Not Creed but Covenant

by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, July 28, 2019

**Reading**

In a series of lectures titled The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and Promise of Our Covenant, Alice Blair Wesley tells the history of the founding of the church in Dedham, Massachusetts, one of the oldest Unitarian Churches on American soil. Toward the end of the first lecture she writes:

For any who might suppose our 17th century free church ancestors talked mostly about original sin, predestination and hellfire, I am glad to be able to tell you, not one of those topics is even mentioned in the record of the founding of the Dedham Church. The document describes these discussions of 1637-38 and the talk, talk, talk at each step of the way to the founding, and on to their first reception of new members after the founding, and on to their first election of Officers, after which they ordained two of their own members as Pastor and Elder. In these pages there is much use of these words: reason, reasons, reasoned, reasoning, deliberation, make trial of, clearing, cleared up, encouragement, advice, advise, counsel, agree, agreed, agreement, approbation, liberty, liberties and promising. There is also repeated use of the words: sweet, comfort, help and brotherly. But by far the most commonly used words in this written history are: affection, affections, affectionately, embrace and love, loving, lovingly. In the first 24 pages I counted 32 uses of the words affection and love. Why? Because then and now and for as long as human history lasts - when all is said and done, done and said some more - the integrity of the free church comes down to our loyalty to the spirit of love at work in the hearts and minds of the local members. The laypeople who founded First Church, Dedham knew so and clearly said so, and that is why we still say together, so often in our churches now, “Love is the doctrine of this church. . .”

May we long continue to say so, and understand deeply what we are saying in the liberal free churches these laypeople founded.

**Sermon**

I’m wearing my walking shoes today, as we begin our second year of interim ministry together, a reminder that we are on a journey, traveling the space between one settled minister and the next. My time with you is intentionally limited. Knowing that we have only a brief time together makes it all that more precious. Isn’t that how it is with life?

Like many Unitarian Universalists today, I was not raised as a Unitarian Universalist. I was an inquisitive child and had questions about what I was being taught at my childhood church. That inquisitive nature turns out to be an enduring personality trait of mine, one that is common among Unitarian Universalists. There’s a line from the hymn Blue Boat Home that captures our inquisitive nature: “casting questions into the deep.” In other words, our questions are not mundane, but speak to what theologian Paul Tillich called our “ultimate concerns.” They are the questions humans have been asking for millennia, questions without easy or simple answers, like, How and why did life begin? When and how will it end, or will it ever end? How do we make meaning of the dual reality of having been born knowing that one day, we will die? And how, then, do we best live this one finite life we’ve each been given?

As a child, I had some big questions. Not exactly those I just named, but big questions none the less. Those arose out of my Lutheran upbringing which included the reading of the Apostle’s Creed every Sunday. This is not meant as a criticism of my Lutheran family and friends. More than 2,000 years of arguing about the questions have not resulted in consensus about the answers. And, in Unitarian Universalism, there is room for diverse beliefs about religious questions.

My questions were these:

* If God is all powerful, all knowing and all loving, how could God condemn anyone to an eternity in Hell?
* If God spoke to people during biblical times, when did God quit speaking to people, and why?
* If Jesus was the son of God, how could Jesus also *be* God?
* Why couldn’t women be called to serve the church in the same way men could?

It has been said that all theology is autobiography, so indulge me in a personal story if you will. Like so many young people, I drifted away from the church when my parents quit making me attend. It wasn’t until I was married with two young children of my own that I thought that church might be a good idea, after all. You see, they started asking big questions, those two children, questions like, “Where do babies come from?” Now, I could answer the biological questions about eggs and sperm, but their questions were deeper than that. “Where do eggs and sperm come from?” At which point I realized they were not asking a biological question, but a religious question, “Where does life come from?” Even the Big Bang theory leaves some unanswered questions.

My husband had been raised Catholic so we compromised on the Presbyterian church. Truth is, the pastor of that church was our neighbor and we liked him. It was one communion Sunday that I had what can only be understood as a Unitarian conversion experience. In my Lutheran church, the words of the liturgy for communion said in part, “Our Lord Jesus Christ on the night of his betrayal . . .” When it came time for that same part in the Presbyterian church, the words of the liturgy changed ever so slightly to, “Our Lord Jesus Christ on the night of his arrest . . .” That one word changed everything for me. It was like a bolt of lightening went through my body. “Common criminals are arrested,” I thought. “Maybe Jesus was human, not God.” I knew the thought was heretical, so I didn’t go to my pastor. I went to the library instead.

When I told this story to one of my seminary friends, she replied, “You know you might be a UU when you spend your Sunday afternoons at the library researching Christological controversies.”

There at the back of a thick volume of World Religions, I found the Unitarians and Universalists. Unitarians who believed in a fully human Jesus who had a spark of the Divine within and the Universalists who believed in Universal Salvation, that is either everyone is going to heaven or no one is, because God is too good to damn anyone to an eternity in Hell.

Unitarians and Universalists both held that revelation is not sealed, that new understandings are revealed through the words and deeds of prophetic people throughout the ages, including people of our own time – and – truth is revealed through the findings of science.

Not only that, the Universalists ordained Olympia Brown in 1863. They were the first denomination to ordain a woman into the ministry and the Unitarians quickly followed.

