

The Creedless Church  
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Like our Christian cousins that follow a liturgical calendar, this month marks our entry into the third year of using our Transformational worship themes. September's theme is Acceptance/Tolerance/Respect. Now that might seem like quite a large amount of topic to cover in only a month – but in this sermon, I engage all three for they are intertwined in a deep way within my understanding of the creedless church. For you who are looking for my sermon titled The 5 W's of Our Covenant as printed in our monthly magazine First Words – you're on the correct Sunday. This is what happens when you try to work ahead of yourself, send an e-mail with the title and then forget you sent the e-mail and rename the sermon. Still, it's the same sermon.

In early Christianity, from which our Unitarian Universalist faith arose (but not until the Reformation) there were creeds – or statements of belief to summarize the teachings of the faith. Different creeds came into existence as church fathers argued about truth and created doctrine. Most Christian faiths, regardless of denomination, recognize three creeds – called ecumenical creeds – because they applied to the catholic church (small c meaning the universal Christian Church – again, before the Reformation). There is the Apostles Creed – not because the apostles of Jesus wrote it but rather, this creed tried to capture what the apostles taught. It's one of the oldest, dating back to the middle of the second century. The Nicene Creed in 325 CE, was created as a response to the Arian heresy. A man named Arius taught that Jesus was not truly divine and of a different substance than God; Arius' teachings challenged the developing doctrine of the Trinity. Some claim that Arius is an ancestor to Unitarians because Unitarians posit that God is one, not three. Finally there is the Athanasian Creed in 500 CE; “this creed,

attributed to Athanasius, a fourth century bishop of Alexandria, the creed defends the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. In some Episcopal and Anglican churches, the Nicene Creed is recited every Sunday. Some churches alternate between the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed.

Creeds have survived and served church authorities and their people for centuries. They have been staples of a faith tradition and have created incredible tensions within the church. There is some real comfort being surrounded by people who believe the same thing. But what happens you don't believe something anymore? There was a phrase in the Nicene Creed that in 1054 CE led to a permanent split in the church. There was an argument about the phrase "and the Son" You see, the question was did the Holy Spirit come from the only the Father or from both the Father and the Son. The traditional Greek wording of the creed didn't have "and the Son" and the Eastern church believed the Greek wording, thought it a more original understanding while the Western, Roman church believed in the addition of "and the Son." Hence, the Western and Eastern Church divide. These creeds are powerful entities. (Dennis Bratcher, ed., [www.crivoice.org/creedsearly.html](http://www.crivoice.org/creedsearly.html))

It is important to know what one believes and creeds, or statements of beliefs can be important to clarify ideas and how one decides to live their lives. Creeds work for millions of people and yet they don't speak for everyone, especially when what is put forth as truth doesn't follow the natural order of the Universe as we know and experience it. It becomes especially important if your belief in these creeds is what guarantees your eternal salvation. Theologian and author Forrest Church, in his essay titled "Awakening" from the book A Chosen Faith (a book that talks about our UU faith) writes: "With Jesus, resurrection or no resurrection... He lived in such a way that his life proved to be worth dying for. And yet, from the Apostles' Creed,

embraced as doctrine throughout much of Christendom, one would have little way of knowing this...What does this creed affirm about Jesus' life and teachings? Not one thing. It states merely that he was born in an unusual way and died in an unusual way, telling us nothing about the fact that Jesus lived in an unusual way. This is what is important about Jesus. Not that he existed before he was born; was implanted in a virgin's womb; visited hell after he died; and then returned to be resurrected and reign in heaven. These are dogmatic propositions of faith. They can be confirmed by faith alone, and a mighty leap of faith at that, for they stand in direct contradiction to nature's laws. ...The Apostles' Creed and other such statements of dogmatic theology (Church writers) entirely miss this point. They seem to suggest 'if you believe in Jesus, you can live forever,' not, 'if you believe as Jesus, you can live well.'" (page 6-7).

Countless numbers of people throughout the ages have found themselves reciting creeds and realizing that they no longer believe the words. This can become a crisis of faith. How do you know what's true and if what you're saying isn't, then what do you do?

This question takes us into a mind (m-i-n-d)-field of what we mean by truth. Is truth a fixed reality? Sealed for entity? My answer is sometimes. Example – heat, fire burns. This is true. And so does extreme cold...and so can the wind. The one truth that heat burns does not cancel out the other truths that other things can burn as well. Even seemingly opposites, like heat and cold can burn. Unitarian Universalist congregations do not have a creed. We think that revelation, that truth is not sealed and fixed. We have experienced in our own lives that as we learn and grow, so does our understanding...and so can our understanding of what is truth. So we are people of faith without a creed, or statement of belief. Okay...it's good that we don't recite something some of us believe in and some of us don't. But what then do we have? If we aren't a creedal church, a church based on a creed, then what kind of a church are we?

We do have a statement of principles – which some would call a creed. There are the seven listed in the opening pages of the hardback hymnal. And listed underneath those, are six sources in which our Principles are grounded. They are an important part of who we are and where we come from. And directly above all of those words that make up our sources and our principles are these: We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: ...Covenant – it's not a statement of belief – a covenant is something we do. As it is used in this way, it is an action. And it can also be a noun – a thing.

“Covenant, most simply, means ‘to come together’ as we are doing here...more specifically [it] means ‘to come together by making a promise.’ (Rebecca Parker’s 1998 General Assembly address, *What They Dreamed Be Our to Do: Lessons from the History of Covenant*).

