The Promises We Keep
A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
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West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church
Rocky River, Ohio

If you visit the Namaste Alzheimer’s Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado, you might see a white haired woman walking purposefully around the lake just in front of the center. She is wearing a bright red jacket and is smiling to herself. Maybe you take a seat on a bench and you watch her for a while, as she makes it around the lake, and then starts back for a second lap. It’s an ordinary day, just like this one, with a commonplace scene—a woman, a lake, walking. What you do not know from this scene is the woman’s name—or her age or why she is on her third—or is it fourth lap around this lake? What you don’t know is that sometime ago, she made a promise to herself on behalf of another. What you don’t know is why.

For those of you who are not yet regulars at West Shore, you should know that we take on a theme each month, and we try to explore that single idea through sermons, the worship service, music, poetry the arts and through intergenerational services. We take one word or idea and hold it up like a multi-faceted diamond, and ask you to take each month as an opportunity to engage with the meaning of those words. Last month we explored the topic of Evil and how this particular faith tradition—of Unitarian Universalism—understands and interprets evil. This sermon begins our monthly reflection on the theme of Covenant.

Covenant is not a word that gets used in our day to day lives very often. We hear words like rights, laws, creeds, contracts, compacts, but to “covenant” seems to be lodged between Noah and Moses in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet, the covenants we make and the promises we break have a direct impact on the quality of our lives as we strive to live together as individuals in community. So in order to go forward with “covenant”—I have to go back; back to how this idea of making covenants has shaped not only Western culture but this particular brand of church culture known as Unitarian Universalism; and I want to explore what goes into making promises to oneself and to others and what happens when we break those promises. Weaving in and out of these reflections, is a story.

Several weeks have passed by and you are back at the Namaste Alzheimer’s Center. You have visited your father, who does not know you any more. Yet when you are in town, when you can, you visit him, and everytime you see him, he smiles and says hello as if each time was the first. You look out the window of his room, and there is that same woman, in the red jacket and cap, walking. It is snowing lightly, and she is bundled against the cold, but doesn’t seem to mind. She is smiling to herself, and walking around the semi-frozen lake. Her name, you discovered, is Martha.

The idea of covenant goes back to earliest human culture; our most explicit understanding of covenant in Western culture is expressed through the Hebrew Bible and the tribe of Israel—a people whose relationship with their God—Yahweh—required the creation of covenants. Before there were laws—before the Ten Commandments—before the legal system that turned tribal wanderers into the people of Israel—there were covenants, usually initiated by Yahweh to describe what Yahweh will and won’t do in relationship to humankind. Why was this such a big deal for the Tribes of Israel? With our modern eyes we look at the stories of covenant from the Hebrew Scriptures and say—“what kind of God was that, who would wipe out a people because an entire culture had gone bad?” You have to understand that the idea of covenant that we moderns have inherited has its roots in an ancient understanding of being in—what we say today—“right relationship” with one another. In that story of Noah and the Ark the point of it is not that the world was wiped out by a mythical flood, but rather, that the people who wrote the book of Genesis were trying to describe how easy it is to destroy relationships instead of preserving them. One understanding of this mythical story of Noah and the Flood is that it is less about Noah and the wicked people—and more about God learning how to be God; God learning how to be in relationship with human beings. This ancient story then sets the stage for us, as individuals who seek out our own tribe and make promises
and agreements among ourselves known as covenants. Now I know that if you are atheist or agnostic or pagan—that this ancient biblical language of God and Yahweh may have little meaning for you. But think instead, of it instead, more like what we tell newcomers to Unitarian Universalism; that this faith is not about creeds—but deeds; not about what you are supposed to think or believe, but rather, about what you do. In this case, God makes a covenant that God will never again attempt to break apart his relationship with humankind, and She seals that vow with a sign—the rainbow to serve as a visual reminder of that promise that has been kept.

Martha Michel started walking around the lake everyday, when she would visit her husband, Lester, a patient at Namaste. When he first came to Namaste, they would walk together. It was a way for the couple to continue to enjoy the outdoors. In better days, Lester had climbed every Fourteener in Colorado; she conquered 32 of the peaks with him. Five laps around the lake is a mile and Martha would do 15 laps around the lake every week. Without fail. For the past eleven years.

What’s the difference between promise and covenant? A promise is a declaration of something that we either will do or will not do. It can mean the indication of something favorable to come; or to “afford a basis for expectation,” like the promise of rain or the promise of a good time. It can be made to oneself—like I promised myself I would not eat that last piece of chocolate cake; or to one another—I promise to love you and care for you; I promise to follow through on what I said I would do.. A covenant is similar, but it encompasses more than a promise. A covenant is a relationship between ourselves and each other and the Holy—that not only calls us to our higher purpose, but offers forgiveness when we fall short of it.1 To be in relationship with one another in a meaningful way—we covenant with one another. Sometimes those covenants are explicit, like words spoken at a marriage or union ceremony. Sometimes they are made explicit through liturgy, such as the speaking of what’s called the Blake Covenant in our worship services almost every week. When you join a Unitarian Universalist church—or agree each year to renew your membership through our Stewardship Campaign, you are not signing a contract, but renewing a covenant with your values, with others and with a larger body of beliefs that call you to be accountable for your own behavior.

