

Toward a New Covenant
the Rev. Edmund Robinson
First Parish in Hingham/Old Ship
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This is my last sermon on Article II, and in one sense it is superfluous. Article II is the denomination-wide effort to consider replacing our Principles and Purposes, and I preached on it three Sundays in April and we had a spirited discussion about it in a meeting the first Sunday in May. We'll have another period right after the service this morning for those who want to engage in further reflection or discussion of Principles and Purposes.

A more particular reason why it might be superfluous to consider changing the Principles and Purposes is that that issue made it on to the warrant for the Old Ship Annual Meeting in May. Because of transportation issues, I had to leave that meeting before all the business was concluded, but I understand that the warrant article regarding the Principles and Purposes passed almost unanimously and with very little discussion. Yay, us! So we have opted for the new format and language. Those who are not amused by the JETPIG mnemonic will be glad that you don't have to embrace him if you don't need to remember those six values.

Hmm, what are they? Love is at the center of the flower, as I think we all agree it should be. J stands for Justice, E stands for Equity, T stands for Transformation, P stands for Pluralism, I stands for Interdependence, and G stands for Generosity.

The actual nationwide voting on the principles and purposes will take place at General Assembly, which is entirely online this year. Eva Marx is one of the delegates from this congregation, and she has advised that the tradition here is that Old Ship does not generally direct its delegates how to vote on issues coming before General Assembly, because they may acquire some new insights on any important issue by attending the debates which precede the votes.

In sum, it appears to me that this congregation has done all it can do in deliberating on the changes in the Principles and Purposes, and we will see what the larger body does at General Assembly.

We might look back on that heavy lifting and say "whew, glad that's over." But I don't think it's over. I want to propose this morning that we can still keep in mind the idea of covenant and hone those ideas in order to face the decisions coming up in the next couple of years. Issues such as

With what building will we replace the Parish House and how will we pay for it?

How will we rebuild our child, youth and family ministries?

What minister with what strengths -- and weaknesses -- will best serve this congregation in the near term?

How will Old Ship adapt and respond to changes in society and in society's expectation of churches?

What I think I can most usefully do in these last few weeks we will have together is propose a framework for thinking about covenant. And in particular, what does it mean when a body of people forms a new covenant?

The word "covenant" comes from Latin roots which mean "walk together." That's why, when we welcome new people into the covenant that is our church, I like to serenade them with the song I just sang, It's a Pleasure to Know You. As we stand in the sanctuary, we are not getting married. We are not promising to love and honor each other until death do us part. We are promising to walk together, to share the road awhile. If my memory serves me correctly, each one of these new members we welcomed today has prior experience with other UU congregations. That is often the case in our mobile society. We share the road, and we share a bit of ourselves.. .

The term covenant is really grounded in the Bible, a book that some of us know well and with which more of us have a nodding acquaintance,. The Bible is in two main sections, the first of which is called the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible and the second of which is called the New Testament, and which is essentially the Christian Bible. The Old Testament, in turn is broken down into the first Five books of Moses, called the Torah, several books of the history of the Jews, books of poetry, philosophy, fables and song, and the prophets, major and minor. The New Testament starts with the four Gospels, which are styled as the life and times of Jesus, and then has a book of history of early Christian communities called the Acts of the Apostles, then has several Epistles, that is, letters written either by St. Paul or someone trying to imitate him, and the last book is an apocalyptic account of the end of the world called Revelation.

The Old Testament, particularly Genesis has several covenants that God makes with humans. After the great flood, God promises Noah that He will never again try to wipe out all life on earth. Some covenants come with symbols, that is physical things that stand for the covenant. In the case of God's covenant with Noah, its symbol is the rainbow.

Another covenant made by God in the book of Genesis is a promise God makes to Abram, whose name is changed to Abraham in the process, to make of him a great nation, that is to bless him with a lot of descendants. Abram and his wife Sarai are in their nineties by this point, and as she hears God's promise, she falls to the ground laughing. That is why when Abram and Sarai had their child, they named him Isaac, which means laughter. But before all that happened, Abram had taken in an Egyptian servant named Hagar. Sarai was so determined that Abram should have a descendant that she arranged for him to have a relationship with Hagar, which resulted in the birth of Ishmael. But Hagar had become contemptuous of Sarai, and Sarai threw her out of the family compound.

After Sarah had Isaac, she reconciled with Hagar, and God brought them all within the covenant he had formed with Abraham. The sign of that covenant was circumcision of all the males. That included all males born within the household of a member of the covenant, even slave children. So Isaac and his Jewish descendants are within the covenant, but so is Ishmael and his Arab descendants.

Later, in the book of Exodus, God renews his covenant with the Jews in the process of giving them the Ten Commandments and the other aspects of the law. The stone tablets themselves are the sign of this covenant. In the course of interacting with God on Mt. Sinai, Moses has occasion to slaughter an ox and to dash its blood on the leaders of Israel.

Those covenants constitute the Old Testament, that is, a form of words that creates a bond between God and humans. If we fast forward to early Christianity, we find several accounts of Jesus' Last supper, mostly in the Gospels. But probably the earliest account is that contained in St. Paul's First epistle to the Corinthians, which was read by Ellie just now.

Now the technical term for the Last Supper is Eucharist, which is a Greek word meaning thanksgiving. Scholars think that Paul was describing a ritual practiced by the early Christians in about the year 55 CE, probably 25 years after Jesus' crucifixion. But the ritual meaning seems to have been set by then. The bread symbolized Christ's body and the wine symbolized his blood. This whole symbolic structure brings out that Jesus's sacrificial death was the central point of his cult: "this cup is the new covenant in my blood." I do not think that "blood" there is a substitute for kinship, as in "we are all of one blood," but rather is emphasizing the promise that Jesus died for our sins.

