

“Promises, Promises”

**a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore
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Dogs are never late. Deities aren't either. But humans definitely have a capacity for tardiness. It's 10:41, and the sermon is just starting. The ministers have made a promise of sorts about how long Sunday worship will last. You have ordered your affairs accordingly. And now some of you are a little concerned.

Oh ye of little faith.

The theologian Martin Buber describes humans as promise-making, promise-breaking, and promise-remaking creatures. A promise defines the empty space between an insufficient present and a longed-for future – a space that can be spanned only by fulfillment of the promise. This space is where the godly act of creating happens. The capacity for promising is the signature quality of humanity. We are beings with one foot in the realm of dogs and the other in the realm of deities.

Our world is planted thick with promises. We can put to one side the illusory promises to do the inevitable or the impossible. The promises that matter are those aimed at doubtful outcomes. The promise-maker sends the promise forth and anchors it in that longed-for future, without knowing how the fulfillment will come about. So the essence of promising is accepting the risk of failure. And the essence of risk is a willingness to be surprised. The promise-maker accepts – even welcomes – risk and surprise as a way of taking responsibility for the promised outcome.

Every promise is an opportunity to affirm identity -- to say to the world, “this is who I am.” It is also an opportunity to make a lasting difference, affirming that we are not just creatures but also creators. The result of these affirmations is an experience of self-worth, the essential foundation for a fulfilling life. And if the promise-maker fails to fulfill the promise, he must confront the question, what does this say about my self-worth? How will I feel about myself if I fail?

This question cannot be avoided by confining ourselves to sure bets, which are just illusory promises. That would turn us away from the experience of self-worth that we absolutely must have.

Not all promises are created equal. Some call for more willingness to accept risk and surprise than others. Some present bigger opportunities for affirmation of self-worth than others. Some are so broad and deep that we reserve a special word for them: covenants.

The word “covenant” gets used a lot in weddings. Just using that word, of course, is no guarantee of special breadth and depth. A few years back a couple in Albuquerque, New Mexico

formalized their marriage with a detailed agreement, notarized and filed at city hall. It covered weekly allowances, how much to spend on birthday gifts, “lights-out” time in the evening and “wake-up” time in the morning. And sex. How often to have it, when birth control will be practiced, and when children can be scheduled. And then a subject of even greater moment than all of these combined: cars and gasoline. The happy couple undertook to stay one car length behind other cars in traffic and never to let the fuel gauge get lower than half a tank. And finally, just to give this masterpiece a nice sepia-toned finish, they declare “we will provide unconditional love and fulfill each other’s basic needs.” Never has the sublime been so pitifully reduced to the ordinary.

A covenant is much more than an ordinary contract. It is a commitment to a relationship. To covenant is to convene, to come together. It is a promise to exchange all the particular promises and requests needed to fulfill the broad purpose of the relationship. A covenant causes things to expand. Although it may be described on paper, it cannot be nailed down in words.

A contract speaks this way: if you do this, and only if you do this, then I will do that. It is hedged, cautious, risk-averse. Its most basic principle is “no surprises.” A covenant speaks this way: you and I will do whatever is needed to achieve our shared purpose. We will remember that our covenantal relationship is more important than any particular action we take or fail to take to serve its purpose. If either of us fails to honor this shared commitment, the other has permission to call the one who fell short back into covenant, to ask what is happening, to be demanding and supportive at the same time.

In a covenantal relationship, there is an understanding that no one fulfills his promises each and every time. Sometimes you make a doubtful promise, and then put your heart into it, and then fail, and then you and your covenantal partners pick yourselves up and ask, “how shall we recover from this failure? How shall we keep going?” In a covenantal relationship, the message you get from your partners when you fail is as just as much an affirmation of self-worth as if the promise had been fulfilled. The conscientious undertaking of the risk and exerting toward fulfillment is acknowledged. The affirmation of self-worth arising from the relating, not the succeeding.

A contract is a matter of law. A covenant is a matter of love. It is based on an opening of the heart, so that a human connection can be made that is so much deeper and broader than an arms-length transaction. This opening declares a willingness to take risks for the sake of the profound value of deep relating. The measure of this openheartedness is the magnitude of the risks accepted, the surprises welcomed.

Unitarian Universalists have a long history of covenantal relationships. For the last two decades our most important covenant has been the seven principles adopted by our association of congregations. The preamble to these principles reads: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote” -- and what follows are our familiar seven principles.

The preamble convenes a community built around these principles. It commences a continual conversation about how they apply in the world. Each member congregation grants

permission to all the others to call it to account for making these principles real. This covenant of accountability is mirrored in the relationship among the individual members of each congregation.

Today we have heard these principles speak through two committed voices in our congregation, pointing to the reflection of them in our religious education program. I want to add my own voice to this conversation.

Our second principle is a covenant to promote and affirm justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. We just completed a major social justice effort in this church. I see religious education of our children and youth as an equally important, if less obvious, form of social justice activism. Justice work must focus on changing outcomes, but it must also focus on changing people. We should see our marriage amendment effort as a valuable modeling of this dual commitment for our youth and children; and we should see what we do for them in our religious education program as a long-term investment in the cultivation of citizens who cherish justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. I don't have a metric for comparing the impact of a hundred demonstrations in the public square with the impact of sending ten young people into the world filled with conviction for these values. But I've seen what Unitarian Universalist religious education has done to make my own children and many others advocates for such values. It makes a huge difference.

My commitment to our religious education program is a heart-opening one. I don't know exactly how we will develop it into a great fulfillment of our covenantal purpose. I do know that making and fulfilling this commitment will move me forward on my own spiritual journey. I welcome its risks and surprises. I hope you will too.

On p.3 of your Sunday Bulletin there are two important items about getting involved with our religious education program. Those of us involved with teaching our children are serenading you with a covenantal song. We are asking, iz you iz or iz you ain't our baby? This is a chance to open yourself to great love.

AMEN.

PARKING LOT:

[FREEDOM IN RESTRAINT, LIBERATION FROM THE AUSTERE ISOLATION OF
HYPERINDIVIDUALISM, FREE TO DO THAT WHICH CAN ONLY BE DONE
COLLABORATIVELY, WHICH MEANS PROMISES]