

Covenant and Community

*sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered September 17, 2017
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My cat and I have a little morning ritual.

See, I'm sort of an early riser. I seldom use an alarm clock, and am usually up by 6 a.m. In fact, I often awake much earlier – sometimes two or three hours earlier – and lie in bed for quite some time before either falling back to sleep (sometimes) or (more often) eventually putting feet to the floor to start my day at 6 -- pretty consistently.

Now, my cat is not super-feline. She does not, as far as I know, understand language nor know how to read clocks, digital or otherwise. But she does have a thorough understanding of my morning routine as I just described to you, and is always quite aware, sometimes to the minute, of when I actually wake up and when I decide to get up. Remarkably, she knows this even through the changes of seasons and shifts such as daylight savings time, so it is not explainable by her paying attention to the sun's presence alone. This is fortunate for her, I believe, because she also knows that there is a fairly narrow but significant window of opportunity that opens sometime after I first stir awake in the morning and closes about the time I lift my feet off the bed and onto the floor. It is during this window of opportunity – which sometimes lasts for a couple hours or for just a few minutes – that I am captive; that is when she knows that with just the right amount of persistent purring and firmly clawing the blanket near my most sensitive body parts, that I have no choice but to pet her. And by “pet her” I don't just mean a couple of loving swipes across her fur – no, this is serious petting. All

you cat people know what I mean – this is the full-on, nose-to-butt deep petting that involves vigorous stroking of her scent glands on one end and her “elevator-up” tail junction on the other. The kind of petting that is impossible for a human to engage in while trying to fall back asleep. Emma knows this window well, and can be counted on to jump up on the bed at just the right hour each day to receive her morning loving. This ritual, albeit for that purpose, also has the unintended effect of helping to get my butt out of bed, which, come to think of it, also hastens the time at which I make my way downstairs to her food bowl. So maybe it’s not all about loving after all.

Whatever her motivation, it is indeed a ritual. But even more noteworthy is this ritual is a covenant – an agreement for how we are to be together.

It’s tempting right here as I draw this analogy between the covenant I have with my cat and the covenants that bind us in religious community to bring up that old joke about leading a Unitarian Universalist congregation being a bit like herding cats (again, you cat people get it.) But no, the analogy here is not about cats and humans – it is more about what it means to have an agreement, a covenant. The agreement that Emma and I have was never negotiated, discussed, put on flip charts or on a power point presentation – it simply evolved. It evolved between two beings in relationship that find ways to meet each other’s needs. I thought about this the other morning as Emma jumped up onto my bed at precisely the right time. I could decide, on any given morning, that I’m not going to pet her that day – and yes, there are occasions when that does happen. And there are also occasions when she doesn’t jump up onto the bed, too. This is

a ritual that happens about ninety percent of the time we're home together. It is not the ten percent exceptions that are important, however – it is the ninety percent of the mornings in which we each begin our day looking for some familiarity and comfort from one another, on which the sheer repetitiveness and predictability of the ritual seems almost bothersome by itself but she and I nonetheless each say “yes” to our covenant that morning. We each decide, once again, on a new day, to engage with each other in a familiar and important ritual – even if one of us would rather sleep another fifteen minutes.

In the rhythm of the Unitarian Universalist church year – our “liturgical calendar” if you like more traditional religious language – fall is the time many of us consider our “ingathering,” or the start of a new year. So like our Jewish friends who celebrate their new year later this week, we do so here at UUCY, typically starting with our Water Communion ceremony that we did last week. And this week, we begin our new “church year” with services in this lovely sanctuary, and children’s chapel and religious education classes in our south wing.

And each new year, like each new day for Emma and I, we each make a decision – or many decisions, more accurately – whether to be here or not. And if we are here, *how* we’ll be here. Do we come with anticipation and excitement and in the hope of surprising spiritual uplift? Do we come out of obligation, thinking “I’d really rather not, but someone’s got to show up?” Do we come with bitterness for past hurts or disappointments? Do we come with a forgiving heart, ready to re-engage 100% with love?

All these questions, of course, are not really about “we,” they should be addressed to “you.” Why are you here? How do you feel? What are you going to do? These are the questions each of you should ask – consciously or not – to guide your covenant with this congregation this year. Of course, they are not questions for only this time of year, but I ask them now because they may be especially relevant as fall begins. This could be a good time for each of you to reflect on these questions, and to decide whether or not you’re going to jump up on the bed this morning or whether you’re going to pet the cat that just did.

