

Honoring Our Covenant
Sermon By Rev. Amanda L. Aikman
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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READING

Genesis 9: 8-15

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ⁹ "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you ¹⁰ and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

¹² And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: ¹³ I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life."

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Nothing is lost; the universe is honest,
Time, like the sea, gives all back in the end,
But only in its own way, on its own conditions:
Empires as grains of sand, forests as coal,
Mountains as pebbles. Be still, be still, I say;
You were never the water, only a wave;
Not substance, but a form substance assumed. -- Elder Olson

SERMON

When I started attending seminary in Berkeley in the fall of 1989, I'd never worked so hard in my life. I was reading books full of words like "hermeneutics," "exegesis," and "eschatology." I was working 20 hours a week as an office manager. I was trying to write papers about concepts I just barely grasped. And, carless, I was walking every day, my arms full of heavy books, up several very long and steep hills. Stimulated? Yes. Tired? You betcha.

So I was very glad indeed to learn, that October, that all students were invited to a weekend retreat at a dome in the woods at the coast, just to relax. It was so nice! There was nature, there was the fun of hanging out with this group of smart and quirky people, and, yes, brothers and sisters, there were recreational substances.

On Saturday night, someone – it might have been me, there's a certain fogginess in my memory of the evening – started a game: "What word or phrase have you learned in seminary that you would just as soon never hear again?" Someone said, "faith, when used as a verb." Someone else piggybacked on that – "myth, when used as a verb!" And then, of course, we invented the ultimate left-wing seminary course description – "Faithing Your Myth. Prerequisite: Mything Your Faith."

And then Holly, a PhD student who tended to take herself a bit too seriously, said thoughtfully – "The phrase I never want to hear again is, 'We're all ministers.' Because if we're *all* ministers, why have I spent all this time and money on seminary?"

I agreed with Holly at the time. But you know what? now, after 17 years as an ordained minister, I have come around to firmly believing that we *are* all ministers. The popular image of a minister, that image that's lodged in our minds from movies and early impressions, is of someone wearing stiff formal clothing,

someone rather grim, perhaps. But it's not. If my friend Holly were here today, I'd say to her, "While professional, ordained ministers have a very special role, a unique and important role, in our churches and in society, I have seen just as much ministry done by laypeople – I have been moved and inspired a thousand times by the ministry done by regular Unitarian Universalists, the members and friends of our congregations. *We are* all ministers."

We are all ministers – we are all engaged in ministry – in making the world a better place, through our work of healing, nurturing, building, creating, sustaining. Think for a moment about your work, whether paid or volunteer. Your work that you have been called to through your deepest values, out of caring for the beings or the ideals which you love most passionately. Your work that is a calling, that uses your best skills and that gives you profound joy. Your ministry.

How many of you have a ministry to children – as a parent, grandparent, teacher, aunt or uncle – raise your hands? Thank you. How many of you have a ministry of building – creating things of practical usefulness or sheer beauty in the world? A ministry of healing and caring – helping and nurturing friends, family members, or others who are in need or in pain? A ministry to animals? A ministry to the earth? A political or social ministry, struggling for justice and equity? A ministry of esthetics, creating art? A ministry of repairing and restoring? A ministry of leadership – helping others achieve their potential and helping organizations achieve their missions in the world? Are there any I've left out?

Could everyone who raised their hands do so again. Look around. We really are all ministers. The role of the church is to support and sustain you in those ministries. To celebrate and honor your ministries. To provide a safe and loving haven when you are battered and bruised by your struggles as you pursue your ministries in the world. To leverage your personal energies so that you can achieve more working with a group than you have been able to do alone. To inspire and encourage and renew you when you are stale. And sometimes to challenge you to greater efforts – to be greater, to be more, to expand your vision, to give you a safe

place to try new skills and flex underutilized muscles. As Martha Stewart would say, “It’s a good thing.” But not always easy.

