

“Beginner’s Mind: Love and Covenant”

Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke on Sunday, August 23, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

When I was a little girl, I loved Valentine’s Day very much, because at school we got to decorate a shoebox to be a little mailbox, and on the day itself everyone brought in a card for every other student in class, plus we got candy hearts and also cupcakes with little cinnamon red hots sprinkled on the top. Do y’all remember this?

Sometimes, when I was addressing the 25 or 30 tiny envelopes for my classmates, I would ... hesitatingly, nervously, feeling both bold and terrified, I would draw tiny hearts next to the names of the people I thought were cute, or special to me. Never would I write this in a note, gosh no! I would no sooner tell someone I thought they were special than I would try to turn a cartwheel in front of them: it was an act that felt so impossible I was sure that the earth beneath me would open up to swallow me whole if I even tried, and I would be grateful to go rather than live with how embarrassed and nervous it made me.

“As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our Association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love.

Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.”

“[That](#) you will sometimes love enough and sometimes not.”

There is a beautiful challenge and limitation when a faith tradition chooses to name Love as its center and driving spiritual discipline, in part because “love” is a word that bears so many different kinds of weight in our world

and in our lived experience. The timid love of a child with a crush; the powerful love of those who change the world by trying to love it as much and as imperfectly as any human can. The love of siblings, the love of friends, the love of the way music can lift one's spirits, the complicated love of parenthood and loss and broken relationships.

But to me one of the things that is most appealing about Unitarian Universalism is its honesty. We are a people of covenant, and not of creed. The word "creed" has its origins in the Latin "credo," "I believe," which is the first person singular present indicative of *credere* "to believe." Its origin in English, from the Latin, was originally an "article or statement of Christian belief, confession of faith." In the 17th century, the term broadened to mean a statement of belief on any subject.

Now, when I was a child being raised in the Catholic church, it seemed abundantly clear to me that when we said the creed together in Mass on Sunday - "I believe in God, the father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth," etc. - we were supposed to mean it. I was saying "I believe" so if I didn't believe that, I would be lying, and that would be wrong. When I was a young adult talking with my parents about leaving the church, I said, "I just can't sit there every week and recite a creed full of things I don't believe." To which my mother replied, "Do you actually think everyone in the church believes what's in the creed?" To which I replied, "Of course I do! I thought that was the *whole point!*"

Now I think she was trying to make the point that sometimes we say things aspirationally, like a promise to try to believe, but in that moment I felt insulted by the insinuation that I was naive in saying that I thought if I said "I believe" something, that I should actually believe it.

So to me, Unitarian Universalism is being very honest by saying we cannot tell you what or how to believe. We understand that our own sense of reason and personal experience are as important as - or more important than! - things like scripture and tradition. Instead of asking everyone to say

they believe something that they might not, instead we ask people to covenant with one another.

The word covenant shows up in English in around the year 1300, meaning “mutual compact to do or not do something, a contract,” and comes from the Old French “agreement, pact, promise” - which ultimately traces back to, yes, Latin again, *convenire* “come together, unite; be suitable, agree.”

A mutual agreement to come together and do something, or NOT do something.

The word I keep reflecting on there is “do.” A covenant is an action or at least a promise to action. A creed is a belief, which is a thought, which doesn’t instruct us to take any action whatsoever, at least in and of itself. (Acknowledging there are a number of Christian social justice movements, for instance, that DO ask/require that people turn their beliefs into action.)

This congregation has a covenant that we say out loud every Sunday, with and to one another: “We commit to supporting each other with respect and direct communication as we work in community to explore spiritual growth and to be a force for good in the world.”

It is a good exercise for communities to examine their promises to and agreements with one another periodically, because when we invite people to join our church, we are also inviting them to join in this covenant with us. Respect and direct communication to me are beautiful foundations upon which to build. Sometimes it feels very hard to communicate directly and still maintain a sense of respect - but I do believe that we respect one another when we choose to have the hard conversation rather than to avoid it, or cover it with a sort of niceness that may feel insincere.

Working in community both to explore spiritual growth AND be a force for good - why, that’s inspirational AND aspirational! Why do we need community to explore our spiritual growth and be a force for good? Why, because it’s hard, and we can get tired. We can get tired, and forget our

best selves, feel out of sorts and out of touch with that which we value most.

Author, educator, and activist from the Quaker tradition, Parker Palmer, has written about the way shared listening circles allow Friends (and others so aligned) to do deeper exploration than any one person could do alone. He [writes](#), “we all need other people to invite, amplify, and help us discern the inner teacher’s voice for at least three reasons:

The journey toward inner truth is too taxing to be made solo: lacking support, the solitary traveler soon becomes weary or fearful and is likely to quit the road.

The path is too deeply hidden to be traveled without company: finding our way involves clues that are subtle and sometimes misleading, requiring the kind of discernment that can happen only in dialogue.

The destination is too daunting to be achieved alone: we need community to find the courage to venture into the alien lands to which the inner teacher may call us.”

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Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.”

