Covenant: Practice Makes Possible
Rev. Erica Baron

As T. Thorn Coyle says, “Practice makes possible.” How can the practice of covenant help us to navigate relationships in our lives and in our congregations? How do we practice covenant when things are hard? Rev. Erica Baron, Congregational Life Staff in the New England Region.

Transcript of the Sermon:
I talk about covenant a lot. I mean, as a person who has been trying to explain and practice Unitarian Universalism, for most of my life, it tends to come up quite a bit. And often when I do talk about covenant, someone will say to me, I know you're not talking about marriage, but and then go on to describe something they learned about covenant from their own marriage, or long term relationship. And usually I say, Well, I'm not not talking about marriage. In fact, personal relationships, including romantic partnerships, other family connections, and friendships, are the contexts where I have learned how to be in covenant with people, even though only some of those relationships actually have a formal covenant.

When I was in middle school, my best friend was an evangelical Christian named Elizabeth. I was an atheist Unitarian Universalist. For both of us, our theological commitments were really important and completely opposite. So one of our favorite activities was to debate each other about all things religious and their implications. For the earnest teenagers we were, those implications were quite wide ranging, and we never ran out of topics to disagree about. Part of our style of debate was to find and exploit any weakness in each other's arguments, and to tease each other about them in ways that would have been offensive and cruel in some contexts. But for us, these little barbs were part of the banter of our friendship, and that friendship was actually built on a deep well of affection and respect for each other. Years later, I met Rachel, the woman who I eventually married. And when Rachel and I were first getting to know each other, and establishing the communication style of our relationship, I came to understand that this sort of teasing banter was not okay with her. It felt cruel and undermining. So it is not a part of the way we talk to each other.

My father is one of nine siblings in his family, and as each of them found partners and brought them into the family, this was accompanied by a sort

of teasing that often included pranks of various kinds, and was ultimately cemented, but over the top decorating shenanigans, with the couple's car at every wedding. Some couples in the family have gone to great lengths to prevent their cars from being thus marked, including locking them, hiding them and attempting to fool us with decoys. Doesn't matter, we always find them. Except for my sister's wedding, when the photographer had the same car in the same color as my sister's car, and we accidentally decorated the wrong one. The photographer came back to her car and was like, what? When I married Rachel, I was the first person in my extended family to marry someone of the same gender. So I was relieved and grateful that our car got the same treatment as everyone else's at their weddings. In fact, we had two cars at our wedding location, and they both got decorated. It felt like a way of saying that our wedding was as real as all the other weddings in the family.

On the other hand, I have a friend who every year in late March writes an impassioned Facebook post, asking everyone to not prank him on April Fool's Day. To him pranks are mean spirited and make him go through the world anxiously expecting something awful. It feels to him like organized pranks are a way of ganging up on someone, making them a target.

Did you know that different cultures have different speaking rhythms that indicate respect and disrespect? In my culture, northeast American white middle class, the way to show engagement and respect in a conversation is to wait until the other person stops talking. And then to say something with only a very tiny pause, if any, between the two speakers. Sometimes if we're talking about something particularly difficult, either intellectually or emotionally, we might take a longer pause to find the right words. But that's not typical in ordinary conversation. And occasionally, we might overlap. When it's usually accidental, or the person who is overlapping really is trying to dominate the conversation and undermine the other person's words. In other cultures respect is shown by a significant pause between one speaker and the reply. And yet other cultures, the way to express interest and engagement is to slightly overlap the end of the previous speaker. And I learned this in a visceral way back in my first ministry. There was a particular group in the congregation that met about once a month at a member's house. And one of the people in this group lived near me. So we used to carpool. The drive was about 20 to 30 minutes. So naturally, we would chat on the way. And the other person was always interrupting me. I mean, just constantly. And I interpreted this to mean that she didn't really

care what I had to say, and tended to just stop talking at some point in every conversation. Then I learned this thing about conversational pacing, and learns that she comes from one of the cultures that does the slightly overlapping thing, in this case, Ashkenazi Jewish culture. Once I learned that, for her, this slight overlap is meant to indicate interest and engagement rather than disrespect, it felt better. But it still required an effort on my part, to continually reinterpret what I was experiencing.

When I learned that Rachel experienced the teasing style of communication as hurtful, I could have insisted that I didn't mean it that way, and asked her to reinterpret those comments every time I made them. This is actually a thing that people do a lot. It often looks like saying someone is too sensitive, or that they can't take a joke. And I could have done that in this case. But I care about Rachel a lot. So I don't want to be hurting her all the time, even if I'm not intending to. I want her to feel safe and affirmed in our relationship. So I don't engage in that particular style of communication with her. That was an easy thing to change. Want to know what was harder? Changing how I act when things are hard, especially in times of disagreement or conflict. I don't know about you, but I was never taught how to fight well. I mean, not really. I was taught how not to fight, that hitting, biting, kicking, etc. are not appropriate responses to conflict in relationships. And neither is being mean with my words, or using words to be deliberately cruel. Beyond that, though, I think the only skill I was deliberately taught for actively navigating conflict before I was an adult, was compromise. In other words, I get some of what I want, and you get some of what you want. We try to make things fair, often in a pretty mathematical way. The conflicts I've faced as an adult, have mostly been too complicated for the simplistic tool of mathematical compromise to solve. And some of my childhood conflicts were more complicated than this, too, if I'm honest.