These questions are very similar to the questions we asked in a series of cottage meetings last year, and compiled and reviewed last fall at a gathering hosted by Rev. Tandi Rogers. The rich discussions we had revolved around three questions, the first of which had to do with what people value about this congregation in its past or present state. The second question asked us about “peak experiences” of our lives – which, I’ll admit now, was code language for what we value. This second question was not limited to experiences in this or any other religious community, but instead prompted us to think about the things that we value in our lives and, if they are things that are not present in church community right now, why couldn’t they be? Then, following that implied question, the third topic we discussed had to do with our hopes for the future for this congregation.

Those of you who participated in one of these meetings may have felt like the conversation itself was a worthwhile experience – as I did facilitating a number of them. But if the conversation itself wasn’t enough, we -- like any good

UU task force does – translated all the comments to bullets written on flipcharts. Just so we know we accomplished something, right? Then we – the team consisted of me, Linda King, Randy Luvaas, Nancy Born, and Susan Kaphammer – transcribed all these bullets into a spreadsheet and stared at them. For a while. What does a task force do with a couple hundred bullets representing snapshots of the peak experiences and most profound values in people’s lives? Well, again, like a good UU task force, we categorized them. I don’t remember precisely how it came to be, but in all that staring at all those bullets it eventually became clear that we could see four categories in them: community, spirituality, justice, and learning. So we created those categories out of thin air, and then proceeded to put each bullet – which again, represented with just a few words some human being’s peak experiences in life or most highly regarded values of religious community – and put them into one or more of those categories.

This was an incredibly helpful exercise for me – and, I think, for others – for these four simple categories seemed to summarize nicely what a liberal religious congregation is all about: Community. Spirituality. Justice. Learning.

As I wrote in the Unifire earlier this month, I’ve been considering these four categories as a sort of mantra for the work we do as a religious community this year. We’re going to be exploring these value categories, starting with a series of four sermons I intend to deliver on each one. But I also admit that I find it difficult and perhaps counter-productive to consider one of these categories separate from any of the others. I can’t talk about community without also considering spirituality; and to paraphrase Gandhi, justice without learning is blind, learning

without justice is lame. They all four intertwine with one another, and while the categories are helpful when looking at a spreadsheet with over a hundred bullets written on them, they are only categories; a method for erasing the beautiful and complex interdependencies of life so that we may, for a moment, more easily wrap our limited minds around them.

That said, today my intention is to talk about community. I have to bite my tongue a bit when I say that, because “talking about” community is a bit like talking about spirituality, justice, or learning. Talking about any of these things is not the same as doing them. That’s one of the key themes I hope to hold up in this process, for we Unitarian Universalists tend to be a talking/listening bunch; we like to talk about things and/or listen to others talk about them sometimes to the detriment of actually experiencing these things. Talking about community is not doing community, nor is it finding community. It’s only talking about it; but that’s where I start.

(Read sample community statements.)

One thing I’d like to point out about community is that it is different than friendship. The two are intertwined, of course, but friendship is more a collection of relationships that in many cases overlap and intertwine, if they fall within the structure of community, but community itself is more than a series of relationships. It is the emergence of something bigger, a presence that has its own integrity that transcends the sum of its parts.

I’d also like to hold up a more traditional concept of community that differs from our contemporary ideals. Traditional community often stemmed from

family, tribe, or clan and involved people living and working together on a daily basis to meet the basic needs of their lives, which of course is not what we do here. Even somewhat more contemporary notions of community point toward neighborhoods or cities wherein the inhabitants don't necessarily choose one another, but are put together more or less by circumstance. The task is to let these circumstances drive the need to create community – like people do in intentional communities, often derisively called “communes.” Here, I think we are looking more for an alternative to these traditional communities rather than trying to re-create them. I think most of us live and work in places and among people with whom we haven't gone through the process of developing community and are instead thrown in with others in what M. Scott Peck, in his book *A Different Drum*, called pseudo-community. Our workplaces and neighborhoods may be where we interact with people on a near daily basis, and may depend on them to a great extent, but they are often just other cogs in a machine rather than people with whom we have a deep and trusting relationship. And depending on who you talk to, this congregation itself may be one such pseudo-community, which Dr. Peck defines as a group of people who are nice and friendly with one another, but who often avoid conflict or expressing a full range of emotions.