Let’s just say that I had found my people, though it would be several years before I actually walked through the doors of a UU church. There wasn’t one anywhere near us at the time. We became unchurched again for several years, until one Sunday when my husband announced that he was going to church.

Now, I had always been the more religiously inclined one, so I was surprised, but said, “That’s nice, dear. I hope you have a good time.” He kept going back. Each time he would tell me, “You would love this place, really, you would.” Finally, I went with him to the Columbine Unitarian Universalist Church, just ten minutes from our home. A group of people in the neighborhood had started a new congregation. They took out an ad in the local newspaper. The ad was simple. A one-way sign with a red circle and with a line drawn through it, signifying that there is not just one way to truth or enlightenment or salvation, echoing a foundational idea that goes back to the earliest established Unitarian church in 15th century Transylvania, the idea being that we need not think alike to love alike.

Even though I had told my husband, “I’ll attend with you, but I won’t join. Then, well, okay, I’ll become a member, but I won’t get involved.” It wasn’t long before I was singing with the choir, teaching religious education, attending the women’s group, and was elected as co-chair of the Board. I even left the job I had at the time because it required me to work every other Sunday.

I read every book in the church library. I followed the minister around with relentless questions about history, about the denomination, about how congregations are organized and governed. Partly I was looking for a chink in the armor because it all seemed too good to be true and yet, was what I had been searching for my whole life. Then one day, the minister looked me in the eye and asked a question of his own, “Have you ever thought of becoming a minister?” The rest, as they say, is history.

The point of all this is that I discovered that I couldn’t go without my Unitarian Universalist community for even a week. It was like going without oxygen. That’s how life-affirming and life-giving this faith, this living tradition had become for me. The Unitarian Universalist church wasn’t just where I attended services, Unitarian Universalist was who I was. It became and remains an important part of my identity.

This faith, this living tradition, is deep and wide. Its roots go back in time to the early Christian church, when ideas central to who we are today – that there is unity to life, that there is a spark of the divine in each of us, that we are all in this life together – these ideas were suppressed as heresy. That word no longer frightens me as it did during my Lutheran and Presbyterian days. At root, the word *heresy* means *to choose.*

Ours is a chosen faith, whether we are born and bred Unitarian Universalists or if we came out of another faith tradition or no faith tradition at all. Here we hold the proposition that there is more than one way to truth, more than one way to make meaning of this one wild and precious life, more than one way to discover how to best live our lives as moral and ethical beings.

We are held together not by creed but covenant. To find membership among us, no one need give assent to a statement of belief. A covenant is an agreement about how we will be together. We welcome all who would abide with us in a covenant of love and service. Love is our doctrine. Service is our prayer. The words recited here each Sunday. We enter this covenant knowing that we need not think alike to love alike. It is a covenant, a promise we make to each other, and a promise we make to life. It speaks to how we intend to be in our daily lives, how our Unitarian Universalist identity manifests in the world.

The seeds of Unitarianism and Universalism were planted on American soil during a time when the predominant theologies being preached were of hell-fire, damnation, and the salvation of a predestined, elect few. When the pilgrims and puritans left England and settled in the New World, they had questions about how and under what authority they were to gather as congregations without the ecclesiastical rule of the monarchs and bishops they had left behind.

When The Rev. Alice Blair Wesley was researching the records of the First Parish Church in Dedham, Massachusetts in preparation for her series of lectures titled The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and Promise of Our Covenant, she was surprised to find that the founding documents used little in the way of what we think of as traditional religious language, that is, words like sin, salvation, hell, and damnation. The First Parish in Dedham is one of the oldest established Unitarian Universalist congregations on American soil, and as such, their founding documents are part of our spiritual DNA. The language Alice Blair Wesley found in those documents was not creedal but covenantal, not about what they believed but about how they would be together. She said that by far the most common words used were affection and love, words that I find to be profoundly religious.

There probably is no way to be certain, but it has always been my guess that they wrote extensively using those words, not because it was the way the were actually *were* together, at least not all the time, but the way they *aspired* to be together. I think it was probably more along the lines of that most famous ode to love written to the Corinthians by Paul. “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or rude. It does not insist on its own way.” Paul wrote the letter to the church in Corinth at a time when they were arguing with each other and they needed to be called back to the spirit of love.

The First Parish Church in Dedham did eventually split over matters of belief: Unitarians who believed in the oneness of God and trinitarians who believed in a triune God. The trinitarian Congregationalists left, taking the church silver with them. The Unitarians retained possession of the building and the First Parish name. Shortly thereafter in 1825, the American Unitarian Association was formed.

Since that time, the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961 to form today’s Unitarian Universalist Association. Both denominations had grown to be more inclusive of many faith traditions. When people ask me if Unitarian Universalism is Christian, I respond by say, “not exclusively.” Our roots are Christian, but Christianity is no longer central to who we are. Our embrace is inclusive of people of all faiths and people of no faith.

When I am asked how we can claim to be a religion if we don’t share common beliefs, I say that at root, the word *religion* means that which binds together. We are bound not by creed but covenant. We welcome all who would join in our promise to abide together in the spirit of love and service. We need not believe alike to love alike. Ours is a mutual quest for truth and meaning, casting questions into the deep. Love is our doctrine. Service is our prayer. May it be so. May we make it so through our living.