

“Thus Do We Covenant”

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, June 24, 2007
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

To build a church that shall be free...

That has been the mission – the vision – of countless generations of Unitarians and Universalists – the creation of, and the handing down, of a church community where people are not bound by narrow thought or lifeless creed – a church community that trusts the dawning future, and encourages all who worship there to boldly explore the spirituality that moves their heart and their soul – a spirituality often very personal, very individual – a spirituality that cannot, perhaps, even be summed up in words.

This morning – as we have gathered here – a couple of thousand miles away, in Portland, Oregon, several thousand Unitarian Universalists are just beginning to gather as well, for an early-morning worship that will be the largest UU worship service of the year – the Sunday service at the General Assembly of our Unitarian Universalist Association. For five days now, these delegates – including our own Cori and Mike Yaeger-von Birgelen – have been learning about best practices in church governance, about community building and internet outreach and adult education and small group ministry – in short, all the things that are involved in the life of a vibrant congregation, of any stripe, in America today.

But I can guarantee you, also, that one of the things those thousands of UU's have been talking about this week at General Assembly – and will probably even talk about this morning, in worship – is the perennial challenge we, in the free church tradition, face in explaining our faith to others. There's probably not a person in this sanctuary today who has not had to, at one time or another, *justify* his or her participation in a Unitarian Universalist faith community, to someone – be it a concerned relative at a family reunion, a curious spouse, a hospital chaplain, a blogger, or a co-worker.

Just what is this thing called Unitarian Universalism? How can you pin down such a moving target? How can you define a religion that is comprised of more than a thousand, very independent and very unique, churches – a faith that is comprised of hundreds of thousands of very independent, and very unique, *individuals*. Aside from a sometimes quite zealous belief in religious freedom – what do we hold in common?

This is the challenge I faced, a couple of months ago, at a public forum held, just on the other side of the woods, at Mercer Elementary School. The occasion was the first public event sponsored by the Religious Diversity Task Force of Greater Anderson Promotes Peace (or GAPP), of which I was a founding member. After months of planning and meetings and discussion and promotion – here was my chance to talk about Unitarian Universalism – albeit, in a minute or less – to an auditorium of people, many of whom had no idea what UUism was all about.

Now, I'm a professional at this, right – I mean, I literally *get paid* to talk about Unitarian Universalism. And there I was, on stage, under the glare of the lights, waiting, and waiting, to speak, as the list of local religions slowly ticked off, from A to Z, with UUism naturally coming very near the end of the alphabet. By the time it was my turn, we were so far behind – that's my excuse anyway; everyone else took *way* more than their allotted minute to tell their story! – rather than launch into my well-rehearsed so-called “elevator speech,” I found myself winging it in an effort to save time – and did not do UUism or our faith any great service in the process.

Next came the folks from Unity, and then we were done. It was time to move on to our respective literature tables, where we would be able to meet with and talk informally with those in the audience who were now milling around – those who were curious or had questions about a particular religion. I was feeling pretty bad about my performance, but I didn't have much time to indulge in self-pity before a gentleman approached me and asked for more information about Unitarian Universalism. I began by offering him some pamphlets, and then told him a bit about the history of our liberal religion. He thanked me politely, and moved on.

Another person came by, and then another – I must not have done *that* bad a job! – and soon I began to notice that their questions largely focused on what Unitarian Universalist *worship* is like – what kinds of things do we do and say, sing and pray about, on Sunday mornings – we who apparently don't worship a particular individual or defined deity?

Almost without noticing, I slipped into “compare and contrast” mode, indicating that our services – due largely to tradition and our history, are actually quite similar to Protestant worship services – we gather on Sunday

mornings, for an hour or an hour and a half; there is a sermon; we sing hymns; we have a prayer; we take up a collection; we reflect on the mystery and beauty of life.

But the way in which we differ, I told them, is what is crucial. When they, like most people in our culture, think of a church – they think of doctrines and creeds, statements of shared belief that a group of people can recite and agree to agree to. That is the *creedal* tradition.

We are part of the covenantal tradition – a very different kind of religious animal – a tradition as old, at least, as the ancient Hebrews – a tradition in which a group of people gathers not around a certain belief or creed, but rather around the idea of *relationship*. To be in covenant is to be in a relationship – with the members of one’s group, and, in the case of a religious community, with something much larger, as well.

Rev. Alice Blair Wesley, a retired UU minister from Maryland who is probably among those in the arena in Portland right now, for the 8 a.m. worship service, is recognized as our leading scholar on covenant. She gave a series of lectures on the subject at General Assembly a few years back, in which she said this:

“We Unitarian Universalists are a [religiously] liberal people over on the left of the free church tradition. The root idea of our entire tradition is the covenant. A covenanted free church is a body of individuals who have freely made a profoundly simple promise – *a covenant*. We pledge faithfully to walk together in the spirit of mutual love.”

In an article in the UU World magazine this Spring, Wesley elaborated on this theme, writing: “Most of us have known moments of overflowing love, [moments when, in the words of William Ellery Channing], a light has seemed to dawn, and new life stir within us. These are very personal, individual experiences. Yet we human beings are as much social creatures as individuals. There is no such thing as vigorous spiritual health, or the capacity to fulfill *any* great purpose, without long and serious engagement with ... others...”

“Some say we have no test of membership,” she continues, “but I say – at our best – that we have a quite explicit test – one we need to proclaim clearly, and spell out with courtesy and warmth. Our covenant – to find, and live out together, insofar as we can, the ways of love – is open to all who will enter it, with us.”

