

Title: Agree in Love

Blurb: A covenant is a set of promises that we make to one another, in a Unitarian Universalist religious community, in light of something larger than ourselves. A covenant is a commitment to the relationships we have with one another and to making, maintaining and strengthening those relationships, a religious practice, even when and especially when times are difficult. As we make that commitment to relationship, because together we can achieve something important that we could not achieve by ourselves. Because these religious communities we form matter not only in our own lives, but in the lives of people we have never met and may not ever know.

Speaker: Rev. David Pyle

Bio: The Rev. David Pyle is the Regional Lead and a Congregational Life Consultant with the MidAmerica Regional Staff.

Rev. Pyle holds a Masters of Divinity from the Meadville Lombard Theological School and a Bachelors of Arts in History and Political Science from East Tennessee State University. He completed his Clinical Pastoral Education Residency at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, Illinois. He has served as a minister for congregations in California, Michigan, and Illinois, and as an Administrator for a congregation in Texas. He also serves as the Deputy Command Chaplain for the Army Reserve Sustainment Command. He lives in Oak Grove, Kentucky.

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READING “Our Faith” by Edward Schempp

“Unitarian Universalism is a fierce belief in the way of freedom and reverence for the sacred dignity of each individual. With Jefferson we “have sworn eternal hostility against every tyranny over the mind.”

Unitarian Universalism is cooperation with a universe that created us. It is a celebration of life. It is being in love with goodness and justice. It is a sense of humor about absolutes.

Unitarian Universalism is faith in people, hope for tomorrow’s child, confidence in a continuity that spans all time. It looks not to a perfect heaven, but toward a good earth. It is respectful of the past, but not limited to it. It is trust in growing and conspiracy with change. It is spiritual responsibility for a moral tomorrow.”

Schempp was the plaintiff in the 1963 Supreme Court case that declared mandatory Bible reading in public schools unconstitutional.

READING “Nothing to Fear in Difference” by Adlai Stevenson

“I think that one of our most important tasks is to convince others that there’s nothing to fear in difference; that difference, in fact, is one of the healthiest and most invigorating of human characteristics without which life would become meaningless. Here lies the power of the liberal way: not in making the whole world Unitarian [Universalist], but in helping ourselves and others to see some of the possibilities inherent in viewpoints other than one’s own; in encouraging the free interchange of ideas; in welcoming fresh approaches to the problems of life; in urging the fullest, most vigorous use of critical self-examination.”

SERMON: Agree in Love

One of the joys of being a US Army Reserve Chaplain is that I'm in a professional working ministerial relationship with ministers, fellow chaplains of very different religious faith traditions than Unitarian Universalism. Over the last five years, I've been in ministry with two Roman Catholic priests, one conservative rabbi, one Pentecostal minister, one Episcopal priest, two evangelical ministers, a Presbyterian minister, a Southern Baptist pastor and a pastor for the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Now, these are not just interfaith collegial relationships. We're all in ministry together, in essence serving the same congregation. My current supervisor is one of those evangelical ministers. I have been the supervisor for many of them at one point or another. Over the last six years that I've been part of the Medical Brigade and the Army Reserve Sustainment Command. Over my 16 years in the army chaplain corps, I've been in such ministerial relationship with hundreds of other military chaplains, many of them from very different faith traditions that are often very religiously conservative faith traditions.

And in most cases, I'm the first Unitarian Universalist they have ever met. Many of them have never even imagined that a faith tradition like ours, could even exist.

I could not count the number of conversations I've had trying to explain what it means to be part of a covenantal faith, where we do not even pretend to believe the same things, and yet are in committed religious community with one another. These military chaplain colleagues will ask me what I believe about God, Jesus, heaven, hell, salvation and sin, and I will tell them, and when they're hovering on the edge of apoplexy, and in some cases, I'm beginning to worry about their blood pressure, I issue the coup de grace. I say something like, but you know, that's just me. Just my faith. Many Unitarian Universalists have very different ideas about these things than I do. Boom! Mind blown. Look of total confusion. What? I thought you were telling me what Unitarian Universalists believe? Oh, no, I say. Most of the congregations I have served have thought my beliefs were quite odd. That is what makes it fun. Now we, in this online worship service, I bet we get what I'm saying here. But my dear military chaplain colleagues, at this point either storm off in complete confusion, usually with some comments about heresy in the afterlife. Or they become really curious about Unitarian Universalism and about how a faith tradition like ours could exist and even thrive.

