



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“In This Together,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on September 25, 2011

In the story Sarina read a few minutes ago¹, I wonder, who do you identify with? I picked that reading because I suspect there's something of both the mother rabbit and her runaway bunny in each of us. And it's such a sweet story.

It reminds me of when our first child was born. It was a chilly night in early April, around 11 o'clock, and the time was getting close to leave for the hospital. I took the overnight bag out to the car, just so we were ready. Coming back into the house, I stopped outside the back door for a moment, because I felt a pang of something. From inside me came a voice, that said one word: “Run.” As in, “Run away from this night of being needed.”

“Where did that come from?” I wondered. In case you're wondering, I didn't run. I went back inside, and sat by my wife. We went to the hospital, and by early afternoon the next day, thanks to a lot of hard work on her part, I'd witnessed a miracle--the birth of a precious little wrinkled baby boy. I left a message on my dad's answering machine that day. I said, “He is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.”

Later I wondered about that night, and that voice I heard, urging me to run away. I realized that a part of me was afraid of becoming a father--afraid of the responsibility, of being needed. Afraid of screwing it up, of being a failure as a dad.

I am all for commitment and community, but the truth is, there's a part of me that wants to run away. And I suspect there's a part of you, too, that doesn't want to be pinned down, that's like the runaway bunny.

There's another way to read this story, as a metaphor for our relationship with God. We can wander where we will, we can run away all we want, but God is always there, wanting to be in relationship with us, waiting and hoping we'll come home. I like to imagine God that way, as one who misses us, who longs for us the way a mother waits for her children to come home.

There's a phrase that comes up again and again in the Bible. God says, “You will be my people, and I will be your God.” Here's a passage from the prophet Ezekiel:

¹ The reading today was the children's story *The Runaway Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown.

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God (Eze 36:26-28).

“Have a carrot,” God says. Or to be more precise, “Follow my rules, and I’ll give you a carrot.”

This is a recurring theme in the Bible, of God who longs to be in relationship with Israel, and of people who keep messing up, turning away, and then trying to come back again. God makes agreements, or covenants, with Israel, as a way of being in relationship and trying to help keep the people accountable.

A covenant is not a contract. It’s an agreement that helps those in a relationship stay faithful to one another. A covenant helps one to be responsible to and for the other. Unlike a contract, which is based on distrust, a covenant is based on love and trust and hope in the other. Marriage is a covenant. A prenuptial agreement is a contract.

The Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber said that what makes us human is the fact that we make promises to one another. He called us the “promise-making, promise-breaking, promise-renewing animal.”

A part of us is like the runaway bunny. That part can sounds like an adolescent “Don’t tell me what to do. You aren’t the boss of me!” But there is also, deep in our souls, a desire to be whole and connected, a longing to put back together that which has been broken. “We are all longing to go home,” Starhawk says.

For thousands of years, religions have been a way people expressed this desire for wholeness. This desire for transformation, for a new home, a place that we have never been, “a better country,” as the author of the book of Hebrews (11:16) said so long ago. This longing for home is central to the religious impulse. And religions understand that you can’t get there on your own. That’s what religious community is for--helping us on our journey toward wholeness and home.

One of my favorite contemporary theologians is Desmond Tutu, the retired Anglican archbishop of South Africa. He likes to talk about Ubuntu--an African word that means, “the essence of being human.” Archbishop Tutu says Ubuntu is the understanding that “There is no such thing as a solitary individual. A person is a person through other persons.” He says, “We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole World.” He says, “I need you to be you so that I can be me.”

Down through time one way people have articulated this connectedness, this longing for wholeness and home, is through covenants. Covenants between people and God, and among people themselves. Covenants that articulate what we hold dear and how we are going to treat each other.

In our UU tradition, we are not organized about a creed or statement of faith, because we don’t all believe the same thing. We put more emphasis on how you live than what you think or believe.

We organize ourselves around the understanding that we are in this together. We agree, or covenant, to affirm our UU principles and sources, to let them be our guide. When you join this church, you make a commitment to do your part here. What is a congregation if not people who need one another and depend on each other, and serve the greater good? And we are in covenant with other congregations too--we are supposed to be in relationship with them and accountable to one another.