There is another interesting aspect of this: Paul's account of the Last Supper in First Corinthians does not have the context that are in the later accounts in the Gospels. All of the account in the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and

John) place the Last Supper at Passover, as a Seder. A Seder is a Jewish ritual meal commemorating the liberation of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery. To me, it seems bizarre that St. Paul, a Jewish Christian and a Roman citizen, would have omitted this context. The theme of a Seder, after all, is freedom and at least there is bitter irony that Jesus is deprived of his freedom as he ritually celebrates freedom.

In those early days of Christianity, there arose an issue with who could be in the covenant. In the years after Jesus was executed, the movement of his followers split into at least two branches. One remained in Jerusalem and was led by James, the brother of Jesus (Santiago, to those who have made a pilgrimage). It was largely a Jewish movement. The other mission was the one that St. Paul led, to the Gentiles throughout the eastern end of the Mediterranean. And shortly after that mission was begun, it came up against a big question of identity: Did a non-Jewish male need to get circumcised in order to join the Jesus movement? This had practical as well as theological ramifications. Paul had to travel to Jerusalem to confer with James on this issue. After much wrestling, James and his team decided that no, non-Jewish males did not have to be circumcised but they should try to keep the spirit if not the letter of the Jewish law.

By the way, there was a covenant issue like this in the early days of the Puritan English settlement of Massachusetts. The people who set up the colony had decreed that no one could be a full member of a church unless they had had a direct experience of Jesus Christ, and if you feared for your immortal soul you didn't lie about such things. But it was a very strict covenant and church membership started to plummet. That was when some bright soul came up with the idea of the half-way covenant: if your parents passed the membership test, you could get in by what was essentially a grandfather clause.

Now why am I taking you back to Sunday School here? Obviously, very few UU's hold on to the feature of Christianity that is central to these biblical passages, that Jesus died for your sins and if you believe in him you can obtain eternal life. Our Universalist ancestors rejected the substitutionary theory of atonement as far back as 1805. Most of us if we think of Jesus at all, think of him as a spiritually gifted teacher, not as a supernatural fixer.

My point here is that covenants can be adapted and modified, but how much change that brings to the covenanted body depends on how central the covenant is in that body.

Some of you may not see the relevance of any of this today, but I'd like to put before you an arresting piece that was posted on Facebook a few days ago,

and has since gotten a bunch of interest. It is by a writer named Naomi Wolf, who is Jewish and lives in Los Angeles and has written at least one best-seller. Here is what she said:

Okay, so I was challenged below: "Read the Bible! God gave the land of Israel to the Jewish people." So....I may get crucified for this but I have started to say it -- most recently (terrified, trembling) to warm welcome in a synagogue in LA: Actually if you read Genesis Exodus and Deuteronomy in Hebrew -- as I do -- you see that God did not "give" Israel to the Jews/Israelites. We as Jews are raised with the creed that "God gave us the land of Israel" in Genesis -- and that ethnically 'we are the chosen people.'" But actually -- and I could not believe my eyes when I saw this, I checked my reading with major scholars and they confirmed it -- actually God's "covenant" in Genesis, Exodus and Deuteronomy with the Jewish people is NOT ABOUT AN ETHNICITY AND NOT ABOUT A CONTRACT. IT IS ABOUT A WAY OF BEHAVING.

Again and again in the "covenant" language He never says: "I will give you, ethnic Israelites, the land of Israel." Rather He says something far more radical - far more subversive -- far more Godlike in my view. He says: IF you visit those imprisoned...act mercifully to the widow and the orphan...welcome the stranger in your midst...tend the sick...do justice and love mercyand perform various other tasks...THEN YOU WILL BE MY PEOPLE AND THIS LAND WILL BE YOUR LAND. So "my people" is not ethnic -- it is transactional. We are God's people not by birth but by a way of behaving, that is ethical, kind and just. And we STOP being "God's people" when we are not ethical, kind and just. And ANYONE who is ethical, kind and just is, according to God in Genesis, "God's people." And the "contract" to "give" us Israel is conditional -- we can live in God's land IF we are "God's people" in this way -- just, merciful, compassionate. AND -- it never ever says, it is ONLY your land. Even when passages spell out geographical "boundaries" as if God does such a thing, it never says this is exclusively your land. It never says I will give this land JUST to you. Remember these were homeless nomads who had left slavery in Egypt and were wandering around in the desert; at most these passages say, settle here, but they do not say, settle here exclusively. Indeed again and again it talks about welcoming "zarim" -- translated as "strangers" but can also be translated as "people/tribes who are not you" -- in your midst. Blew my mind, hope it blows yours."

See my friends, here is a covenant from ancient times, which you can read about in the Torah, but which is still a live issue in a very important part of the world for many people. I shouldn't say "live," it's actually part of a life-and-death issue.

If you look carefully at the uproar over the recent verdict in State of New York vs. Trump you may notice alliances forming on surprising lines. You can see these as contests of loyalty or competing covenants. Is belief in and loyalty to the Rule of Law part of the covenant of American Democracy? What can we do to support these values?

My friends, I will be leaving you in a few weeks. I want to thank you for all the kindness you have showed to me and to Jacqueline, particularly in giving us rides to and from this magic place. As the song says, friendship's a diamond, and trouble's the diamond mine. You reached out to me in my Medical Mystery Tour and we were all the better for it. As I wind up my ministry here, my prayer is that you will work well with your next minister or ministers in discerning the way ahead for this proud old congregation Old Ship and formulate a new covenant which will answer your needs.

Amen.