Rev Ron Phares
Reflection:
Pinky Swear: Covenant and ASUUC

A mentor once told me that I didn't need to like everyone in my congregation, but I did have to love them. I think that is true of you all as well. You don't have to vibe with everyone here. But you do have to love them. In fact, that's the whole point.

We're here to create a reality based on love, rather than affinity. A love capable of holding diverging personalities and, by that holding, transform proximity into compassion, into affection, agape, and joy. To prove it possible and model it for the world, and for our descendents.

Our covenant is meant to secure a field in which that reality of love can happen; the Beloved Community.

That's it. That's really the whole reflection. The rest will just be details, context, and some flourish. If you stay past this point, you're really just religion nerds.

You're staying? *Nerds.* But nerds for love.

Okay, so here's the thing. As beings on this planet, in our particular eco-ranges and anthropologies, we are each and all part of larger organisms that we depend upon. We depend on the ecosphere just as the biomes within us depend on our being alive to live.

Organisms, like your body or a forest, are made up of smaller organisms that contribute to the flourishing of the larger organism and need that larger organism to survive to ensure their own survival.

As a person, you are a community, a being of beings. The smaller organisms within the larger organism do not have to necessarily like each other, do not have to agree on everything or, really, on anything save one: without the whole each will wither and they are all important to the whole.

This is the essential agreement then. The substrate upon which holy covenant rests: to honor the whole and not compromise its integrity via harm against its component interdependent beings or their collective sum.

Thus it is with the earth. Thus it is with this congregation. <u>We</u> are a whole organism. We call it Beloved Community. In this way Unitarian Universalism is in harmony with the very processes of the earth itself.

Did you know that? Maybe you did on a subconscious level. Maybe that shoeless librarian lost in your soul's ancestral archives knows it. Maybe you knew that your participation in this community in and of itself is a kind of ongoing ritual that embodies your reverence for life in order to align us with its prerogatives. Well, if you didn't know it before, you know it now.

And believe it or not, that is why we have policies and procedures. To assure that we maintain the whole. That is why we have process. To ensure balance of power. That is why we have committees, teams, roles, and an org chart. And it is why we need covenant.

Happily, we do not do dogma to orient us. We do not do creed to bind us. We have no test of faith and do not prescribe which divine vocabularies and metaphors you deploy to render the world meaningful. We have none of that. Can I get a rock on?

We only have our mutual promises; our covenant.

Without covenant, we would have no map, no orientation. We would be beholden to fashion, fear, or self-worship. I have seen it. Without covenant it is easy to get lost.

I'm reminded of a time when I was a kid, and to earn some merit badge or other, our scout leader gave us the task of getting back to camp after leading us into the wilderness at night. We tried to remember the way. We consulted and argued and it was all the leader could do to keep us together, much less from going in the wrong direction. Finally, someone noticed the north star. Just like that, we found our orientation, agreed on our direction, and found our home.

The beloved community needs a north star, an attractor, something beyond the community by which to orient. Covenant can serve this north star purpose well. Covenant articulates our intention. As I mentioned last week, covenant connects. And as connection, it becomes a conduit, becomes a medium of relationship and communion. Not just with each other, but with the world.

If we do not have that north star, that call, that intention that expresses our values, what's left is our informal relationships with each other. It is a common UU congregational puzzle because, in lieu of a central theology, interpersonal relationships often become the backbone of congregational life.

And while friendship is absolutely necessary to bringing about the beloved community, it can not be our orienting attractor. If it is, we will never bring about the beloved community.

I want to emphasize that friendship is necessary. But, if it is central, it forms a webwork that over time becomes difficult to penetrate. The shared past becomes a bulwark as it, rather than mission, forms the core of the community and repels those it hopes to attract. Further, when interpersonal relationship rather than value is the center, power is leveraged to status rather than mission and we accidentally enshrine class rather than spirit.