I've encountered many other tools that people use to try to navigate conflict as an adult. And you might recognize some of these as tools you've learned to use yourself or have used on you. One tool is the continued reliance on mathematical compromise. And this tends to make every conflict sometimes even every interaction, in every relationship an entry in some imagined ledger of debt and surplus. Conflicts are solved by asserting debt and exacting payment. Or less often, by admitting indebtedness and offering concession. Another tool is the logical argument. Conflicts are won by asserting that the emotional needs of the other parties to the conflict are insignificant, or failing to notice them all together. And by

hiding one's own emotional needs, behind the veil of reasoned argument. This usually comes with an inability to notice and tend to one's own emotional needs, as well as the others. There are so many other tools that people use for conflict, emotional manipulation, which usually works by making the other person feel guilty until they give into your wants. There's remaking the rules in which the standard being applied in any given situation is always the one that benefits you. My favorite tool for much of my life was withdrawal, allowing the other to win this conflict by getting what they want. And then letting the other win every conflict, always getting what they want. Until the day I decided that the continued negation of my own wants and needs is not worth it. And this is followed by a more decisive withdrawal in the form of ending the relationship. And then I met Rachel, I had finally come to the end of my own willingness to disappear my own wants and needs in a relationship. And I did not want to withdraw from my relationship with Rachel. I became committed to her, to connection with her, to building a life with her and to a real equal partnership between the two of us. And that meant that we had to learn to go through conflict within the context of our commitment to each other. We didn't do this very well at the beginning. I know that I used the tactic of saying whatever will be the strongest arguement to get my own way early in our relationship, I think I'd probably use the logical argument tactic to. And there were some truly absurd fights that were about small mundane things which covered far deeper fears and insecurities for both of us. And yet, we still wanted to be together. So we had to learn to do better. And gradually, with the help of a couples counselor we did. The details of that process are unique to us, of course. For me, though, the thing that I learned by engaging conflict in my primary relationship was how to bring my most important values and commitments into conflict. I value fairness, that means I have to apply the same standards equally in a conflict, I can't change the rules of engagement whenever it suits me. I value honesty, that means I need to acknowledge when my partner says something true, that is hard to hear. And it means I have to admit it when I'm wrong. I value equality. That means I can't get my way all the time. But also I can't give way all the time. Most of all, though, I value this person, my partner, because I love her. I want the way we go through conflict to move us toward each other at the end of the day, rather than pushing us apart. To do that, I need to be transparent, to show her what's really going on for me, which means I need to figure out what's really going on for me.

Practicing my covenant, my commitment to my wife over the course of years, has made it easier to notice when I'm getting angry about something that is not the real thing. It has made it easier to stop before I say something just to win, and decide to say the more vulnerable truer thing instead. It has made it easier to stop when she hits on something true that I hadn't considered to take it in and to let it change my mind. I don't do any of this perfectly even after 17 years. But as author T. Thorn Coyle says, practice makes possible. So it gets more impossible, the more I practice.

Congregational communities are another place where we practice covenant. Within congregations, we sometimes think of covenant as a thing, set of promises that we write together, and which we remind ourselves of, hopefully at regular intervals. I know in my experience as a Unitarian Universalist lay leader and minister, I often thought of our congregational covenants, as quite fragile. As a set of promises, they could be broken and regularly were whenever we failed to live up to a perfect ideal of what those promises mean. Maybe it was this seeming demand for perfection that led to the other thing I regularly witnessed, covenants languishing and drawers and files, never made alive in actual interactions in the congregation. So the idea of a covenant not as a thing, but as a practice, not something we make, but something we do, has been an important shift in my thinking. In congregations, we make commitments to each other, and then we practice them. Sometimes this is easy. Sometimes there is the simple joy and a community doing go to work together. But just as in my marriage or in any long term relationship, there are also moments of tension, challenge and conflict. And then we have to practice our commitments to each other. Covenant as a practice feels much less fragile than Covenant as a thing, at least to me. When I imagine a covenant as a set of promises, in my mind's eye, I see a glass vessel, beautiful, capable of holding whatever I needed to hold, but only until it is inevitably broken. Covenant as a practice feels more like maintaining my house, there is always a to do list. Small things break or need attention pretty much all the time. But the structure is sound. And the more I work to fix the small things, the more I learn about how to take care of the structure. And I also know when there is a big thing that I need help with that the house stands through all of this. It's a good thing we have a strong house because covenants can be hard work, especially in a diverse community. Let's say I'm sitting at a board meeting and the discussion is flowing freely. But there's someone that keeps interrupting everyone else. Is that because they don't care about what anyone else is saying that might be. It might

