

We Begin Again in Love

Service Description:

We Begin Again in Love

Ours is a covenantal faith, and what binds us together are the promises we make. Just as we periodically spend time looking at our personal lives making promises to ourselves, we should also look at our promises to each other and to the communities we are a part. Presented by Beth Casebolt, CRE, UUA Congregational Life Staff in the Central East Region.

If you need an image, this one on Worshipweb is appropriate

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/image/we-forgive-ourselves-and-each-other>

Suggested Readings

Opening Words

To Remember Our Promises

By [Sarah C Stewart](#)

Bring who you are as you enter our church this morning.

Bring your best self and your struggling self;

bring your mistakes and your triumphs;

bring your shortcomings and your recommitment to good.

Bring yourself here and open your heart to beauty, to truth,

to the door that is open to the presence of God.

Here in this church we are trying to walk together on the peaceable way; trying to hammer out division, and hatred, and all that separates one from another.

We try, and we will fall short, but held in love, we try again.

We come together this morning, as a church, to bow our heads in prayer,
to raise our voices in song,

to remember our promises and vow to live by them once again.

WorshipWeb - <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/opening/remember-our-promises>

Chalice Lighting-

We light our chalice this morning

Remembering that in churches around the world

Other Unitarian Universalists are lighting a chalice

And so we are in community together.

Responsive Reading - This should ideally be done as a responsive reading, but can also be done with two readers.

Singing the Living Tradition - #637

A Litany of Atonement, Rev. Rob Eller-Issacs

For Remaining Silent when a single voice would have made a difference

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For losing sight of our unity

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled
the illusion of separateness

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

Benediction/Closing Reading

The Work We Share

By [Krista Taves](#)

It is our work, shared with each other in covenant,
That creates and sustains this beloved community.

We extinguish this chalice, but its light lives on
in the directions we have chosen today.

The light of this faith lives on in us, together,
in our hearts, minds, bodies and spirits.

Amen and Blessed Be.

WorshipWeb - [https://www.uua.org/worship/words/chalice-extinguishing/
work-we-share](https://www.uua.org/worship/words/chalice-extinguishing/work-we-share)

Recommended Hymns:

Come, Come Whoever You Are, #188

Love will Guide Us #131

Break Not the Circle #323

Time for All Ages - Broken Promises, by Beth Casebolt, CRE

This is a story for the young people joining us today, but the older folks are welcome to listen in.

I want to tell you a story about a young person whose name was Teri. Now Teri was a very happy young person. They liked to dance and they liked to sing. They liked to go to school and be with their friends. They liked to play with their kitten and help their dad fix dinner. Typical young person stuff.

One day Teri made a promise to their friend Geri to go their house to play after school. Teri made their promise while they were at church. Geri and Teri didn't go to the same school but they lived in the same neighborhood. But the next day, Teri went to school and got busy. They went to art and they had lunch, they went to reading and finished their math. And then they rode on the bus home. But when Teri got home, they totally forgot they were supposed to go to Geri's house. They saw their kitten and started playing with it and they talked to their mom. Suddenly the phone rang and it was Geri. Geri was very upset. They had been waiting and waiting for Teri to come over but Teri never shown up. Teri had broken their promise.

Have you ever had a time when you broke a promise? Maybe you promised to spend time with your friend, like Teri, or clean your room, or write a letter or email and you didn't. Maybe you forgot. Maybe something more important came up and you didn't have time. But no matter the reason, you didn't keep your promise.

How did you fix things when that happened? Did you say you were sorry? Did you do whatever it was later? Did you find someone else to do it instead? What do you think Teri should do?

Teri was upset about their promise. They didn't mean to hurt Geri's feelings. They just forgot. So Teri apologized. Geri was hurt, but accepted Teri's apology. After the phone call Teri talked to their mom. Mom asked what Teri could do to make it up to Geri and Teri asked if they could invite Geri over to play the next day. Mom said yes, so Teri called Geri back and invited them over. The next day they were able to play together and Teri apologized again in person. Geri accepted the apology and they played happily the rest of the afternoon.

Now it's hard when we break a promise because most of the time it not only affects us, it affects someone else too, right? And that person may feel hurt when we break our promise. They may have been counting on us to help them in some way and we let them down.

It's important when we break a promise that we realize what we have done and talk about it with our friend or family member. That we understand how they feel about the broken promise. We might not realize how important that promise was to them. Then we can agree to try again.

