

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Berks County
Everyday Commitments
Rev. Sandra Fees
May 4, 2008



Our lives are filled with commitments. Some of our commitments - to marriage, children, and church – constitute long-term promises, often lasting a lifetime. Others have a shorter timeframe, such as serving on a committee or a summer job.

Still other commitments, like driving a friend to an appointment, may last only a day or an hour. Of course some we thought would be enduring may come to an end. And others we thought would be brief become rooted in our everyday existence and abide with us.

These various commitments taken together express something of our lives. They emerge from the purpose and meaning of our days, from who we are, and the values we hold dear. Rather than a random assortment of obligations, responsibilities, and dates on calendars, they present a snapshot of what drives our existence.

What we commit to and what we make time for indicate something of our actual lived priorities, our ultimate concern. You see, a commitment is not an idea alone. It is not only a way of thinking. It is more importantly a way of being. That's what makes it so daunting, so compelling, so powerful – and so absolutely essential.

And there's more. The commitments we do make not only express who we are but also help to create the people we are becoming. Twentieth century theologian and Unitarian minister James Luther Adams says, "We become what we love."

The implication seems clear. We commit to the things we love, or we risk losing them. Given what I observe in our culture as a resistance and even avoidance of basic commitments, things like RSVPs, telling the truth, being on time, I sometimes find myself wondering and worrying about what it is we do love and what we are thus in danger of becoming.

When we commit to and strive toward a life of faith, to the intimate bonds of partnership, family, and friendship, to a generous and grateful approach to living, and to concern for the world we are going to be living out of a spirit of abundance, courage, honesty, and kindness. When we are unwilling to do so, we wander lonely in the wilderness.

That's why James Luther Adams placed commitment at the center of theology, ethics, and religion. He said, "The first characteristic of human collective existence is commitment, that is, making an agreement, a promise. Promising is a characteristic feature of meaningful human existence" ([The Essential James Luther Adams](#)). It is a decision of the heart to create a bond of trust and care with people and groups.

The theologian Martin Buber describes humans as "promise-making, promise-breaking, and promise-remaking creatures." We create and re-create our lives out of the promises we make. Like Adams, Buber recognizes the making of promises as essential to human nature.

Everyday Commitments (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

A covenant is one kind of promise we make. And it is a kind of commitment I want to focus on this morning because I believe it has a bearing on all the other promises we make. A covenant is a sacred promise, a specifically religious commitment. This concept is found in the Old Testament. There the promises between God and individuals, between God and groups of people, establish agreements about how people are to be with one another and with God.

Our religion follows in the tradition of the covenant. We are a covenantal people. Our covenantal tradition exists in contrast to creedal ones. What connects us as Unitarian Universalists is our affirmation and agreement to our principles and sources and to a certain way of being together – to being in right relationship. According to a report of the UUA Commission on Appraisal written in 2005:

In a creedal faith, individuals are tied together by one set of beliefs; in a covenantal faith, they are bound by faithfulness to vows. As covenanters, we contend that we can better shape and stretch the Unitarian Universalist faith within the caring critique and embrace of community.

A covenant has a contractual aspect to it. But it is the relational piece that gives it spiritual grounding. That is its source of deep and profound meaning and power. Adams says, “One maintains responsibility for the collective, not ... because it is the law, but because of love. The responsibility is motivated by affection.” What we covenant with one another is what we promise to do on behalf of the relationship. It is based in trust and affection (Essential JLA). We promise each other in love.

We freely enter into mutual agreements. By doing so, we move boldly forward as companions on the spiritual journey. We empower one another through the sacred bonds of mutual trust and support. What an incredible gift it is to hold each other in love and care by these voluntary vows. Such promises are fulfilled only in communal life. They require companions and institutional allegiance. They remind us that we are connected and beholden to others in our chosen faith.

When we break our covenant with one another, it is a breach of faithfulness, a violation of the affection upon which the promise was grounded in the first place. It hurts because it is a violation of our trust.

In his description, Buber wisely said that we humans are promise-breaking as well as promise-making creatures. This too is a reality of our lives in community, in relationship. Promises will be broken. We do not always live up to our agreements and understandings about how we are to be together. When we fail to keep our vows, we need to call each other back into our covenant, back into loving relationship.

If we don't, then we will continue to be out of right relationship. We'll hold grudges and gossip about each other. We'll complain and carry resentments and disappointments. This surely is not the life of faith any of seeks.

