, the holy spirit of mutual love, in freely organized groups.”

The charter of one of those congregations, the church in Dedham, is required reading for Unitarian Universalist ministers in training. We read the Dedham charter from 1638, known as the Cambridge Platform, not because we want to do church exactly the way New Englanders did in the 17th Century. Believe me, there is plenty about the way they organized themselves that we want nothing to do with.

We read, it though, because it gives us insight into why we are all here now, doing church they way we do church. As Blair Wesley says, “show me the patterns of your church organization, and I’ll show you what the people of the church find worthiest of their loyalty as church people. Organization and theology are not two different things. Our organization is a function of our actual theology.”

And at the heart of our theology, and the heart of our organization is Love. That we might find our way in the world together guided not by fear, but by love, not by suspicion and mistrust, but by the promises we make to each other.

The people of Dedham believed that “a free church is a group of people who want the spirit of love to reign in their lives.”

They believed that such a church would be self-governing, that the body would elect their own leaders (lay and clergy) and would be governed by the decisions these elected leaders made with the best interest of the entire congregation in their hearts.

They believed that reasoning was the best way of understanding the truth and of being in relationship. As Blair Wesley puts it “Reasoning together about what we love, and about all the social implications and complexities of love, in continuous consultation, has been a built-in part from the very beginning of the free church tradition from which we Unitarian Universalists have come.”

Continuous consultation. Members of these early churches also called this way of being “walking together.” So committed were they to walking together in love, in continuous

consultation, that when there was a conflict or a disagreement, they outlined detailed guidelines for the conversations to be had. Wesley tells us that “If any member’s actions, or their attitude - “carriage,” our ancestors called it- - If any member’s “carriage” seemed scornful or sarcastic or sullen or ungenerous, he or she would likely be called upon the next afternoon by the Elder to “clear” things.”

The only reason one would be asked to leave one of our ancestral congregations is if one were unwilling to be in consultation, unwilling to walk together, unwilling to engage with forbearance.

Key to this way of being together was the freedom to choose to enter into the covenantal relationship. The same way some of us join with another person in marriage and make promises to that person, we freely enter the relationship with a congregation and the members of a congregation. We pledge to be our best selves, to be trust worthy, and to trust our fellow human beings. Many of us believe that this relationship, this way of doing church, this way of walking together is the most important part of our shared faith.

Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix, Arizona writes that “We sometimes wrongly say it is the absence of creed that is most important to who we are [as Unitarian Universalists]. This is wrong.” She doesn’t mince words!

“Any one of us could practice religious freedom at home on Sunday mornings,” she says. “We could practice religious freedom all day long, every day, and never come into community.”

“It is covenant that brings us out of isolation,” Frederick-Gray says, covenant that brings us “out of selfish concerns, out of individualism to join ourselves to something greater, to become a part of a community that is working to practice love, to dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge and wisdom together, to find better ways to live our lives and live in the world. This...is sacred, religious work.”

This congregation has had its share of conflict, of broken trust. And you keep walking together. You are now poised on the cusp of a bright future together. You are growing. This afternoon we will host a luncheon for those interested in joining this community, in entering into intimate companionship with the rest of you, all of you promising to keep on moving forward in love, caring for each other and for the world, ministering to each other’s broken hearts, sharing each other’s joys.

You come together, freely gathered, to celebrate the ultimate blessing, the freedom to trust each other and to trust yourselves, freedom to do what love asks of you, to treat each other with dignity and respect, to engage with forbearance, to keep your promises.

I hope that you never forget that what you do here is important. Not because you can believe what you want or say what you want, but because of the trust you place in one another, and the trust others place in you. What you do here is important because of the

stranger who has yet found you who will come with the memory of trust betrayed and say “*Is it okay that I am here?*” and you will say “*You are welcome*” and mean it.

Resources

The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant,
2000 Lecture Series by Alice Blair Wesley

<http://minnslectures.org/archive/wesley/wesley.htm>

“A Radical Covenant” Delivered by Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray on November 15, 2009 at The Unitarian
Universalist Congregation of Phoenix, AZ. <http://www.phoenixuu.org/?q=node/3727>