

Covenant¹

Rev. Myke Johnson

September 11, 2016

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Water Ceremony

Carolyn Barschow (our new Director of Religious Education):

It is a Unitarian Universalist tradition in September
to gather ourselves together with a water ceremony,
sometimes called a water communion.

We bring water from the places we love, or the places we have traveled,
to pour into one container,
just as we are gathering ourselves into one community.

Rev. Myke:

When we pour water from many places into one container,
all of the water mixes together,
and every drop will have some of the waters from every place.
Even so, when we gather in community,
we become joined to each other, we have an influence on each other:
We can help each other to grow, with kindness.
Or if we are unkind, we can hurt each other.
Who we will be is shaped by our connection to each other.

Carolyn:

All water is connected.
The same water recycles itself through the whole earth.
So even if we get water from our kitchen tap,
that water has been around the world on its journey.
All the waters on earth are really one water.
And that is a reminder to us that all the people on the earth
are really one people—we belong to each other.
We must take care of each other.

Rev. Myke:

We must also remember that water is the source of all life. Water is life.
We must always protect the water and keep it pure.
Today we dedicate our water ceremony to all of those
who are attempting to protect their water,
especially the people of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe
who are trying to protect their water from the Dakota Access Pipeline.
Today, the Wabanaki people of Maine are also sharing a water ceremony
in solidarity with the people at Standing Rock.

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Carolyn

In just a moment, we will take the waters we have brought with us,
and bring them to the front.

As you pour your water into the round tub,
you can tell us where that water came from—
just one or two words please, no explanations or stories,
or we will be here till dark comes.

You can share your longer stories about the water after the service is over.

Rev. Myke

If you did not bring water with you, please come up anyway, if you are able,
and just touch your finger to the water,

to symbolize that you are part of our gathering of the waters.

Did you know that human beings are between 50 and 75% water?

So even if you forgot to bring water in a glass,
by bringing yourself here today, you are bringing water into our circle.

For those who find it difficult to walk, feel free to stay in your seats.

For others, each row can move to the left, and return by the right,
so we don't bump into each other,

Walk very quietly, so we can hear what people say
when they name where their water is from.

When all have shared their water:

Water Blessing

Rev. Myke: I invite the children and Religious Education guides and leaders to come up for our water blessing.

Water is life.

We give thanks for its many blessings and for the blessings of this community.

May we always remember to give thanks for the water and to protect it.

May we always remember to give thanks for this community and care for it. Amen.

Reflection

What does it mean to be a community of covenant? Let me begin by telling you a story.

When I was ten, my three younger sisters and I all got chicken-pox at the same time. My mom helped to keep us entertained at home by playing with us the board game Monopoly. My sister Nita and I played the game to win. We each would try to get as many properties and houses and hotels as we could, so we could charge huge rents when the other players landed on our spots. The goal was to bankrupt the other players until one of us was the last player in the game.

But my mom and my sister Vonnie had a totally different approach. They were tenderhearted, and didn't want anyone to have to leave the game. So if someone was about to lose all their money, my mom and Vonnie would loan them some of their own Monopoly money to keep them in the game.

Nita and I were operating in the spirit of competition—which was actually the way the rules of that particular game were written. But my mom and Vonnie brought a different set of values to our time together—a desire to keep everyone in the game.

Groups and families and society itself often have unspoken agreements about how we will interact with each other. Competition is one of those expectations in our society. But when I look back at the values my mother was bringing to our play, I see a commitment to inclusion and watching out for the vulnerable. It reminds me of the values that I find in my reading of the Christian gospels. It seems to me the central message of Jesus is to care for one's neighbor and even one's enemy—especially those who have little. No one should be excluded from the circle of love. Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison, bury the dead.

Every group has unspoken agreements about how we will interact. A covenant takes that another step forward. A covenant is a chosen and explicitly stated agreement about how we will be with each other. It is a kind of promise, a commitment to certain values that will shape our relationships and the kind of community we will become.

Unitarian Universalism is a community of covenant. What binds us together is not a common belief in certain ideas—which for some faith communities are known as creeds. We don't have a creed. What binds us together is a covenant about how we will be with each other. This is what it means when we say that our mission is growing a community that transforms lives through the power of love.

At Allen Avenue, we don't yet have a written document that expresses all the aspects of our covenant with each other as a whole church. But smaller groups and committees within the church have used this tool in many ways. For example, the Board of Trustees has created a covenant which includes, among other things, certain agreements about how they hope to be with each other: Make attendance at meetings a priority. Honor each other with mutual respect and acceptance. No idea is a bad idea. Listen attentively and reflectively and contribute as appropriate to the discussion. One speaker at a time. Other committees and small groups have similar covenants based on the values we hold about being together.

As a Unitarian Universalist movement, we covenant to affirm and promote the worth and dignity of each person. We covenant to affirm and promote our seven principles, principles which express how we want to be with each other, with the wider human community, and with the larger sphere of all beings.

For some of you these will be very familiar, but I think it is worth saying them out loud. I've asked our new Intern Minister, Israel Buffardi, to alternate saying them with me.