I shared this earlier without telling you where it’s from: these are the opening words of Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant, of [Article 2](#), of the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association - our nationwide legal and covenantal community of faith. It is within this section of the Bylaws of the association that our shared values are laid out; affirming that each is only possible for us to live fully with the spiritual discipline of Love, our shared values are Justice, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Interdependence, and Generosity. (JETPIG!) (Or, to include “Love,” J. PIGLET)

Some people don't love that "JETPIG" mnemonic device, but I do. I love it because when we think about a little pig with a jetpack, it explains the commitment to action at the heart of our faith. We can talk all we want about any of those values (and more besides), but if we do not have sufficient courage born of the spiritual discipline of Love, it will be so hard for us to act on them. Just like that piglet won't go anywhere at all with no fuel in its jetpack! Love is the fuel; love is the discipline. It's hard even WITH the spiritual discipline of Love, and we have to be prepared for the days we fail, the days we don't have enough energy, or feel hurt enough that we aren't sure we can engage with anyone or anything without that hurt coming out of us. That is one of the biggest challenges of our time for any person of faith and goodwill - to maintain the strength to act while remaining a person of integrity, who strives to minimize harm and not impose judgement.

What love does, in any and all of its forms, what love can do is embolden us. As a shy child, I still felt something so important that I thought, somehow, I should acknowledge that in the world. Love emboldened me, as it emboldens us all. Love, the spiritual discipline of love, gives us the strength and the depth to practice boldness.

"How can we maintain our core principles when dealing with other people who have such different beliefs?"

To prove that I am indeed my mother's daughter, I will say that when I first read the card with this question written on it, I thought, "Every person in this church has different beliefs!" I do think I understand the sentiment behind the words here, of course. When we gather to talk about spiritual discipline and Love and living our values that call us to continually broaden our idea of who our neighbor is and how we are called to love and serve that greater Love for all - not just a few! - it's really, really easy to look at people on the news or on the internet who appear to have an entirely different set of shared values and beliefs than we do and feel....judgemental, angry, harsh, sad.

But ... it is true. Each of us does have a different set of beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing the world. It can be challenging to communicate directly, honestly, and respectfully with ourselves about the places we may fall short of living our values. Every day, I personally make choices that require the courage of my convictions. Every day, I also make choices that are easier, that let me avoid the hard conversation (or at least put it off), that prioritize my wellbeing over others. In a world so full of injustice, talking about a shared value of Justice can feel like shaking an impossibly tiny fist. In a society so inequitable, working for Equity can feel like a Sisyphean task. In a country where so many seem to be in favor of returning to a falsely mythologized past, working for personal and collective Transformation can feel like being lost in a hall of mirrors. In a time where we increasingly struggle to get out of the silos of folks who think like us, aspiring to true Pluralism can seem antithetical to the rest of the work. The same goes for Interdependence in a world that tells a myth of rugged individualism, and Generosity in a world that doesn't just preach but practices scarcity.

A covenant is a promise to do or NOT do something, together. When we consider those whose actions communicate to us that they are operating from a very different set of shared values than we are, we must consider that there is much more than what we see or know on the surface. We must cultivate within ourselves the courage to act, to reach out, to seek a way to connect if possible, and to work to minimize the harm of hateful thoughts and actions if direct connection and conversation are not possible. But while this question does certainly seem to imply that we're talking about people outside of UU circles, we must also acknowledge the complexity and diversity of stories and backgrounds that are here, week in and week out. We promise to search and support, to act as a force! What do we promise not to do?

Let's think about our other major shared sacred text: Our words of welcome.

“Whoever you are, whomever you love, however you express your Identity, whatever your situation in life, whatever your experience of the holy, as you come seeking love, your presence here is a gift. Whether you are filled with sadness or overflowing with joy, needing to be alone with yourself or eager to engage with others, all who welcome all are welcome here.”

We promise to welcome you if you are welcoming... which means we promise not to act in ways that are not welcoming. What “welcoming” means is part of our shared values that we don’t always consider, which is why part of what I’ll be sharing from during this sermon series this year is a 2020 report from the UUA’s Commission on Institutional Change called [“Widening the Circle of Concern.”](#) It’s a text that actually gives all our congregations some practical actions they can take both to be more welcoming, and to give attention to how they remain in covenant with people who are not welcoming.

Remember, we’re all going to fail. Maintaining our sense of self when faced with someone who seems to oppose all that we hold dear is challenging. This faith, on Sunday mornings as well as all the rest of the week, strives to hold us each in care as we join together in that struggle. It invites us each to hold one another in care, in our churches and congregations and communities, even though there will be people we disagree with, or things we don’t care for, or parts of worship or policy or governance that push against things we thought we knew or understood. Being in a covenantal community, that agrees only to stay in the work together and not to hand one another easy answers, can feel uncomfortable, sometimes. But it feels honest. It feels like, if we practice the boldness that Love invites us to, then we can recognize we love this faith, this place, these people, enough to stay in it when it is hard. It feels to me like the way we have the best chance to do this hard, amazing, life saving, spirit lifting, work of being human, together. When we join in the spirit of Love - sometimes as timid as a child with a crush, sometimes bold enough to move mountains - that will be what binds us together in honesty, forthrightness, and shared joy.

So may it be.