But we live in time when individualism is so strong. When we are inclined, much of the time, to think about our own needs. We forget what Desmond Tutu knows so well, that “we belong in a greater whole and are diminished when others are humiliated or diminished.” We need a community that helps us to remember who we are and whose we are, that supports us and holds us accountable; that reminds us of our highest values, and helps us live by them; and, when we fail or fall short, that helps us to get up and try again.

That’s what a covenant should do: remind us of who we ought to be, and show us the way to get there. And when we break the covenant, provide a way to make amends and repair what has been broken.

Last year a group of us began working to develop a covenant for this congregation. This work came out of a realization that we need to articulate what we value here, how we want and expect each other to act, to describe what being in right relationship looks like.

All organizations, from families to nations, have expectations and rules. Sometimes these are implied, not written down anywhere. The trouble with this is that you can cross a boundary or break a rule without even knowing it. If you’ve ever had someone tell you, “We don’t do that here,” you know that doesn’t feel so good.

It’s better to be clear about what the boundaries and expectations are. One of the places we do this pretty well is in our Small Group Ministry groups. In some churches these are called Covenant Groups, because people make a commitment to the group for a set period of time--they covenant to be a group, and to run the group according to certain expectations. Small group ministry uses a particular way of being together that encourages deep listening and honest sharing. It can take a bit of getting used to, but when people attend faithfully and abide by the simple rules, it works. It fosters deeper connections, helps build community and is good for the soul.

I’ve become aware that another place to be more explicit about expectations is our ritual of lighting candles of joy and sorrow. I don’t want to remind you every Sunday that this is part of our prayer time, and not a time for announcements or stories or speeches, and I trust you don’t want that either. But it’s better to be up front about what the expectations are; it’s fairer and more welcoming than just assuming people know or will figure it out. I’d rather remind you ahead of time, than have to approach you afterwards and say the equivalent of “We don’t do that here.”

But please don’t take this to mean that we shouldn’t ever disagree or speak hard truths to one another. We should--and I hope our covenant will help us with that too. Though it’s not always

easy to hear, I do appreciate the times when some of you have told me that I annoyed you or disappointed you. It's not easy to say this, or to hear it, but it's part of being in community together. The truth is, if we want to go deeper, we need risk going beyond being polite to being real with one another; to tell the truth that we do sometimes hurt and annoy and disappoint each other.

And then what? How do we stay in relationship when the going gets tough? That's where having a covenant will help. In the same way that marriage vows are "for better and for worse," our covenant, if we get to know it, if we put it into practice, if we make it part of our common life here, our covenant will remind us of what we aspire to, and that we are all in this together. It will help us, when we make mistakes and hurt each other, to seek reconciliation, forgiveness and healing.

What Starhawk says is true: We are all longing to go home, to some place we have never been. A place we do catch glimpses of from time to time, where strength joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Where there are arms to hold us when we falter. Where there is circle of healing, a circle of friends, a place where we can be free.²

I want to invite you, for the first time, to join in saying together the words of our covenant. They are printed on the insert in the order of service. Will you stand as you are able? We'll say the words of our covenant responsively, with Sarina leading us.

Leader: We strive to be a beloved spiritual community of members and friends who affirm that Love is the Doctrine of this church;

Congregation: Therefore, we enter into this covenant:

L: We find worth in Honesty,

C: So I vow to speak my own truth and encourage others to voice their own truths, honoring the diversity of all of our experiences.

L: We cherish Compassion and Kindness,

C: So I pledge to use love as my guiding principle and to keep an open mind and heart.

L: We value Respect,

C: So I promise to deal directly with others, to reflect patience while listening and to remember the good intentions of others.

L: We value Accountability,

C: So I will be responsible for what I hear and for what I say and do.

² These words slightly adapted from words by Starhawk.

L: In our endeavor to dwell together in this community we acknowledge that when we find ourselves in discord, our spiritual wellbeing is in jeopardy;

C: Therefore, I will seek support in order to reconcile my relationship with others and to practice forgiveness.

All: And as we seek to understand our interconnections, we celebrate the strength we hold as individuals and collectively as a church to build the common good.

May these words inspire us and hold us accountable; may they remind us that we belong to one another, that we are all in this together, and that it is good. Let us all say together,

Amen.