We covenant to affirm and promote:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

Israel: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

Myke: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

Israel: We covenant to affirm and promote:

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

Myke: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

Israel: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

Myke: We covenant to affirm and promote:

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The word covenant comes from the old French and Latin, meaning “come together.” Making a covenant with each other expresses our profound recognition of our interdependence. Even in the midst of a society that celebrates individualism, we understand that we need each other if we are to fully thrive.

As I have been thinking this week about covenants, I have also been following the struggle of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe to protect their water from the Dakota Access Pipeline. Part of the challenge they face is that covenants that were entered into between the tribe and the United States government have repeatedly been broken. In fact, every treaty that has been made with Indigenous nations has been broken by our country.

One hundred fifty three years ago, the Army massacred the Standing Rock people during a peaceful gathering at White Stones. The survivors of the massacre came back to try to rebuild their community. Later, they were relocated to make way for a reservoir that flooded their forest and farms, and given low income housing to live in, on land that had too much clay for gardens. Now, the Dakota Access Pipeline is threatening their water supply, yet there was no consultation with the Tribe before permits were granted.

The Sioux understand the nature of covenants. They understand their interdependent relationship to water: water is sacred, and water is life. It is their covenant with water that calls them to risk their lives to stand up to protect the water. They have a covenant to remember their ancestors, and to guard the future for their children.

There is a prophecy from their elders that a black snake would come and it would bring death and destruction—but it could only be countered with prayer and non-violence. The black snake is the pipeline, and in April the people started a non-violent camp for prayer and protection of the water called the Camp of the Sacred Stones. They have been joined by over 100 other tribal nations, as well as the United Nations, Amnesty International, and many other allies.

This action is all about covenants—the covenants of treaty obligations, and the covenant of the people with the land and water, and the covenant we all must have with the earth and with the future of the earth for our children and grandchildren. To be a community of covenant means to be mindful of the relationships that make our lives possible.

Today, we brought water from the places we live, the places we have traveled. Do we know the sources of the waters that give us life? Here in Portland, our water comes from Sebago Lake. There is also a pipeline that runs right through the Sebago Lake watershed. A few years ago, we were protesting to keep it from being used to transport tar sands oil, which is more caustic than other oils. A leak in that pipeline could contaminate our drinking water too.

We are living in a time when the fundamental agreements about how we want to live together are in dispute. On the one hand, there is capitalism, which weighs everything by monetary profit for corporate shareholders. It doesn't matter, within the capitalist agreement, if the water is spoiled by pipeline spills. But there is another fundamental agreement, which Indigenous people have been living by for millenia, and which Unitarian Universalists name in our seventh principle: respect for the interconnected web of life of which we are a part.

We have to ask ourselves how we will stand during this time of conflict between these foundational values. We have to ask this question, because in our time, we are playing the game of monopoly for real, and the rules of the game, which we were taught to assume as merely the way things are—those rules are leading us into danger. When I was a child, I followed the rules of the game, because I didn't know any better. Will we compete and consume until there is only one winner? Or will we try to keep everyone in the game, recognizing our mutual interdependence with all people, and with the water and the land on which we live? Everything depends on our answers.

Quiet Meditation

Reading: Covenant by Rev. Rebecca Parker

Let us covenant with one another to keep faith with the source of life
knowing that we are not our own, earth made us.

Let us covenant with one another to keep faith with the community of resistance
never to forget that life can be saved from that which threatens it
by even small bands of people choosing to put into practice an alternative way of life.
And, let us covenant with one another to seek for an ever deeper awareness
of that which springs up inwardly in us.

Even when our hearts are broken by our own failure
or the failure of others cutting into our lives,
Even when we have done all we can and life is still broken,
there is a Universal Love that has never broken faith with us and never will.
This is the ground of our hope,
and the reason we can be bold in seeking to fulfill the promise.

Closing Words & Procession

We will close our service today with a procession and a song. Those who are able will go outside—we will go past our dawn redwood tree, one of the living witnesses to our growing community. Our tradition has been to circle around the tree, but this year there is new grass coming up that might be damaged by our feet... So today, we'll move out to the turning circle of our new parking lot, to officially celebrate and dedicate it by pouring water from our common water.

It might seem funny to dedicate a parking lot. Asphalt & painted lines & cars. But it isn't the asphalt that makes it important. It isn't the paint that marks the spaces. This parking lot is important because it reminds us that when we work together, we can set goals and make them happen. This parking lot is important because it represents our covenant with the six and a half acres of land on which we are standing: the covenant we have to cherish and take care of the land where we gather. This parking lot is important because it offers a welcome to everyone who needs our life saving message. It says, come in, you are welcome here!

I want to honor and thank the people who did the work to make it happen (*named during the service*) and I don't want to forget everyone who contributed funds, and participated in the process of decision making to bring our building and grounds renewal plan to fruition in this first project. Thank you! When most of us have circled round the parking lot turn-around, we will sing the song "Simple Gifts."