We do the same in our communities. As Unitarian Universalists, in our community here at church, we make promises to each other called covenants. Covenants are promises we make to the whole group about how we will behave and treat each other. We promise not to be mean and

to listen to each other. We promise to take care of our church building. We promise to take care of each other. And when we break our covenant, we need to find a way to apologize and begin again with the whole community. That's a lot harder than breaking a promise and fixing it with one person. But it is important.

So the next time you break a promise, whether to your friend or to your community, think about what you can do to make it better and start over again. And remember that every time we break a promise we can try to make it right again if we talk about it, together.

We Begin Again In Love, by Beth Casebolt, CRE

We all make promises. We make promises to ourselves, we make promises to our family members and our friends. We make promises to our work colleagues and to the different communities we are members. We call promises by different names - commitments, covenants, agreements, resolutions, but they are all, at their core, still promises.

We all break promises as well. Think about yourself. When we start something new we make promises. At the New Year we make resolutions about making changes in our lives, how long do your New Year's resolutions last? If you are like me, you are lucky to make it out of January before old habits start creeping in and those resolutions - promises - are gone.

Our congregations are no different. Only here we call those promises covenants.

Covenant. Covenant is one of the keystones of the Unitarian Universalist faith. It is an important part of our history, it is an important part of our present and it is an important part of our future.

What is covenant? This explanation comes from the Commission on Appraisal Report, “Engaging our Theological Diversity”:

“Mutual promises flow from a shared covenant and draw Unitarian Universalists closer to our unifying core than individual claims can manage. Unitarian Universalism summons us to “pledge our troth” (an old-fashioned phrase that marries both truthfulness and trust) to one another, forging our individual religious journeys together.

Promises must be risked openly and publicly, unlike beliefs, which can be held in the privacy of one’s own soul. Promises are fulfilled only in communal life. Promises require companions and signal institutional allegiance.

Promises remind us that we are connected and beholden to sisters and brothers in our chosen faith. We are spiritual kin, bound together in the interdependent web. Promises support partnerships through fair and foul weather. Promises foster and sustain beloved communities.

In reality, congregations, like couples, can crack and rupture for plenty of legitimate reasons. However, breakups frequently occur because life appears greener elsewhere, because conflicts escalate without redress or simply because of boring stretches. Hence, mature promise-making encourages partners and parishioners to calm down, breathe deeply and stay at the welcome table.

Unitarian Universalist minister David Blanchard penned wisdom applicable to covenantal bonds of all sorts in his meditation manual *A Temporary State of Grace*:

Do more than simply keep the promises made in your vows. Do something more: Keep promising. As time passes, keep promising new things, deeper things, vaster things, yet unimagined things. Promises that will be needed to fill the expanses of time and of love...keep promising.

Promises remind us to remain firm yet flexible, to choose again what we chose before. Promises prompt us to keep an evergreen awareness in our interpersonal and institutional lives, to grow where we are planted and, as necessary, to do some repotting.”

So from this we learn that covenants are an important piece of our faith. It's how we are together. It's how we stay together. It is what holds us as a community. We are a covenantal faith - there's that word again, covenant. We don't have a creed that we all state we believe that holds us together, instead it's our covenants.

Covenants are important in our congregations and we find them everywhere. We have covenants in all our RE classes that teachers and students are expected to abide by. We have behavioral covenants in our congregations that outline how we expect each other to act in our community. We have board covenants and committee covenants. But exactly how do we use those covenants? Do we revisit them? Stay true to them? Revise them when necessary?

In a classroom setting, a covenant only stays effective for a church year. The next year, it's a new class and a new covenant is part of the first day's activities. When a new person joins the class, the covenant is reviewed and they are asked if they agree. Board covenants are reviewed each year when new members are elected and join the board. This offers an opportunity to talk about these promises and expectations and re-consider them. Changes can be made, these are living documents.

But what about our congregation wide covenants like our behavioral covenants? Do we revisit those on a regular basis? When was the last time you read your congregation's behavioral covenant, if you have one? Do we advise individuals about these covenants when they join and listen if they have objections? How do we manage these situations? Are these living documents? Are we making them an active part of our lives?

And more importantly, what do we do when covenants of any type are broken? How do we repair and reform our community? This is the piece we seem to ignore. We make promises, but we don't consider what to do if the promises get broken.