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One month ago, I was standing on a beach in Kauai, a little peninsula the size of this room, a sandy little island really, encircled by black rocks, connected to the main beach by a thin sandy isthmus. Under a partly-cloudy morning sky, performing the wedding of Clark and Jean. We were surrounded by 10 of their smiling friends and relatives, caressed by the soft breeze, the crash of waves in our ears, our sandaled feet crunching in the sand. Not far away, a monk seal lay resting on the beach. We decided it was the Official Seal of Approval for Clark and Jean’s wedding.

Now I am not making this up. I have 12 witnesses. I was just starting the part of the ceremony where I talk about why people cry at weddings. At that precise moment, it started to rain. A spattering of rain fell on the page and I remember just hoping the ink wouldn’t run. The rain kept up for about a minute. And then it stopped, and the sun came out, and David, who was taking photos, gasped: “Look! A rainbow!” And sure enough, down at the horizon, just barely visible against the dark-grey clouds, there was a rainbow. Everyone murmured excitedly about what a good sign that was. And after the ceremony, everyone congratulated me on my perfect timing.

In Genesis, after creating the flood which wipes nearly all life from the earth, Yahweh repents, and He sets the rainbow as a sign of His covenant with humanity and also with all animals.

We know that the rainbow comes about from the refraction of light as it passes through water. We know that there’s nothing miraculous about it. And yet, when you see a rainbow – whether it’s at an amazing time such as the middle of a wedding, or just on an otherwise ordinary day – doesn’t it lift your heart, give you hope somehow, remind you to stop and marvel for a moment at the incredibleness

of our universe? No wonder that our pre-scientific ancestors, seeking an explanation for the amazing phenomenon of this array of colors in the sky, attributed it to a special agreement, a special relationship, an agreement of mutual accountability, between humans and the divine. A covenant.

In a wedding, the commitment, the covenant, the two parties make to one another, is clear, it's spoken, it's voiced: they covenant to have and to hold, to stick together as long as they live. They say "I do." They say "I will." They say "I promise."

Our religion, our faith, Unitarian Universalism, is based not on a shared creed, a shared belief – but on a covenant, which is a solemn contractual agreement between people, or between God and people. An agreement to do, or refrain from doing, certain things. The Israelite tribes were united not only by their covenant with each other, but by their covenant with God. Covenants are the basis of much modern law, and we of course engage in a variety of formal and informal covenants in our lives. But *our* faith is unique among Protestant sects in that our faith is based not on a commonly held creed, but on a covenant to support one another's freedom of belief. God's covenant with Abraham, to make Abraham the father of a great people, was sealed by Abraham's agreement to circumcise all the males of his tribe. To be part of the covenant of a UU church is less painful.

In many UU fellowships and churches, the congregation has chosen a covenant that they say together every week. Here's the most common version:

*Love is the spirit of this church/ And service is its law
This is our great covenant-- /To dwell together in peace
To seek the truth in love/ and to help one another.*

Whether explicitly or implicitly, I'm sure that you share a similar covenant between you.

We are all ministers, called into a covenant of *mutual* care and responsibility, when we join a UU church. But the ordained minister's role is different, and significantly so.

Because that covenant – the covenant you have had for 20 years with Thomas – is a different kind. It is *not* mutual. You are not here for him. He's here for you. When you talk to Thomas about personal matters, chances are you spend most of your time talking about your own life and very little about his. Because he's here for you.

And now Thomas is leaving you. He is relinquishing his covenant with you, and you will go on to form a new covenant with, first, an interim minister, and then, more significantly, with your next called minister. It may be hard to envision what that will be like. I can hardly imagine it. I've been here in the neighborhood since 1994, and all that time, the one constant in our local UU scene has been Thomas and Shoreline.

You may have a mixture of feelings – excited anticipation, perhaps, about whatever new gifts your new ministers will bring, some fear, perhaps – “will this still be Shoreline UU Church when Thomas isn't here?” – and also a whole lot of grief. You may have given quite a lot of attention to your own grief. But what about Thomas'?