I'll say that again. When interpersonal relationship rather than value is our center, power is leveraged to status rather than mission and we accidentally enshrine class rather than spirit.

Conversely, centering values - as in a covenant - and reflecting those values in institutional processes makes for a less interpersonally contingent scene which, somewhat ironically, fosters love and inclusion, aka the Beloved Community.

So this all sounds pretty attractive. But, this word: Covenant. What does it mean? Why do we use it?

Simply put, a covenant is a set of mutually upheld promises we make to one another. Historically, we trace it back to our Hebraic roots, though it likely predates the ancient Yawists. The god of Abraham trucked in promises. These covenants established how the divine and we mortals will behave in relation to one another for our mutual flourishing.

That kind of shared promise was not unique to the Hebrews, mind you. Traditions from every corner of the earth have some set of agreements with the life force - by whatever name - that serves to maintain the universe, from Aztecac to Confucian, from Sikh to Ute. Covenants like these ensure that the universe will maintain, not so much the status quo, but more like the current trajectory.

The importance of covenant re-emerged in earnest, in our tradition's story, many centuries after the first Hebraic covenant. As the Bible was translated into local languages the rate of literacy climbed and the number of folks who could extrapolate meaning from the text soared. Without the central authority of an ecclesiastical elite it was theological anarchy.

That may sound great! But, individual interpretation threatened to atomize the tradition, potentially turning the power of religious conviction over to the hands of the self-serving and influential and, sometimes, the wrong headed - which was exactly what they were trying to escape in the ecclesiastical authority of the Roman Church.

How would we remain accountable without centralized authority? How would we guard against the corruption of our new found freedom? We would return to promises; to the divine and to each other. We would make Covenant to hold each other in care formally. Covenant became a way to replace power with accountability. It gives authority to relationship.

Given then, that covenant is first and foremost a deep bow to relationship, we should be aware that it smuggles in an implication, a lingering resonance from the old understanding with the holy. So it is that in a human to human covenant we are implicitly recognizing the divine nature of one another. It may be that without each other, we lose sight of the holy, and without an orientation to the holy, we lose sight of each other.

I would offer that a human to human covenant may also serve as a model and map for a covenant with the non-human. For the inherent holiness of you and I that covenant honors is no different than the inherent holiness emanating from a leaf, a tree, a forest, an ecosphere, a planet.

Crafting a covenant that centers relationship engages in a kind of sorcery. We turn a statement of values, hopes, and procedures into a vehicle of spiritual practice, a medium of connection with each other and the roiling lifeforce in which we come to be and into which we recede.

So we make promises to bind us, to keep us true, to keep this body (me) and this body (us) a safe and empowering one. We covenant to create a kind of intention and discipline, a structure in which freedom is made responsible and vulnerability made transformative.

Now… having said all that, I'd like you to take a look at the hand out you received. This is All Souls UU Church's Collective Vision of Beloved Community which includes a covenant on page 2. Now, as I read this - to me, the covenant portion reads almost like a right relations procedure. And while that is well and good, it's not particularly sexy. But it is necessary to have something like this somewhere.

The key though, is that this covenant claims as its purpose the of fostering an atmosphere where UU principles may be practiced. I think, with just a little license, we

can also understand that the entirety of the Collective Vision of Beloved Community that precede and include named the covenant are implicitly a part of the covenant. That balances the procedural with some soul.

Take this home. Have a look at it. Put it on your fridge or something. Refer to it in your committee meetings. Refer to it in your grocery shopping and nature walking.

It's a lot of words. The task I've given myself is to simplify all of this into something that is, if more generalized, easier to remember. You will know when I have finished.

And here it is (Clap!). Raw. This business of covenant. It's not about you. It's not about keeping you safe or bridling you. It's about a new world. And you either want it or you don't. And so when you practice covenant you are about the business of bringing a new world into being. And the hour is late. So what will it be my friends? Shall we love? Shall we beings of beings honor the being we comprise? Shall we make a new world?