So what’s the difference? Rev Suzanne Meyer reflects on the difference when she writes “A covenant, unlike a contract, which is automatically broken if one party fails to honor (their) end of the deal,( a covenant) remains in place even if one party is unable to honor it. Relationships based on covenants allow for failure, forgiveness, reconciliation, and grace.” 2

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments it marked the shift from a purely covenantal relationship to one that, over time, became more contractual. It became a less about the relationship of people to one another, and more about the relationship of people to Jewish law. Contracts and laws do not allow for human imperfection; covenants do. Covenants assume we will sometimes fail and welcomes us back.. And the idea of covenant is not based on is not based on the idea of two individuals, otherwise unconnected, pursuing personal advantage. Covenants are about the “we” that creates identity for the “I.” Our faith has a focus on the “I.” To be in right relationship we must honor the “I” but not at the exclusion of the “we.”3

So at the heart of all of this is a concept that is easy to understand—yet much harder to practice. The Rev. Burton Carley from Memphis, Tennessee notes, that “a covenant creates right relationship through partnership without dominance or submission. It is rooted in one of the most human capacities: our talent for making promises to one another. To freely enter


2 Meyer, Suzanne. “The Curriculum of the Free Church.” The Third Annual Conference on the Free Church. 30 March - 1 April, 2000”

into a covenant creates a bond of trust. Defining and strengthening that bond of trust is the grounding work upon which all other work is built. The basis of that trust is the acknowledgment of the integrity and sovereignty of the other, and a mutual pledge to achieve together what neither can achieve alone.”

So what does this mean, practically for those of you who just joined the church, who heard about the CARE covenant at the Path to Membership Class? What does it mean for those of you who joined the church before the CARE covenant was created? What about those of you who joined the church before covenants were even used in a Unitarian Universalist Church? It’s not unlike the couples who come to me for marriage or union who want the ceremony without the couples counseling. To be fair, most welcome the chance to sit down and talk about their relationship, to understand its landscape, both its freedom and its boundaries; but there are a few who just want the ceremony. They are excited about having found each other—have managed to, so far, avoid major disagreements, and seem to feel that talking deeply about the “what if’s” may taint the perfection of their relationship. I can’t imagine blessing a union under the covenant of marriage without asking the obvious question, “so what happens when one of you breaks your promise or can’t keep the promise you made to one another? What happens when you are unfaithful, or you relapse or you say hurtful things that cannot be taken back? What is it that will bring you back to the hard conversations over your kitchen table—not just once, but over and over and over again? How will you keep this covenant with one another?” The poet Rumi has an answer to that question “though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again come.”

It is early spring and the trees have just barely begun to show the faintest signs of green. The geese in the pond are back, flapping and slapping the water. Your father now cannot call you by name, has forgotten how to walk, mixes up words. You are beginning to resent the amount of time it takes just to come here to visit someone who doesn’t seem to care if you come or not. You sit with him at his noon-day meal in the cafeteria, and there she is again, that white haired woman with the bright red jacket, walking around the lake. This time you don’t just watch her, you kiss your father goodbye, grab your coat and hat, and head out to join her as she rounds the bend.

Covenants are the community expression of promises; and they keep us coming back, day after day, year after year, just like Martha Michel, whose true story, of walking 10,000 miles in memory of her late husband, Lester, was in the news this past week. “Why did she do this”, she was asked? “Alzheimer’s affected his speech early on. He didn’t talk except on rare occasions,” Martha said. The last time Lester spoke to her was by the lake. “He was pretty far along with the Alzheimer’s,” she said. “His arms just hung down and his face was just expressionless. We stopped over on the other side and he said to me, ‘I want to hold you.’ And I picked up his arms and put them around me. He died at age 79 years, 8 months and 16 days,” she said. “We had been married 56 years and 20 days.”

After Lester’s death, Martha just kept walking. None of the interviews actually say this, but my guess is that she began walking first in his memory, and then, as a kind of promise to herself and to his memory—and then the promise became a discipline, the discipline became a habit—the habit became a lifestyle and before she knew it—eleven years had passed and she had racked up enough mileage to have crossed the United States three times or to have walked to Paris, France and back.

