

## “Toward a Covenant of Being”

A sermon by  
Rev. Frieda Gillespie

Today, I want to speak about another of the 5 spiritual practices of leadership in our liberal churches. It is the covenant of being as opposed to a covenant of behavior, which allow us to be together in the spirit of love. This idea of the spirit of love goes back to the very beginnings of our free churches in America. Perhaps the very first church in New England that professed to be a free church was the Dedham MA church. There we can find documented these beginnings and learn how our free church model came about. For this discussion I refer to one of our most articulate ministers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who wrote in the Minns Lectures in 2000 on this subject. In order to know who we are as Unitarian Universalists, we need to understand one of the most fundamental of principles of our churches, that of congregational polity. Another way to say congregational polity is congregational doctrine.

Alice Blair Welsley asks “What ought all the lay members of a liberal free church understand their own local congregation to be about? Answer that, and you can discuss the liberal doctrine of

the church. That is, you can have a lucid conversation about the doctrine our members should teach concerning their own thriving, livewire liberal church, by what they say and by their actions in the church. For that is what a doctrine is: A doctrine is a lived teaching about the essential nature of something.

She goes on to say, “Strong, effective, lively liberal churches, capable of altering positively sometimes the direction of their whole society, will be those liberal churches whose lay members can say clearly, individually and collectively, what are their own most important loyalties, as church members. Note: Not what are their beliefs, as in a creedal church. Rather, what are their shared, mutual loyalties in a covenantal church.

I just told of some good - not bad, good - people who came pretty close to killing off their own church because they loved most, in the church, the wrong things. They forgot that freedom in the church is not of much use or value unless freedom is there used to explore, together, the realities of our lives we find most worthy of faithful love. For all their easy talk of freedom, these members had not consciously, for a generation, linked freedom in the church with religious love of the most worthy realities of their lives, the kind of love so deep that it informs and shapes all our loyalties, inside and outside the church.

Why do we here in this Unitarian church inwardly scream NO, at the mere suggestion of having our churches run by any outside corporate bureaucracy, no matter how benign, even one of our own devising, the UUA? The reason is: No

matter how much we Unitarian Universalists may have changed since New England colonists established the free church tradition in our part of the world in the 1630s, we have not changed in this: We understand way down deep that freedom in the church - and the authority to run it and do in it what we, the local members, deem best - is absolutely necessary and must be inviolable if we are to have in our lives one community, among all those of which we are a part, in which we can - with honest, though sometimes conflicted hearts and minds - examine together our own deepest loves. We need to examine together our own deepest loves, that we can try to see whether we are living by right loves, or by some misplaced, inappropriate love for less than worthy realities."

So what kind of love were the individuals professing loyalty to who stood up in this church Wesley referred to. Was it love of ego and being 'right' rather than seeing the truth of a matter. Were they reaching for something deep within themselves and sharing those parts of their lives most worthy of love?

In 1637, there was no free church in New England. There was only a group of 20+ settlers that were determined to live differently than they lived in England. They wanted a purer, truer religion than they had in England. They did not have this at first when they arrived in the new world. Indeed, they had to spend some time, years to create a settlement with homes and plantings for food and raising livestock all of went into their survival. And leaving their fraught relationship with the indigenous peoples they encountered aside for the moment, they struggled to survive. So it was a while before they could even turn their attention to what kind of church they wanted to create, now that they had the freedom to do so. Wesley says that in all of their efforts to survive, they didn't really have a chance to get to know each other. She writes, "So, guess what these New Englanders did in 1637 to get to know each other and to approach - gently, slowly - some very profound and personal religious issues, terra incognita among them. They set up a series of weekly neighborhood meetings, "lovingly to discourse and consult together. . . and prepare for spiritual communion in a church society, \* \* \* [gap in the record] that we might be further acquainted with the (spiritual) tempers and gifts of one another." Meetings were held every Thursday "at several houses in order," in rotation. Anybody in town who wanted was welcome to attend.