Everyday Commitments (cont'd.)

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Some congregations read a covenant such as the one we read by Griswold Williams every Sunday as a community to remind each other of the essential nature of the relationship. Sharing a spoken covenant can be a way to affirm and re-make the covenant on a regular basis.

So what are the promises we make to each other as a religious community? What are our commitments?

We have a commitment to each other as members of this faith and this church. Some of the promises we make to each other as members of this religious community were shared in our member ceremony this morning.

We had a membership class a few weeks ago. As part of it, I talked about the expectations and responsibilities of members. Sadly there was a time in the history of our churches when we were embarrassed to talk about this and therefore it often seemed little was expected of our members. My experience with new members is that they are grateful to know explicitly what is expected of them.

Growing dynamic churches today expect a lot of their members. We expect a lot of each other. As it turns out, when we expect more of each other, we so often rise to the occasion.

When people believe the best in us, when they expect us to do well, to behave well, to be generous, to serve, to be intentional about the spiritual life, then we find ourselves reaching to do our very best, and even sometimes surprising ourselves by what we can do. We have a sense of confidence and purpose, a sense that we matter and that our efforts here are an integral part of the fabric of community and life.

Our growing expectations of ourselves reflect our growing health, strength, and spiritual maturity as a church and our increased sense of self-esteem as a religious community that can and does fulfill its mission. Promises that are fulfilled build trust, love, and self-esteem.

That is happening because as part of our relationship, we agree to give time, talent, and money to this church. The covenant between us can not be as strong as possible without all three of these by every one of us.

As more and more of us give generously and willingly of our spiritual gifts, our time, and our money, this church becomes more and more alive with possibilities and so do each of us. We are increasingly becoming a church that is transforming hearts and minds and spirits. We are fulfilling our mission in the world – as individuals and collectively. Our other commitments are not so different. If we tend to them, if we devote ourselves to them, they nourish us and the world.

As part of our covenant as members, we commit to telling other people about the church – to letting our little light shine in public. Those who are seeking this life-saving, life-transforming faith need to be introduced to it – by each and every one of us.

Everyday Commitments (cont'd.)

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I do this by participating in vigils and interfaith activities. Yesterday I offered a prayer as part of a vigil during a peace walk and also after that at the peace festival. I reconnected with several people in the community and connected for the first time with several ministers.

I also made a contact with someone in the Native American tradition who may be able to offer a program for us sometime in the future, and with someone who works in mental health and may be able to give us assistance as we explore this area as part of our social justice work.

Members who participated in yesterday's activities sported their Unitarian Universalist t-shirts and staffed a table at the festival. I'm sure they also made connections. All this brings visibility to our faith and our church – and what we stand for.

Our covenant includes the call to be socially responsible. This means promoting justice and mercy. According to the Old Testament prophets, a covenant required concern for “the weak and the deprived” (JLA). Our faith has a history of such commitment, to feeding the hungry, to striving toward full participation by those without a voice, and to working to free people from oppression and fear.

There is one more specific covenant I want to mention. It is the historic covenant in our churches between minister and congregation. This covenant involves what we refer to as the free pulpit and the free pew. The congregation entrusts the pew to the called minister who is given the freedom to speak her truth without censure.

The congregation has the right to dismiss the minister from the ministry. But as long as the minister is in relationship with the congregation, the minister is the spiritual leader who has freedom of the pulpit, freedom as the congregation's spiritual leader.

Members of the congregation likewise have the freedom to disagree with the minister about what she says from the pulpit. The ability to be engaged in lively conversation about the sermon topic and service is viewed as a positive sign of congregational strength and vibrancy. The minister and congregation share in a sacred bond founded on trust, love, and truth.

The covenant we read together captures the core commitments of this church and I think also of our everyday lives. We covenant to love, truth, and service. We promise to dwell together in peace. We promise to seek knowledge in freedom. We promise to serve human needs.

These are our everyday commitments. They are not only for the moment we signed the membership book or took our marriage vows, but they are made and kept every day of our lives. These are promises we make and re-make every day in order to grow into harmony with the divine and each other.

I ask you, each of you, to consider the promises you make? What promises do you make to your spiritual companions and to this church? What promises have been made to you? I encourage you to be generous in your promise-making and your promise re-making. By doing so, may we become what we love.

Everyday Commitments (cont'd.)
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May it be so. Amen.