It's that second group, the curious chaplains, that I know I'm gonna like. And I've learned more about Unitarian Universalism from their questions than I did from attending a Unitarian Universalist seminary. The idea of a faith tradition that is not bound together by a shared doctrine, a shared set of beliefs, is a very difficult idea for them to grasp.

After a long conversation with one of my colleagues a few summers ago, an African American Southern Baptist pastor from Oklahoma, in which I discussed the idea of our congregations as being bound in covenantal relationship, and committed to building the beloved community. He looked at me and he said, so basically, you all are trying to be the church that Jesus talked about, rather than believe all the things about Jesus. I told him, I probably would never have framed it that way. But-- and I still don't know how often we achieve being that kind of a community. But I could go with that understanding, and that I personally still believe some of those things about Jesus, even if others of my faith tradition did not. Being the beloved community, being the Church that Jesus talks about, in my friend and colleague's words and understanding. It's a high ideal. It's an amazingly difficult, difficult standard that we set for ourselves as Unitarian Universalists, setting forth ideals as radical as the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations at the center of our commitments to make one another, that we make to one another makes being in religious community, a difficult and sometimes painful spiritual practice. We ask a lot of our religious communities that we create, and we hold those communities up to a set of ideals that we really can only ever strive to achieve.

When I have the in depth and serious conversations with those curious Chaplain colleagues of mine, about Unitarian Universalism, one of the most common reactions is that they cannot believe that we can pull this off, that we are able to remain in religious community with one another. They think of their own congregations and try to imagine being in religious community without a unifying center of belief, scripture, theology and practice. And what they tell me is that they just cannot imagine. They cannot imagine how such a congregation could remain together without that kind of identified center. Because they know how difficult it is to be in religious community. That it's always challenging, even when we are not reinventing church in the middle of a pandemic. Think about it. We invite people in the community to invest their deepest and highest aspirations, their hopes and their dreams, to invest a part of their soul. We invite people into relationships where we call upon each other, to be vulnerable.

And in that vulnerability, we can hurt one another. This is not just true of Unitarian Universalism, this is true of every religious community. My military chaplain colleagues see this in their own traditions. And they know that in those times when the community is not at its best, when there is conflict that is not engaged well, or when people are wounded within the community, they know that they can turn to their sacred story, their sacred scripture, their sacred ritual, their sacred beliefs, as the center to hold the community together. And they cannot imagine how we are able to hold our communities together without having such a sacred and common center. What I tell them is that in

Unitarian Universalist congregations, at least, when we are at our best, what rests in the center of our faith tradition is a practice of covenant.

Not a covenant, not words on a page, but Covenant as a practice, as something that we do with one another. Covenant as a verb, not a noun. Covenant as an action, Covenant as a way of being. Covenant as a commitment to relationship with one another, as a sacred promise made to one another, a sacred promise that holds us together, even when being together is hard. Oh, our congregations have covenants that are nouns, things written on paper, printed on the wall, or read at the beginning of meetings.

The Unitarian Universalist Association that I serve, and that I work for as a congregational life consultant and as the MidAmerica Regional lead. Our Association exists because there is a written covenant between all of the more than 1000 congregations, a covenant that each congregation, your congregation has made with all of the other congregations. It is from that covenant, that the seven principles and the six sources come. It is a sacred promise that your congregation has made to all the other congregations across the country and beyond.

A covenant is a set of promises that we make to one another, in a Unitarian Universalist religious community, in light of something larger than ourselves. A covenant is a commitment to the relationships we have with one another and to making, maintaining and strengthening those relationships, a religious practice, even when and especially when times are difficult. As we make that commitment to relationship, because together we can achieve something important that we could not achieve by ourselves. Because these religious communities we form matter not only in our own lives, but in the lives of people we have never met and may not ever know.

Hosea Ballou, one of the preeminent Universalist ministers of the 1800s, who systematized much of the American Universalist thought that has grown into Unitarian Universalism today was able to capture this sense of covenant in his oft quoted axiom. "If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury. But if we do not, no other agreement will do us any good." In this he was not calling upon our congregations to not have conflict, to not have disagreement. He was not saying that we all have to think alike. He was calling us to even in our disagreement, keep covenant, keep the relationships at the center. Keep at the center of that commitment to love one another. This practice of covenant, or covenant as a verb comes down to this: keeping love at the center. And I tell you, it is a hard practice, especially right now, during this time in our country's history. In my civilian ministry, which is why I'm here with you all today, I'm a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association's congregational life staff. We're the part of our association that works directly with congregations, on the challenges and the opportunities that our congregations face.