We have a hymn in our grey hymnal called Come, Come, Whoever You Are. This is a very familiar hymn to many of our members and it's often sung as a representation of how accepting we are. We welcome everyone as they are. Did you know this hymn is adapted from a poem by Rumi and a line has been left out? If you have sung this hymn in harmony you know the missing line:

The poem actually reads:

“Come, come, whoever you are,
wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving, it doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vow a hundred times.
Come, come again, come.”

Note what was left out of the hymn - Even if you have broken your vow a hundred times. We welcome you even if you have broken your promises. Why was that left out? Why don't we sing that line? It's as if we don't want to acknowledge that promises and covenants get broken. We are conflict avoidant and we don't want to talk about the messy work of fixing things when things go wrong.

Let's think about this. When we have a covenant in a classroom, and someone breaks the covenant what do we do? Usually the teacher, or sometimes a student says, that's not part of our covenant, and the person

who has broken the covenant says “oh sorry” and stops the behavior and everyone goes on. Problem solved.

What happens when a board or committee covenant is broken? When someone comes to a meeting unprepared? When someone won't allow other opinions to be voiced during the meeting? When someone cross-talks during discussion? Do we call them on it? Do we point out their error? Or do we ignore it because we don't want to get confrontational or be in conflict? Do we hold the covenant sacred or give in to discomfort? It varies depending on the personalities on the board or committee. Unfortunately more often than not, we ignore the behavior. And when we do that, the covenant no longer binds the group together. Some groups read their covenant at the start of every meeting as a reminder of what they have promised to do.

Congregational covenants such as behavioral covenants often have a procedure or process of reconciliation that goes with them. Sometimes this is called a disruptive person policy. Sometimes it involves a Right Relations Team. But do we follow those? Or do we ignore the behavior that is in violation of the covenant in the interest of “keeping the peace” and only use the policy when behaviors are extreme? Is it because we don't want to be the person who “pushed them out?”

We need to become better at calling those who have broken covenant back into covenant with us. We need to agree a mistake has been made and that we are going to begin again in love. Those who have broken the covenant own and admit the mistake, those who have been affected by the

broken covenant forgive those who have broken it. This isn't a perfect system. And it can take a long time to heal the wounds that a broken covenant has caused. These aren't overnight fixes. We're human. We hold grudges. It's hard to forgive. We don't like to admit when we are wrong. But it's how we go forward. It makes the process complete.

Congregations are one of the few places in our lives we get to practice these skills. To apologize, to atone for our mistakes, to offer and grant forgiveness. When was the last time you did that outside of your faith community or your family? Rarely are these sorts of processes found outside of the church anymore.

This is how rules and covenants differ. Breaking rules usually requires some sort of punishment or loss of privileges. If you do X, you can no longer do Y. Covenants aren't the same. When a covenant is broken the community calls the person back into covenant by asking the question can you recommit to be with us under these guidelines again? Can we trust you?

This method of conversation and learning to hold covenant is a skill our society is losing. Many of us are entrenched in our "side", in our beliefs and we can't hear what the other has to say. Covenants invite dialogue. Why do you feel that way? What brought you to that conclusion? How can we make this work for everyone? How do we forgive? How do we adapt and go forward?

Covenants are the glue that hold us together. Re-covenanting processes are the skills that make living together as a community possible. And like other skills, coming back into covenant as a community is something we should plan a process for, be intentional about, practice, and review regularly. Does your congregation offer opportunities to be in dialogue and practice these skills? Doing this can be uncomfortable. We have to practice being in discomfort to make this work.

Businesses and many other kinds of groups exist purely for the sake of accomplishing their stated goals — the people come together for the sake of their common purpose. For religious communities, on the other hand, being in community is its own goal. And since communities are made of imperfect creatures, falling short of that goal is inevitable. This means that any covenant that lacks a process for reconciliation will inevitably fail.

Think about the community of your church, and the smaller communities within it. What are the covenants that hold them together? Are they explicitly stated or not? Are they reviewed regularly, or do members just assume someone new will somehow figure it out on their own? And when someone falls out of covenant — when, not if — does the group know what to do to restore the community? As Rumi wrote, “even if you have broken your vows a hundred times, come, yet again, come.”

To be a living and healthy community, we need to be intentional about how to bring people back into the circle of caring and begin again in love.