Ten years ago, The Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, who I know was a guest here not long ago, one of our very first African-American ministers, gave a notable address to the ministers gathered at General Assembly. In this address, he talked about his love for the Unitarian church.

I am at home among these people in this liberal religious movement. It is a place where I was nurtured, and because I was nurtured I grew; having grown, I could give, and having given I grew more. It is a place where struggling, I could fail; where failing, I was still loved, where loved, I could begin again. It is a place where in pain I could go; where, having gone, I was

cared for; where cared for, I could heal and go on. That is why I am a minister, to help sustain religious communities - places like the one in which I grew up, places made holy by what people experience within them - the seasons of their lives and the healing of their souls.

Mark became a minister because he loved the church. He loved the community. He became a minister and then he discovered the irony that he was not able to be friends with people in the congregations he served. He said:

Ministry...is a source of unrequited grief. I regret having not read the fine print. If I had, perhaps I would have made another choice. But the print was very small, the phrasing paradoxical, while I was young and eager. This is what it said:

*You will love your parishioners with all your heart but never befriend them.
You will pour out your lifeblood for the community but never settle there.
You shall die to the congregation so that the ministry might live.*

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About 15 years ago, when I was the minister at Evergreen UU Church in Marysville, I came to a gathering that was held here – I don't remember the purpose any more, some sort of workshop, about growth, I think, with people from three local churches. And one of the questions that was asked was, "what would cause you to leave your church?" I was one of the people who was reading and reporting on the responses. And it was striking – people from the other two churches had all kinds of responses to that question. But nearly all the responses from Shoreline members said the same thing – "I would leave if Thomas resigned." It was kind of stunning. I teased him about having created a cult of personality, though I think I stopped short of calling him "Beloved Leader."

Over time, I saw that change. As this church grew and matured, thanks in large part to Thomas' caring leadership, the congregation itself became the locus of

attachment and caring. You will be just fine after Thomas leaves. The covenant between you, the strength of the connections between you, the clarity of your mission, will sustain you through this time of change.

But what about Thomas?

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Mark Morrison-Reed talked of his experiences trying to deny these truths. He tried to be friends with his parishioners. But that prevented him from being able to minister to them. And when he left the church that he had served for many years, he tried to deny the truth that he had to die to the congregation so that the ministry might live.

I'm sure that because Thomas and Bob live so near to the church, you will be tempted to be in denial, too. "We'll still be neighbors with Thomas – nothing much will change." But it will. Because your special relationship with Thomas, your covenant, will be relinquished. And I encourage you all to be very explicit about that, next month. I hope that in the midst of all the goodbyes and memory-sharing, to also formally state that the covenant between you and him is dissolved. Because while entering into a covenant is like a wedding, ending a covenant is like a funeral. We honor and formalize the fact that something important and significant has come an end. We mourn and grieve so that we can move on.

Now, while the covenant between you and Thomas is still in existence, your relationship is not mutual. He is here for you. "You will pour out your lifeblood for the community but never settle there." I remember the years when Thomas badly needed a new car, but kept his old one going way past its expiration date because he was giving so much to the building fund. I also know that Thomas and Bob have been among the top three or four pledgers in your church, even though

their income is lower than many others'. I hope you will keep not only that in mind, but also the deep, deep caring that Thomas has shared with you all these years, when you write a check to contribute to the gift that will be given to him at his farewell party. (Thomas, would you cover your ears and go "la la" for a moment?) This is not a time to be stingy! I think you should aim at \$500 for every year he's been here. Okay.

From Mark Morrison-Reed:

The relationship of minister and parishioner has the qualities of a friendship, but no matter how warm and deep, authentic and reciprocal the relationship is, it is not a sustainable friendship. Why? Because it is built upon an unavoidable imbalance - the minister is always more responsible for the relationship. When necessary we ministers must be prepared to forsake the role of friend for that of minister, and ready to choose the well being of the community over the needs of the friend. We are not as free to share all aspects of our lives and ourselves. Nor can we make friends with whom we please, for that would create two classes of parishioners — the chosen and the not. Finally, when our ministries come to an end so must the relationships, lest we take up space the next ministry needs if it is to take root.

