

“To Abide in Friendship”
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration
August 6, 2011
Reverend Kathryn Ellis

We humans need to be seen and heard. We need recognition and acceptance. We need to be liked and loved. It matters when someone remembers our name, remembers what we told them. We do need kindness, hugging, laughter, friendship! Humans are not built to be solitary, but to be communal. So we come together in community. We come together seeking meaning, seeking solace, and seeking healing. We come asking the question, “Do we belong here?” The author of our reading this morning, John O’Donohue talks about the longing to belong as a sign of the presence of divine.ⁱ

When we feel that sense of belonging, of being “at home” then we can allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to learn, to grow and to change. We don’t need everyone to agree with us or even need everyone to like us although many people would prefer that! We do need care and affection. We need to be able to trust. We need to have faith in ourselves and in others, in our community.

Unitarian Universalist minister, the Reverend Mark Morrison-Reed writes, “The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”ⁱⁱ

As Unitarian Universalists, we are a covenanted community. A covenant is a sacred promise; we promise each other mutuality. Reverend Alice Blair Wesley, a wise retired Unitarian Universalist minister, rewrote in contemporary language the covenant that the pilgrims (our Unitarian Universalist ancestors) made with each other.

We pledge to walk together
in the ways of truth and affection,
as best we know them now
as we may learn them in the days to come
that we and our children may be fulfilled
and that we may speak to the world
in words and actions of good will.ⁱⁱⁱ

Notice that they do not promise perfection and they recognize that change will come. They promise to be religious and spiritual companions (literally to break bread together). Rev. Gordon Mckeeman wrote, “Universalists believe that all of us are going to end up together in heaven, so we might as well learn how to get along with each other now.”

At Restoration, we have articulated our covenant. In the first part of our promises, we promise to abide in friendship, by:

- Embracing our differences and celebrating our diversity;
- Enjoying each other's company in fellowship and fun;
- Encouraging each other;
- Supporting each other's spiritual growth;
- Giving and receiving help in times of need;
- Participating in the activities of our community, both formal and unstructured;
- Welcoming newcomers into our congregation.

Covenant promises are serious promises. They are not always easy to keep, but they reflect our best selves, our best intentions. They require us to be attentive, to recall our promises and to stay present when things are difficult. We are promising ourselves to stay faithful to our community, to restore our community when it needs restoration and to restore our souls together.

Writer, Robert Benson, "To embrace one's brokenness whatever it looks like, whatever has caused it, carries within it the possibility that one might come to embrace one's healing, and then one might come to the next step: to embrace another and their brokenness and their possibility for being healed. To avoid one's brokenness is to turn one's back on the possibility that healing might be at work here, perhaps for you, perhaps for another."^{iv}

We need to be able to keep our promises when things are difficult. This congregation has seen some difficult times in the past. Those of you who were here then, you have remained faithful to your religious community. Sometimes, you weren't even sure why and still you remained faithful. You have renewed your promises. To continue to keep them means to accept ourselves, one another and the community, and it means not to deny or avoid problems or conflicts, not to compare and compete whether with each other or with other congregations. We do not need to be perfect. We need to be authentic, to be real.

When we do that, we will have more fun together! When we feel that we belong, have faith and trust in the basic goodness of the community, we can feel safe enough to really play, and not worry about seeming foolish. Let us spend lots of time playing together and celebrating the good in our community.

In order to be a truly welcoming, loving community and in order to be really good at radical hospitality, we need to practice what O'Donohue reminds us, "Love begins with paying attention to others, with an act of gracious self-forgetting. This is the condition in which we grow. . . ."^v

To embrace and celebrate our diversity, we need to know who we are which means we need to really listen to others. Encouraging, giving help, supporting spiritual growth, all require listening, learning from the other. Often as they are learning from themselves. When we have guests, we need to ask them about themselves, how they are – not tell them about us or ask them for advice. We need to listen for, ask what it is that they are looking for. We need to listen for their questions. We can share with them, our own faith journey, our experience of Restoration, but only after we have looked them in the eyes, smiled and listened to them. “In our congregations, cultural competency includes the practices of humility, listening, patience, graciousness and the holiest of curiosity.”^{vi}

Radical hospitality mean openness. We are called to live with open hands, open eyes, open minds and open hearts.^{vii} This is a religious calling, a spiritual vocation. Our theology names the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the sacredness of human life. May we continually remind ourselves of this sacredness. May we be open to the other. May we remember our promises to one another.

Loving Kindness Meditation^{viii}

May I be filled with loving-kindness.

May I be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May I be well in body and mind

May I be at ease and happy

Now, think of a close friend or family member, someone who has truly loved and cared for you. Picture them.

May you be filled with loving-kindness.

May you be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May you be well in body and mind

May you be at ease and happy.

Now, picture someone from this community that you are not as close to and may not know so well

May you be filled with loving-kindness.

May you be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May you be well in body and mind

May you be at ease and happy.

Now think of someone with whom you have difficulties and conflict and picture them.

May you be filled with loving-kindness.

May you be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May you be well in body and mind

May you be at ease and happy.

Extend your meditation to all people everywhere

May all people be filled with loving-kindness.

May all people be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May all people be well in body and mind

May all people be at ease and happy.

And to all living beings

May all living beings be filled with loving-kindness.

May all living beings be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May all living beings be well in body and mind

May all living beings be at ease and happy.

ⁱ O'Donohue, John. *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*. New York; Harper Perennial, 1997, p. xviii.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Tom Owen-Towle. "Covenant" in *Theology Ablaze*. San Diego, CA: Flaming Chalice Press, 2011, p. 40.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Tom Owen-Towle. "Covenant" in *Theology Ablaze*. San Diego, CA: Flaming Chalice Press, 2011, p. 49.

^{iv} Quoted at <http://www.inwardoutward.org/2011/07/13/embracing-brokenness>

^v O'Donohue, John. *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*. New York; Harper Perennial, 1997, p. 7.

^{vi} Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association. *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*. Boston:Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005, p. 150.

^{vii} Owen-Towle, Tom. "Hospitality" in *Theology Ablaze*. San Diego, CA: Flaming Chalice Press, 2011, p. 279.

^{viii} There are many versions of the loving-kindness meditation. For this sermon I used wording from Kornfield, Jack. *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology*. New York: Bantam Books, 2008, p. 398.