also be that they are using the conversation style of slight overlap to communicate engagement. Maybe I express frustration about something and someone else makes a joke, are they really trying to release some of the tension as a way to indicate that we can still both belong even in difficult moments? Maybe, or are they trying to make light of my concerns? Also possible. What if the way that someone indicates affection feels like cruelty to someone else? What if the way some people express belonging feels like targeted exclusion to someone else? Who does the hard work of continuous reinterpretation? Is it just the style held by the majority of people in the congregation? And if so, are we really making space for diversity of cultures and experiences among us? All of that is hard enough when things are going well. But when we're in conflict, it all gets harder. Tt's harder to let go of the unfair fighting tactics we've picked up along the way, which means it's more likely that we actually are intending something less than kind in our interactions, which makes it harder to give each other the benefit of the doubt about our different styles, which makes us all feel unfairly attacked. Cool, so let's just not ever be in conflict, right, but should make all this covenant and stuff easier.

I had a friend in seminary who used to say that she was starting her own denomination of one, because wherever two or more are gathered, there is conflict. And I mean, she's not wrong. Somewhere along the way, I learned a definition of conflict that feels accurate to me. Conflict is when two or more people want things that are mutually exclusive. Or at least they think the things they want are mutually exclusive. And the people have feelings about it. They are invested in some way, they care about the outcome. That's it, that's the definition, two or more people want different things, or disagree about something that matters to both of them.

So I'm sorry to say that yes, at some point in every community, every relationship, whether there are two or more people involved and how even sometimes when there is only one person involved, conflict will happen sooner or later. In fact, in a community dedicated to diversity of culture and experience, commitment to freedom of conscience and promoting a responsible search for truth and meaning, if we never disagreed, that would seem to imply that we are not living our values. We are going to disagree, we just are. So now what? How do we practice covenant in the congregation through times of ease and joy, times of misunderstanding and culture clash, and times of deep disagreement?

First, it's helpful to know what we are committed to together, such as we are committed to each other to certain values, such as justice, equity, pluralism, interdependence, and love. And we are committed to treating each other with respect, compassion and fairness. Then we can practice transparency and curiosity. Transparency is about letting each other into our different experiences. It might look like that comment made me feel discounted, or when you go quiet, it feels threatening to me. And curiosity is about seeking to understand each other, such as, when you start talking before I'm done, what does that mean to you? Or what lets you know that you belong? How can I help you feel that sense of belonging in this community?

Finally, when there are hard conversations and conflict, we can remind ourselves and each other of our core commitments, I am committed to love, what is the most loving thing I can do right now? Or we are committed to treating each other with respect? How can I demonstrate respect to you in this disagreement. We can choose to do the loving thing, the thing that someone else will feel respected by, the fair thing, as often as we can, that will not be all the time. We are not perfect. And no amount of practice is going to make us perfect. But practice will make it possible to act according to our values and covenants more often and in more ways. So my friends, I wish you good effective practice and times of ease and joy in your covenants. May it be so.

Readings

#434 in *Singing the Living Tradition,* Anonymous

May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations,
and inspired to bring our gifts of love and service
to the altar of humanity.

May we know once again that we are not isolated beings
but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe,
to this community and to each other.

“We Need One Another”

#468 in *Singing the Living Tradition,* by George E. Odell

We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.
We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid.

We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and in need to be recalled to our best selves again.
We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone.

We need one another in the hour of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs.
We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure and stand again.

We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey
All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.

#646 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, by Wendell Berry

We clasp the hands of those who come after us
And the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other's arms
And the larger circle of lovers,
Whose hands are joined in a dance
And the larger circle of all creatures
Passing in and out of life
Who move also in a dance
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
Except in fragments.

Excerpt from *The Cambridge Platform,* written in 1648

A number of professing Christians cannot be formed into a church without their freely and mutually covenanting to walk together in all the duties and ordinances of the gospel. They may be real and visible saints, while they remain un-connected and separate ; but they cannot be a proper church, without entering into covenant and laying themselves under certain obligations to each other, to live and act like Christians.

Hymns and Songs

“Love Will Guide Us” - #131 in *Singing the Living Tradition*
“We Would Be One” - #318 in *Singing the Living Tradition*
“As Tranquil Streams” - #145 in *Singing the Living Tradition*
“Gathered Here” - #389 in *Singing the Living Tradition*
“Come, Come Whoever You Are” - #188 in *Singing the Living Tradition*
“What We Need is Here” by Amy McCreath (https://www.uua.org/worship/words/music/what-we-need-here)
“There is a Love” by Elizabeth Norton, words by Rebecca Parker (https://www.uua.org/worship/words/music/there-love)