

READING FOR SESSION 7

"Standing on the Promises of Christ My Savior" is a familiar hymn in the Black Church. One black preacher challenged his listeners to action by saying, "Most of you aren't standing on the promises; you're just sitting on the premises."

Promises and premises. We are promise-making, promise-keeping, sometimes promise-breaking creatures. The theological word is *covenant*—biblically understood as a binding agreement between God and people. God has selected a people for special responsibility; the people must honor their commitments to their God. When faith is broken there is all hell to pay.

The preacher who spoke of sitting on the premises may have been referring to mere occupation of a pew. *Premises* might also refer to value assumptions about the religious life—*theology*, if you will. Both meanings have value.

Are Unitarian Universalists keeping the promises or just sitting on the premises, geographical or theological? In the words of the Robert Frost poem, "I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep."

What are those promises?

With some justification, Unitarian Universalist congregations are sometimes likened to mercury, taking on an incredible variety of shapes depending on the shape of the container. Members may ride off in all directions at once. Leading a church as a lay or professional religious leader has been compared to herding cats. Nonetheless it would seem our task as Unitarian Universalists is to help erect a temple of the liberal spirit on some specific architectural plan. Below are possible elements:

The liberal church is a community of celebration.

We come together at an appointed time and place to sing, speak, listen, learn, question, and dedicate ourselves to what we call the "Beloved Community." Nothing is more important in the life of a church than the one hour (or more) spent in common celebration.

Once a newcomer came to one of our churches that had a rather austere sanctuary, which was quiet in mid-week emptiness. She found that hall of worship rather cold and barren. Happily, when she came the following Sunday, she found it

unaccountably warm, welcoming, and lovely. On Sunday there were people, the space was meant for people. Their presence creates the experience of corporate worship.

Church attendance is not often stressed among us. A ministerial colleague once wrote a defense of absent members. Another observed, "You can tell Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Citizen that it is important to be decent and honest; you can't tell them it is wrong to go swimming on Sunday. They know it doesn't matter to God whether they swim or not; they don't stop swimming; they stop going to church."

Sunday attendance is one of the few barometers that may be used to evaluate the health of a congregation. Attendance at church is one of the critical yardsticks for self-evaluation, more important than even membership statistics. Regular church attendance is one of the promises of membership in a church; it is not so much a promise to a minister as to a congregation. Every absence weakens the community and diminishes the worship experience.

The liberal church is a caring community.

It is engaged in a mutual ministry in which we accept our human responsibility for our neighbors. Today I am strong and you are weak; I share something of my strength. Tomorrow I am weak and you are strong; I need your strength. None of us is totally self-sufficient; from time to time all of us need a supportive community that accepts us as we are and helps us become what we wish to be.

Most congregations maintain organizational efforts, like some form of caring community program, to meet the personal needs of people. But the atmosphere is also important, an atmosphere that is as real for an institution as personality is for an individual. Most, if not all, Unitarian Universalist congregations have miles to go before they sleep in fashioning such a mutual ministry—there remain lonely ones among us who are ignored, hidden hurts that are not ministered to, suffering that goes without comfort.

The emergence of the Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups has been one response to this crucial need. Small Group Ministry is a network of small caring groups in which each member of the

congregation can participate. It is a human network that embraces all who wish to be included so that each person will have friends with whom to share the most burdensome and the most liberating moments of the life process.

The liberal church is a learning community.

All its members are engaged in a cradle-to-grave process of religious education by which they grow their own meanings, values, and convictions. No one is all-wise. We need each other's insights; our values need the critique of others if we are to grow in religion, if we are not to stagnate spiritually.

One might envision a mini-university of religious studies with all ages seriously engaged in a learning process. The teachers will be not only professional staff but members of the congregation who have much to share of themselves, their knowledge and their skills. Envision a multiplicity of learning activities, not duplicating the secular agencies but addressing the ultimate questions like the meaning of life and death, the aging process, the ethical obligations of learning to live together, an understanding of our own faith and that of others, and the religious imperatives for social responsibility.

The liberal church is a community of moral discourse and social action.

Any religious group that does not confront the broken world in which it lives is guilty of cowardice and irresponsibility. Each action, individual and communal, should come out of deep conviction and emerge from a foundational understanding of our liberal religious faith. Moral discourse must become commitment in action.

The congregation as a whole is as responsible for this dimension of communal religious life as it is for the worship service, the religious education program, or pastoral care and mutual ministry. While the spiritual has an inreach dimension, it has an outreach dimension as well. Spiritual gratitude and health overflow into the wider community.

The liberal church is a community of commitment.

It is sustained by the generosity of its members and friends, in terms of both energy and financial resources. This is the depth dimension that

enables the church to function in its programmatic mode. No institution can survive without a commitment that is both broad and deep.