Thomas has been here for you. But when that covenant is relinquished, the relationship will no longer be his responsibility. It will move into a realm of mutual responsibility. He probably won't be coming to this church for a long time, except at the invitation of your new ministers. But when you bump into him at Third Place Books or wherever, have brief conversations with him, *don't* talk about church, and *before* you tell him all about yourself and your activities and the changes in your family's life, *before* that, ask him how he is, ask about Bob, ask about his family, ask about the garden. Because Thomas will no longer be there *for* you. He won't be all that interested, trust me, in how well your grandchild is doing in college, or that funny twinge you have in your knee. Because he won't be your minister any more.

Many of the guidelines that our professional organization has developed seem arbitrary or even mean on first reading. For instance, next year, if you ask Thomas to do a memorial service or wedding for you, he will say no. Because your current minister should do it. Think of it, again, like a marriage. How can you develop a deep relationship with your new spouse if the ex is hanging around? That's why these guidelines exist.

I, too, will be relinquishing my little covenant with this congregation, as Minister Affiliated, at the same time that Thomas leaves, because of the professional guidelines. I'll always be your friend, though.

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I know you care very much about Thomas. You care about his grief. So don't put off going to see him, to say anything that's left to say. Don't leave it till the last week. And don't think you can put it off till the summer, or some future vague date. After July 1, Thomas will no longer be your minister, and he can't be your friend. That covenant will be over, forever. Have compassion for his loneliness, his loss – and do the two most useful and meaningful things that are in your power. Care for the ongoing health and flourishing of this congregation by renewing and redoubling your commitment to this church.

And pray for Thomas. Pray for him to find satisfying communities to belong to, meaningful work, friendships to sustain him. Pray for him to find joy and healing and delight.

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And what will sustain *you*? Your own covenant with one another. Continue to strengthen the congregation through your own involvement, commitment, and caring – continue to attend, and pledge, and pursue your ministry here, no matter how you may feel about the interim minister, the called minister – keep attending, keep pledging, keep this wonderful church humming.

Mark Morrison-Reed spoke of the death of a beloved church member, some time after he and his co-minister wife, Donna, had left the Rochester church. Beth was the new called minister.

Two and half years after we left, Al French, a church member we'd known well, died and Beth Banks, who followed us at First Universalist, invited me to deliver the eulogy. We both thought Donna and I had been away long enough. We were wrong. I knew it as soon as I began interacting with the older members — I was the minister and Beth the interloper. Twelve years in ministry and I was just beginning to really understand that ministry was not about *my* relationship to the members but rather *theirs* to one another. Nor should it be the answer to *my* yearning to live in community because at the end of the day they will stay and I will leave. Only then did I begin to grasp this reality — ultimately I must die to the congregation so that the ministry might live. When several years later our surrogate father at First Universalist, Bill, died we consulted Beth and decided not to attend. It meant grieving in private, a double loss — of Bill and of community.

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Your ministry will continue. When you feel insecure or uncertain in your ministry to and with one another, cling to your covenant – that promise of mutual support and kinship and caring and purpose that calls you, now more than ever, to stand fast, to hold the health and prosperity of the congregation above your own needs. Minister not only to each other, but to the greater causes and values you hold; be a minister to the staff of this church through their time of uncertainty and change; be a minister to the unchurched, the seeker, the stranger. And be a minister, also, to those who come to serve you, as interim minister, as called minister, keeping in your hearts a tender awareness of their loneliness and the little deaths that they, too, have grieved as they pass from one congregation to another in service to our free faith.

Nothing is lost; the universe is honest,
Time, like the sea, gives all back in the end,
But only in its own way, on its own conditions:
Empires as grains of sand, forests as coal,
Mountains as pebbles. Be still, be still, I say;
You were never the water, only a wave;
Not substance, but a form substance assumed.

My dear friends, may you be richly blessed. Amen.