I've long believed that “community” is of such value in people's lives in twenty-first century America because we've been so thoroughly pushed away from it. We live in an individualistic culture, which, in many ways, gets more so all the time. I know I've felt the steady erosion of the prominence of community within my own life, and even as more and more of us feel it's dearth we also tend

to embrace, or to at least passively accept, the steady growth of individualism. You've all heard this before, as you probably have also heard any number of sociologists or behavioral psychologists talk about how we human beings are "hard wired" for community. I agree that there is some truth in that, but I also believe that we are "hard wired" for its opposite – we tend to think of ourselves as free and independent beings, and tend to value that freedom quite strongly, especially in Western culture. Nowhere is it more highly valued than in Unitarian Universalist congregations, which in our not-to-distant past prided ourselves as the "free church" and the church that still places a "free and responsible search" for truth as one of our core principles. Of all the religious communities in our world today, we could very well be the one in which the values of freedom and independence are strongest – yet we are also drawn to community. This dichotomy is perhaps attributable to the fact that we *are*, at the end of the day, a religious community. Even if we are a relatively individualistic one, becoming a part of this community is one way to bring community into our lives more than many of the alternatives, such as staying at home and reading the paper – or our own personalized newsfeed – on Sunday mornings. You may all be fierce individualists when it comes to your theological beliefs, but you're here nonetheless, seeking something more than your own comfortable domain.

This dichotomy between the individual and community was memorably presented to Unitarian Universalists by the sociologist Robert Bellah – famed author of "The Habits of the Heart" – some twenty years ago in a talk he gave at a General Assembly. He noted the oddness of a group of people extolling the virtues of community that have as our first – and some say, foremost – principle

the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.” He challenged us to try to put the community – or some sort of common experience – at the forefront rather than individuals. For a religious community that does not have first and foremost an allegiance to a common being such as god, this is quite a challenge, one that I think we’re still working on.

Here’s an example that came up recently. Just as I and others have been pouring over the significance of these values that came out of our visioning exercise – with “community” and “spirituality” being the top two, others of us, quite separately, wound up engaging in conversation about one of the few embodied rituals we do here at UUCY: our closing circle at the end of each worship service. It may only be symbolism, but symbolism is powerful when you’re seeking community. The symbolism of the ritual is it is the one time in our weekly gathering in which we leave the immediate space of our individual seats, and are invited to physically touch one another and transform our gathering from a loose collection of individuals scattered around a large sanctuary and become, well, a circle. We become a thing in itself, a community. It is the time when we can all see each other, not just the backs of our heads, and take in, if only for a moment, the circular bonds that community is made of. I’m going to say more about this discussion next week when I look at spirituality – something else that we Unitarian Universalists tend to be better at talking about than actually doing. But for now I ask you to consider the symbolism behind this ritual, and to ask, if you find this joining of hands uncomfortable, what is it that makes it so? Perhaps this discomfort is also symbolic of the barriers we face in engaging community. Many of us spend so much time in our comfortable world of “I” that we find

actual communal engagement uncomfortable. Maybe that's a symptom of what's missing in our lives.

But what does it mean to actually *do* community? That's an interesting question, because community itself is a noun, a somewhat abstract concept (which again, we're good at abstract concepts.) To address this question, I hold up the root of the word community, which is a sometimes troubling one for Unitarian Universalists: communion. Communion is the act of creating community – it is the personal effort and contribution that we each make in order for community to be created. No community would ever exist if it weren't for people joining in communion. When we do our water communion ceremony at the beginning of our church year, we not only pour water into our common bowl, but we in return receive the blessing of the communal body. To come seeking community as if it were a commodity that you can buy in a store is foolish. Community is found when, and only when, each person willingly joins in the *communion* of souls – joining hands, spirits, minds, and/or hearts with one another, giving of oneself every bit as much as receiving.

Emma and I have a ritual of communion every morning – or most mornings, I should say. It takes something from each of us to make it happen – a covenant or agreement that we can be there for one another.

May we embrace such agreements in our lives, as we join in communion.



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