Some confuse the spiritual and the material—believing they are opposite, if not contradictory. But the investment of time, treasure, and talent in the life of the religious community is in itself a spiritual discipline. It is what James Luther Adams calls the "tangibilication" of values—making what is discerned spiritually actual in the phenomenal world. It is giving institutional expression to our religious values.

There have been many articulations of the nature of this religious community. Unitarian Universalist minister Max Coots writes,

We make no claim of being exclusive keepers of a special revelation, nor presume to have all the answers by which to provide a fire escape for those who fear hell, or an automatic passport to those in hopes of heaven. Where two or three of us are gathered together, I only know for certain that coffee will be served.

A UU colleague in ministry, Ralph Helverson, writes about the First Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which was organized in 1636 and has stood in its present location for well over a century, "There are many people who would resist equally vehemently any move to tear this church down or to take it seriously."

To keep our promises will not be easy. Walt Kelley puts these words in the mouth of his comic strip character Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." The external threats to liberal religion, to democracy, and to social justice are real. Yet the thing we have most to fear is not persecution—it is indifference. At many times in our history the strong arm of political and religious oppression was lifted against us. We had the will to endure and to prevail. Those were dangerous times, but not nearly as dangerous as these times, when commitment to religious community is too often optional, casual, indifferent.

Unitarian Universalists have not fully developed a sense of institutional commitment. A pattern of occasional participation is the norm for too many people. UUs have tended to select a sermon here, a program there, and service when needed.

As there are seasons in an individual's life, there are seasons of membership participation. People often enter with a burst of enthusiasm;

they bring their children and their participation is high. Children grow up and leave home, family patterns change, people who were once the lifeblood of the church move to the periphery of involvement, families break up, and other community interests all compete with the church for time, finances, and energy.

One must respect the right of Unitarian Universalists to determine their own patterns of participation. Yet it does bring into focus the meaning of membership. Is membership an occasional involvement, or is it a lifetime commitment? Does it cover only the time when needs are high, or must it be seen as covering a time when needs have changed and our task is to help meet the needs of others? At times of crisis, like the assassination of President John F. Kennedy or the terrorist tragedy of September 11, 2001, our sanctuaries have overflowed with people who otherwise seldom darkened their doors. Someone had to be there to keep those doors open and the lights on.

The liberal church is a church for all seasons.

It has been there in good times and in bad, in season and out, when it has been popular and when it has been unpopular, when people have participated and when they have withdrawn, and all times in between. The church abides, trying to keep the promise. But a church for all seasons requires a membership for all seasons.

For the liberal church there are no cosmic contracts. It is continually created and recreated hour-by-hour, day-by-day, week-by-week, year-by-year. It does not recreate itself automatically but by the power of will of a group of individuals.

Building that road takes commitment in community. It is not enough for a liberal church to be a miscellaneous collection of rugged individualists. As Emerson said, "No member of a crew is praised for the rugged individuality of his rowing." There must be a blending of singular selves into something called community. This commitment, this community cannot be compelled; it has to be willed into existence by hundreds of individual decisions. Individuals need to see themselves also as members.

We covenant together and make and keep promises to each other, costly commitments of time, energy, and money. The free church is not really free. We learn this annually during the

church canvass, a kind of religious ritual by which people determine the nature of their commitment to the community. Energies follow investments.

If Unitarian Universalists are really serious about their commitments, they need to create and nurture human institutions. Theoretical commitments to health will not build hospitals, verbal support of public education will not build schools, abstract commitment to religious values will not build churches to provide space for helping people celebrate, care, learn, and act in religious community.

Unitarian Universalists have promises to keep to those brave men and women whose causes and commitments they are proud to celebrate; promises to keep to their buildings, inanimate structures of space and light, brick and stone, that house the animating forces of a religious people; promises to keep to children that they may know a living and growing religious experience; promises to keep to the wider community that there will be at least one prophetic voice that cries shame on injustice and beckons us all toward the Beloved Community; promises to keep to themselves that they will do their part in building a religious community that will nourish their spirits in the days to come.

Martin Buber sums up the peculiar qualities of religious community in this tale:

In a town not far from that in which Rabbi Nahum of Tchernobil lived, some of his disciples were once sitting at the table to eat, and as they were sitting, they spoke of the account which the soul has to give of itself in its deepest self-reflection. Then it came over them in their fear and humility that it seemed to them as if the life of them all was thrown away and squandered, and they said to each other that there would be no hope for them any more were it not that it comforted them and gave them confidence that they were allowed to join themselves to the great Zaddick, Rabbi Nahum. Then they all rose, driven by a common desire, and set forth on the way to Tchernobil. At the same time as this was happening, Rabbi Nahum was sitting in his house, giving account of his soul. Then it seemed also to him in his fear and humility as if his life were thrown away and squandered, and that all his confidence came from only this one thing, that these eager men had joined themselves to him. He went to the door and looked

toward the dwelling place of the disciples; and when he had been standing there for a time, he saw them coming. "In this moment," added the Zaddick when he told of the event, "did the circle close."