We have a Covenant. The word sounds ancient maybe, Biblical even. And there is mention in the Bible about covenant; in the Hebrew scriptures God makes several covenants, promises to various people – Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David to name some. These promises were mostly about land...and the continuation of their family line. Twelve years ago, in 1998 Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King, one of our UU seminaries, delivered a beautiful essay/sermon to the General Assembly. It was titled *What They Dreamed Be Ours to Do: Lesson from the History of Covenant*. It's in the General Assembly on-line archives – I recommend it to you. In the essay she writes that we inherit covenant before we create covenant – that we are born into some promises before we are even aware of them. She invites us to ask the question “what have we been given? What is the covenant we are already in?” What kind of promises are we living out unconsciously – with our choosing to be in this faith tradition. We have inherited a faith tradition that cherishes one another, the relationships that exist within the community. We have inherited a covenant, a promise and connection with a source larger than ourselves whether we

call it Spirit of Life, Love, the earth, God, Buddha or \_\_\_\_\_ (your label here). We already exist in relation to that which is greater.

And covenant is something we do; it is a practice – so that means our actions show more of who we are and what we’re about than our words. I’m wondering what am I, and what are our actions saying about us to the world? What promises are we making in this community? There is a familiar story that shows so well the promises people made to one another...not with words but with actions. The story goes, “A rabbi asked God to give him a glimpse of what heaven and hell would be like. God agreed to this request and asked the prophet Elijah to be the rabbi’s guide on this adventure. Elijah first led the rabbi into a large room. In the middle of the room was a fire with a big cooking pot bubbling away on it. And in the pot was a delicious stew. All around the cooking pot sat a crowd of people. They each had a long-handled spoon, which they were dipping into the delicious stew. But the people looked pale and thin and wretched. There was an icy stillness in the room. The handles of the spoons were so long that no one was able to get the lovely food into their mouth. When the two visitors were back outside again, the rabbi asked Elijah what strange place this was. “That was hell,” Elijah explained. Then Elijah led the rabbi to a second room, which looked exactly like the first. In the middle, a fire was blazing and a cooking pot was bubbling away, full of the same delicious, aromatic stew. People sat around the fire, with the same long-handled spoons in their hands. But they were enjoying lively, animated conversations with each other. And the difference? Well, the people in the second room were not trying to feed themselves with long-handled spoons. They were using the spoons to feed each other. “Ah, heaven’ said the rabbi.” (source unknown, one hundred wisdom stories, Margaret Silf, editor, page 55).

We have a covenant with the source of life that calls us into service – service to one another and to the larger world. This service allows us to accomplish together far more than we could ever do on our own. I witnessed this covenant in action this week and especially yesterday. I was with you and watched you give of yourselves so that others may also have. I watched you talk, help, and extend a hand to another as they sought to find what they needed and yes, this community and our community of neighbors, like the people in heaven both benefitted from service one to another.

In this community full of diversity, full of opinions and thoughts – full of experiences and ideas that can sometimes conflict with one another – by our very being here we have made a promise to one another. That as members of this community, this congregation, we will accept differences, we will celebrate diversity and tolerate, yes I mean tolerate differences of opinion on how some things happen here – how some decisions are made; and underneath it all, we have promised to respect one another in the process. This is not easy work; it's so much easier to be dismissive of those who don't think like we do, don't act as we wish they would, / but we are called to something greater than that. We have a promise of a relationship founded on respect. It is who we are, it is what we've inherited by choosing this faith tradition and it is our sacred work to do in this world, beginning here.

When creating this service I found the quote for our Centering Thought and knew immediately that Shaw had written what I feel about community. "...my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can." We covenant together to affirm and promote Life, Compassion, learning, growing, being our whole selves, – and into this diversified, varied and thoughtful people, a group of committed individuals with loving attention to the health of this community, after seeking much in put from

as many as would participate, they created a covenant of good relations. They created a noun – a thing we can look at, refer to and remind ourselves. We create and live the promise when we practice it, when we turn this noun into a verb. There's a copy of this covenant in your order of service. It is eloquent and starts with respect. It shows us all, members, friends, staff and ministers how to be respectful, what actions we do to demonstrate our values, how we learn and what it means to serve. The Good Relations committee is interested in your thoughts about this covenant, this promise we've entered into. They are hosting conversations about this covenant after the service – please join them and share your thoughts.

And because covenant is something we practice – it means we're not perfect with our promises. And sometimes, covenants are broken. They can be broken by accident – sometimes without our knowledge and sometimes they are deliberately ruptured. And like realizing you no longer believe the creed you've said before, broken covenants can be a crisis of faith. What to do when you experience this? Seek out help...go directly to the person if you can and seek a conversation to clarify and re-establish connection. Do an action with integrity that brings you into good relationship again. Learn from the experience and choose to affirm life by resolving your part of the brokenness. This is sacred work.

My colleague and professor Rebecca Parker said it this way: "Let us covenant with one another to keep faith with the source of life, knowing that we are not our own, earth made us. Let us covenant with one another to keep faith with the community...and never forget that life can be saved from that which threatens it, even by small bands of people choosing to put into practice an alternative way of life; and let us covenant with one another to seek for an ever deeper awareness of that which springs up inwardly in us. Even when our hearts are broken by our own failure or the failure of others...even when we have done all we can and life can still be broken,

[let us remember that] there is a Universal Love that has never broken faith with us and never will." May we know it to be so. Blessed be.