They adopted a few simple rules for their meetings. Rule 1: They would decide before leaving each meeting what question to discuss next week. That way people were more apt to share considered thoughts. Rule 2: Each week the host of the house would begin, speaking to the agreed upon question. Then everyone else could speak by turns. Each one could, as they chose, speak to the question, or raise a closely related question and speak to that, or state any objections or doubts concerning what any others had said, "so it were humbly & with a teachable heart not with any mind of caviling or contradicting." In other words, Rule 3 was: Here we speak our own understandings or doubts. No arguing. The record reports

that all their “reasonings” were “very peaceable, loving, & tender, much to edification.”

Wesley goes on to say, “These laypeople’s central conclusion, from all these weeks of discussion,

was this: Members of their new free church should be joined in a covenant of religious loyalty to the spirit of love. And once the members were joined in a covenant, of their own writing and signing, the member’s loyalty in the church should be only to the spirit of love, working in their own hearts and minds. No one - not the Governor, not the Gene]ral Court, not even members of other similarly covenanted churches - would have any authority in the local free church. They were not sectarian loners. ... they thought they should and they did seek counsel from neighboring churches. Yet they were very careful to make sure everybody understood, they would seek and consider counsel from others often, accept rulings or commands contrary to their own experience of the spirit - never.

In these pages [which are descriptions of their conversations] there is much use of these words: reason, reasons, reasoned, reasoning, deliberation, make trial of, clearing, cleared up, encouragement, advice,

advise, counsel, agree, agreed, agreement, approbation, liberty, liberties and promising. There is also repeated use of the words: sweet, comfort, help and brotherly. But by far the most commonly used words in this written history are: affection, affections, affectionately, embrace and love, loving, lovingly. In the first 24 pages I counted 32 uses of the words affection and love. Why? Because then and now and for as long as human history lasts - when all is said and done, done and said some more - the integrity of the free church comes down to our loyalty to the spirit of love at work in the hearts and minds of the local members. The laypeople who founded First Church, Dedham knew so and clearly said so, and that is why we still say together, so often in our churches now, “Love is the doctrine of this church. . .”

I don’t know how you feel about this, but it totally blows my mind. My belief about the puritans who started the early free church was so contrary to this picture of the spirit of love. I’ve thought of them as biblically literalist, anything but egalitarian and open to others experience and ideas. Apparently the truth is that they didn’t even consider the bible until well into their deliberations, when they were looking for spiritual principles.

We are almost embarrassed to use these words today in our deliberations within the church. Perhaps we can reclaim this language of love.

In the workshop that several of us attended related to the covenant of being, we learned the differences between a behavior covenant and a covenant of being that is based upon love.

So, perhaps you may feel as I do, that these are not simple ideas. Or perhaps we can say that they are simple but so foreign to our current culture, that we are charged with learning a whole new language of relationship. We are fortunate to have the example of our forbears to teach us how to incorporate the spirit of love into our governance and into our understanding of the nature of our church.

May we keep in sight the example of these wise men and women who formed the free church upon which our Unitarian Universalist churches are built and sustained. May we recognize within ourselves that which is worthy of our deepest affections and remind each other through our conversations

Religious covenant vs. behavioral covenant in practice

Behavioral Covenant

Religious Covenant or Covenant of Being

A behavioral control practice often governed by policies & procedures in which some take disproportionate responsibility	A fundamental faith practice governed by mutual belonging & accountability
Monitored, enforced by consequences	Freely submitted to; reinforced by grace & forgiveness
Requires adherence and politeness	Requires presence, authenticity, spiritual vulnerability
Approach one another as co-members concerned with friendly relations	Approach one another as spiritual partners concerned with wholeness of one another's lives
Congeniality expressed by agreement	Love embodied by "walking together"
Circumscribes communal life	Liberates, enriches, deepens communal life
Claims mutual behavior	Claims mutual loyalties and mutual support with one's entire gifts and giftedness
Call out when broken	Call back into when broken or neglected through forgiveness, restoration, renewal