A part of that work has always been helping congregations to learn how to engage well, within-- engage conflict well, within our congregations, helping congregations to engage in conflict in covenantal and vital ways when conflicts happen, and helping congregations to grow in their trust of one another. Where they are willing and able to

disagree with one another in love, in ways that do not become conflicts that threaten the love that must remain at the center of our religious communities.

One of the things that I and my fellow UUA congregational life consultants have noticed is that there has been a significant increase in the number of conflicts our congregations are experiencing in these last six years. Including during the time when we have been together only virtually. I'm in my 10th year doing this work on both district and regional staffs. And the last five, six years it has felt to me, like helping congregations to engage conflict is most of what I do.

And what is more, in the last six years, I've seen such an increase in people engaging in these conflicts in ways that cause harm to one another in ways that do not keep love or covenant at the center, and in ways that make it difficult for people to risk the vulnerability in their religious community that is a central part of spiritual experience. It's not hard to guess what happened six years ago, that may be feeding this change in the dynamics of many of our congregations. We've been experiencing a time in our country where fear and division are being used as political weapons more than in previous times. No matter the damage, it may cause to those around us. And where many people, especially some of the people in our congregations in our communities who hold marginalized identities, where many people fear being made the enemy or the target of the fear and division that has been promoted and unleashed upon our culture.

In such moments as this, it is in such moments as this, that our practice of covenant, our promises to one another, to hold one another in love are more vital than they have ever been. It is in such moments when we are feeling afraid and uncertain that we most need to be gentle with one another. And we need to hold one another in love. Even and most especially when it's hard. Not in love that does not name when we are hurting. When we are afraid when we believe that things are not as they should be, for as Dr. Cornel West says, "Justice is what love looks like in public." Love never calls us not to speak our truth. Love calls us to speak that truth with compassion and empathy for each other. Love calls us to hearing one another not only through the lens of our own perceptions and experiences, but opening our hearts to hearing the perceptions and the experiences of those we are in relationship with, in our families, in our workplaces, virtual or not. And maybe especially within our religious communities.

Why do we have to be specially careful to share our truth in love and listen with compassion and empathy? In these our religious communities? Because here within the physical and virtual walls of our congregations, within these relationships between us, we've invited people to be vulnerable, to risk their deepest selves, to trust one another, with that which is most sacred, to care for one another. When we share our truth and do so with a love for the other in our hearts, that is the center of Unitarian Universalism. That is the beloved community. That is the heart of covenant that is at the center of our faith. And there is no more sacred religious practice within what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist than this. So may it be. Blessed be. And Amen.

OFFERTORY

A few years ago, I had the experience of a soldier who had been very reticent to speak with me as their Chaplain, ask for an appointment with me. Sitting in my office, seemingly very nervous, they very hesitantly told me that they had heard from someone else that I was a Unitarian Universalist, and they wanted to know if that was true. I was thinking in my mind that this conversation could go a couple of different ways. I told them yes, I was indeed a Unitarian Universalist, and I immediately saw them relax. "So, you don't have a problem with soldiers being gay?" they asked. I smiled and said something like "I think a soldier being gay is wonderful!" and they smiled too. And then they told me that they had attended a wedding of two friends of theirs who were gay at a Unitarian Universalist Church, and until that time they had never even imagined that such a church could exist. That soldier and I developed a wonderful relationship that led to several other Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual soldiers in the unit deciding they could trust me as well. All because of one of our congregations having the courage and commitment to live our values in the public space.

Our religious faith matters. Our living faith tradition saves lives. Our very existence as a faith community gives hope to those we may never even meet, hope that is desperately needed in this world. Your pledges and gifts to your congregation ensures that the transformative power of our ministry continues in a world the desperately needs us. I invite you to give as generously as you always have. The offering to support the work of this congregation and of our faith will now be given and received.

CLOSING WORDS

I will close us with this thought today... the thing we practice here? That we do not need to think alike to love alike? That there is more than binds us than the things we believe? The hope that the divine light between each of us creates an interdependent web of all existence? The world desperately needs that. In our faith communities we are practicing to be the change we want to see in the world. At times, that can be difficult... we do not always do it well. And yet, it is the transformation of humanity that this world needs... Go forth in Peace, Creating Peace.