I’ve always found Alice Blair Wesley to be interesting, challenging, inspiring – and I have long admired her work on covenant. But it was not until that night over at Mercer, that I fully understood the profound depth of what covenant can truly mean in the context of a free and open religion.

It was at some point near the end of the evening – after maybe the fifth or sixth visitor to my Unitarian Universalist information table had come and gone, and I had been left wondering – as I often am, when explaining Unitarian Universalism to the more orthodox – if they really *understood* what I was trying to say. A kindly looking older lady approached, and I launched once again into my spiel about how our worship style might appear traditional and familiar to her, yet our emphasis might differ from what she was accustomed to – when she brought me up short by asking for a specific example.

“Well, for instance,” I said, “at the point in a traditional Christian service where the congregation might recite the Apostle’s Creed, we instead say a covenant.”

Her eyes lit up. She asked me what it was. Without hesitation – without even thinking, really, because they are words that I do have memorized, words that flow very easily from my tongue – I said our covenant for her – and watched in amazement as her eyes did more than light up. They *teared* up.

She told me how beautiful she thought those words were – how simple, and elegant. She said they moved her more deeply than the creed she had been, for almost an entire lifetime, reciting each Sunday – a creed that had become lifeless, for her.

It is not an overstatement to say that, in that moment, I had an epiphany. Just remembering that exchange gives me goosebumps. I have known our covenant to be meaningful to people; I have seen our covenant move people to tears, in fact. But never has its significance, its *potential*, been made more clear for me – never has the way in which it defines this church, as distinct not only from mainstream Christianity and other world religions, but also from most other *UU churches* (I’ll explain that last comment in a moment) – never have I seen, or experienced, the essence of this church in such clarity. It was truly a moment of revelation for me.

But like all such moments, it soon passed. The world intruded once again. The visitor at my table was asking me for a *copy* of the covenant. I did not have one handy – the ground rules of the Religious Diversity event instructed us to avoid promoting our individual churches, but rather to simply provide information about our respective *religions* – and so all I could do was grab a copy of the hymnal – which thankfully, I had brought along – and show her reading number 471, which forms the basis of the covenant we, at Heritage Church, use – as well as reading number 473, its older, original form.

She thanked me, and went on her way – and others took her place. But *now*, having hit upon something that seemed to work, I began offering each new visitor the same compare-and-contrast encounter of the Christian Creed versus our covenant. And ya know – each and every one of them appeared to get it! They may not have all agreed with me, or with my take on free religion, but a respectful dialogue was engaged in each case, and I felt that people were leaving my table truly *understanding* – maybe even for the first time – what I meant when I talked about a covenantal tradition, versus a creedal tradition.

As I have since reflected on that night's experience, I have come to a couple of conclusions – conclusions that, again, it is no overstatement to say, will profoundly affect my ministry, for years to come.

The first, is that I'm aware that I feel much more comfortable and at ease – I am more *at home* – representing the church I serve, than representing the more ambiguous religion with which I affiliate. Simply put, it is much easier for me to explain Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church to someone – than it is to explain Unitarian Universalism.

I appreciate, more than ever before (and I think I appreciated it before!) the way in which Heritage is a community *focused* in its spirituality, focused in its mission and vision, focused in its way of being and doing community. Certainly, we have a wide, wide variety of groups and activities, spiritual paths and practices here – but you can sum it all up in a sentence: *Love is the spirit of this church.* You can sum it all up in the three phrases that are printed, each week, on the back of your Sunday bulletin: We are here to celebrate life, create community, and seek justice.

The second conclusion I reached, that night back in April, was that I am, and probably always have been, without really knowing it, a *Universalist* minister. Since Universalism is the minority strain within the equally minority spiritual path that is Unitarian Universalism – I don't know what that says about me! – but I do know what it says about this church. It says that this is a home – a *spiritual* home – where I am proud to live, where I am glad that I have put down roots. It says that when someone asks me that Galen Guengerich question – where do I live – I don't have to say, "I'm free to live wherever I want." Instead, I am pleased to say, "Here is where I live. I am a Universalist."

I'm sure that – as I continue to incorporate my experience working with the GAPP Religious Diversity Task Force into my spirituality, and my ministry – I will have more to say about my awakening as a Universalist minister. But for this morning, let it be enough that I acknowledge that fact – for my purpose here today is to lift up, for your consideration, the

importance of covenant in our religious tradition, and, more specifically, the significance of the covenant we share, here at Heritage, as a beautiful, succinct articulation of the spirit of this church.

The next time someone asks you that dreaded question, “What does your church believe?” – don’t go for the fancy, long-winded answer – or the terse, religious repartee. Just do what I finally did, after some trial and error, that night a couple of months ago – simply share our covenant with them. I bet you, it will open their minds, and maybe even their hearts, to our faith in a way nothing else you might say, could possibly do.

Let’s give it a try, right now. Stand, as you are willing and able, and say our covenant with me, as you do each week. But as you’re saying it, imagine what it would be like to hear it for the first time. Imagine what it would be like to say it to someone who had just inquired about your church. Imagine that our covenant, was *all* you needed to say, to explain this place, and this community of people.

Imagine...

Love is the spirit of this church,
The quest for truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.
To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve humankind in fellowship –
To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine –
Thus do we covenant with each other, and with God.

To covenant is to pledge, faithfully, to walk together in the spirit of mutual love. Thus do we covenant!

May it ever be so.

Amen.