Keeping promises to ourselves gives us the foundation for the harder work of keeping our promises with one another. Why then, is it so difficult? The apostle Paul, famously agonized about this, when he wrote: For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very thing that I do not want. When we keep the promises we make to ourselves; whether it is to hold our tongue when we’re really like to just blast someone with our opinion or to follow through on a commitment we made even when we’d rather just quietly fade away from that commitment without telling anyone—keeping our promise gives us the foundation for learning

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4 Ibid. pg. 4
to live in community together and for our most intimate relationships.

Covenants may begin with a promise, but it is the covenant that keeps us coming back. Our CARE covenant was created at West Shore in 2005, not in response to a church conflict, but happily, in the absence of one. It was created by members of what is now called the CARE team as a way to affirm the expectations which we have of ourselves as members of a community. Most of the time West Shore’s CARE covenant just sits there—on the website, the bulletin board and in the church’s documents and doesn’t get used all that much—until a conflict arises; and that is when the CARE covenant needs to be reaffirmed; not unlike couples who choose to re-affirm their vows to one another. At first glance, reading this CARE covenant may seem as nice as mom and apple pie—who could be against courtesy, acceptance, respect or engagement? When not in conflict, we say “of course!” But when we find ourselves rubbing up against each other; when we are hurt by one another words or deeds, it’s much more difficult to be quick to listen, slow to judge and willing to negotiate. It seems a lot easier to just ignore, to walk away or to leave. Covenants encourage engagement and it is the engagement with one another that deepens us spiritually.

A couple of years ago I told a story from this pulpit that bears repeating. It’s a true story about a Unitarian Universalist church in New England that had a cross at the sanctuary wall. One relatively new member started a campaign to get that cross down off the wall. “After all” she argued, “we’re no longer an exclusively Christian tradition. It doesn’t represent the whole of our beliefs.” Her campaign was met with some resistance from the long-time members. “It’s been there for over 150 years, and its part of our history,” they said. This battle began to ramp up as newer members and long time members began to take sides. It got ugly. Names were called. People were talking in the parking lot and writing nasty emails to one another. Lines in the sand were drawn. People were going to leave. A wise and skilled church president called a meeting to talk it through, and in the process, stumbled across the Cambridge Platform of 1648, a document of church governance and covenant that has shaped the very heart of what is now modern day Unitarian Universalism. The ideals that arose from this document, created by Congregational Pilgrims, was the understanding that, the free church arises out of a covenant; and the covenant defines who the members can be, what they are to do, and how they are to relate with one another. From this three hundred and sixty one year old document, that church president read this “Church members may not remove or depart from the church, and so one from another as they please, nor without just and weighty cause, but ought to live and dwell together, for such departure tends to the dissolution and ruin of the body, as the pulling of stones and pieces of timber from the building, and of members from the natural body, tend to the destruction of the whole. A congregational meeting was finally called. “I don’t like the cross,” one woman admitted, “because it reminds me of the abuse I suffered as a child at my church.” “I love the cross,” another member said, “it was there when my husband died and it gives me comfort, even now when I look on it.” The new members listened carefully, and were moved. “Of course, it should stay,” they said. The long time members also listened deeply, “we never knew it had that impact on you. Of course, we’ll take it down.” Eventually, the cross did come down from the back of the sanctuary, but it was moved to another wall in the church and rededicated by both the advocates and the foes of the cross, singing together as community then sharing a common meal.

Having a CARE covenant in place for that church would not have avoided the conflict, but it may have provided a framework for the conversation before it had to come to a congregational meeting. By that time, a lot of emotional energy was spent and a lot of damage already done to some relationships. While it appears that this conflict had a happy ending, we don’t know about the members who still don’t speak other or who refuse to serve on committees together. We know that at the very least, while covenant may not be able to fix all hurts and soothe all wounds, it does provide for us a container for conflict so that the entire body may continue to function in health and strength. What we do know is that making a covenant with one other holds us accountable to our best
behavior, and gives us a guide as to what is acceptable and what is not.

The good thing about being part of a church is that you and I both get to practice what is preached in your day to day life. We get to make promises, break them, ask for forgiveness of them, and try again. We get to be in relationship with one another even when it’s painful and you’d rather just walk away and not return to that path around the lake of sorrow and take one more step. We get to be the wounded ones ourselves sometimes, the ones who have been hurt by a careless word or the recipient of a late night email. We get to throw away the anonymous notes because they violate our covenant; we get to pick up the phone and ask “is what you said what you really meant?” we get to practice discipline and restraint; forebearsance and charity to others—because that is what we would hope and ask for ourselves. We get to engage in the ancient wisdom expressed in the Golden Rule over and over again. We get to be quick to listen, slow to judge and willing to negotiate with fairness and kindness as our guides. We are given regular opportunities to practice our covenant—by breaking and ultimately keeping our promises, over and over again to ourselves, to each other, and to this community.

May it be so.