

SERMON We Covenant to Affirm
Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield
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READING

Reverend Eugene Pickett

The following words come from the Reverend Eugene Pickett, the former President of the Unitarian Universalist Association in the early 1980s, during the time when our present Principles and Purposes were being dreamed of and then crafted. Pickett describes the importance of our being able to express a set of shared core beliefs: “The deeper malaise lies in our confusion as to what word we have to spread. The old watchwords of liberalism—freedom, reason, tolerance—worthy though they may be, are simply not catching the imagination of the contemporary world. They describe a process for approaching religious depths, but they testify to no intimate acquaintance with the depths themselves. If we are ever to speak to a new age, we must supplement our seeking with some profound religious finds.”

SERMON We Covenant to Affirm

As I wrote about in my January column in our newsletter, *The Gleam*, we have now been together for one year, you and I. As congregations do, we have had our ups and downs—today we had the baby dedication of Morgan Fae Rush, a wonderful pointing to and affirmation of our future. As I began with you last year I did the Memorial Service of long time church mouse, Fran Ciccirella. A couple of months ago we said goodbye to newer member, Ann Murfitt. Although sad occasions, these are affirmations of the past of this community, as well as its present and future as the memories of members now gone inform what is to come in 2010 and beyond.

I have done one wedding in the sanctuary—we can hope I will do many more now that our foyer looks so beautiful with its new paint job. In May we had a special ceremony raising our rainbow flag by the front door for the first time. We have a new LGBT social group meeting here monthly...a weekly Meditation Practice Group with a mix of folks from this congregation and the larger community...a Rise Up Singing group which I just heard has received a grant from the Wakefield Cultural Council which will pay for the books we use monthly and which recognizes this valuable activity we have opened to the community. Indeed, we are looking outward, as our new Outreach Committee was formed over the summer.

This week I met with representatives of WAAV—Wakefield Alliance Against Violence, the library, the two high schools and our Outreach Committee as we prepare for an exciting collaboration which will take place in May, “Stories for a Safer Wakefield.” In events at the library, the schools, on Main Street and in our church, we will come together to address domestic violence, bullying and intolerance resulting in violence. The energy during the meeting was palpable as ideas were shared about how to address this important justice issue. It is exciting to see the needs and interests of the town come together with us!

Back to the nitty gritty: The roof was repaired over the summer. I have moved the furniture around in my office with the help of Janine and Kelli in my attempt to make it my own—with the extra added benefit that the heat works much better! Through the help of Steve Breton and his guys, more light is shed from the fixture in my office and in our sign on Main Street. I have heard many of your stories in my office, in phone calls, or over soup at our monthly Soup with the Minister. And, as promised, I have continued to ask questions, questions, questions!

I now know where the vacuum and the light switches are. I understand a lot better who is on what committee, how we handle money, some high and low points of the history around here, and how to pronounce Lake Quannapowitt. I have to admit I haven't walked around it yet, as I had hoped I would do. But I am doing much better with walking up and down our stairs, which were difficult for me last January when I first came, as you might have noticed. 2009 saw a lot of improvement in my legs from my nearly fatal car accident of March 2006. Some things take a while.

Some things do indeed take a while...so I keep asking questions. As I asked you in February of last year: Why Church? Why do we go and why do we come here? The answers to that are not static, and you and I need to keep asking them. How do we know what we want to do here? Why do we do it? What holds us together? As Unitarian Universalists, what is it that we can agree on that we believe? Since 1985 one answer to what it might be that holds us together is our Principles and Purposes. For those of you newer amongst us, you can find them right at the front of our hymnal and on the little cards and bookmarks you can find at the back of the sanctuary and downstairs in the Social Hall.

As you have heard, our religious education program will be once more looking at those Principles and Purposes as our children learn what it is to be a Unitarian Universalist, not an easy

thing to teach, since we don't have hard and fast answers, either for ourselves or for them. We are comfortable, most of us, most of the time with a lot of grey areas. I thought it might be time for us upstairs as well to think a little bit about those seven principles while the kids are doing the same thing downstairs, so for the remainder of the year, you will be hearing me mentioning them in the course of our life together and in sermons, using them as a possible frame or core of how we go about our business of faith and living.

Today, as we do each week, we began our service by reciting a covenant while the chalice was lit, something many Unitarian Universalist congregations are also doing this morning. You remember:

Love is the doctrine of this church
The quest of truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.
This is our covenant –
To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve humanity in fellowship,
To the end that all souls shall grow into
harmony with the Divine --

This covenant we say is an adaption of one written by a Universalist minister, L. Griswold Williams, who served a congregation in Reading, PA. among other places. We leave out the final sentence he wrote: "Thus we covenant with each other and with God." I am sure therein lies a tale...and perhaps one of you can tell me how that sentence came to be left out. Another question.

So we do say a covenant together. We love to say that we are a non-creedal religion—that we don't recite something like the Nicene Creed that many us, myself included, did in earlier years. We agree that we don't want to do that! But, in fact, there are few issues concerning our UU faith on which we can seem to agree, from whether we should be called a denomination at all or an association of independent congregations to whether we call where we gather a church or a meeting hall. As Warren Ross wrote on the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption of the Principles and Purposes, "Even as we vehemently reject any creed, we seem to be forever

searching for some verbal formula which all (or a least most) of us can say: ‘Yes, that’s what I (more or less) believe.’”¹

Despite the fact that there were covenants being said at many of our congregations, a need was still felt in the late 1970s to address what our core beliefs were. Our reading from Eugene Pickett gives part of the tale. We needed to address what the word was that we needed to spread. At this same time, the Women and Religion Committee was meeting to address the sexist language in our hymnbook of the time—the blue hymnal, *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*. I can remember this time very well because I was a new UU in 1980, singing in the choir of First Parish in Wayland. At first I could not understand the controversy about why we needed to change the words to hymns like *Turn Back, O Man, Forswear Thy Foolish Ways*. I needed to understand the power of words which leave out half of the human race. Didn’t man include me? Or did it? My consciousness needed to be raised, as did many others, indeed our whole association. The process of the Women and Religion Committee also began to address the statement of purposes of the UUA which was adopted at the merger in 1960.

We UUs love our battles over words. Apparently the contention around the wording of the statement of purposes was so heated that the whole merger process was almost derailed. As Warren Ross tells it, “The contention revolved around whether to include such phrases as ‘love to God and love to man’ and a reference to ‘our Judeo-Christian heritage.’ A compromise version, including a critical change from ‘our’ heritage to ‘the’ heritage, was finally hammered out in an all-day, all-night parliamentary negotiation and debate.”² With such a battle in 1960, it is amazing to remember that our current Principles and Purposes were not only adopted unanimously in 1984, and they are unchanged to this day twenty-five years later. But, hold your horses!

The principles and Purposes are part of the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and we are required to review and update them periodically. That process was going on these last couple of years...and, not surprisingly, there were all sorts of different viewpoints about the new text folks proposed—do we change them, not change them, how would they be changed. The short story is that our General Assembly voted not to send the revision on to

¹ Ross, Warren (2000). How the UUA’s Principles and Purposes were shaped and how they’ve shaped Unitarian Universalism.

² Ibid.

congregations for study and vote at this coming June's General Assembly in Minneapolis as planned. Any revision can not be considered again for two years.

Personally I feel that our Principles and Purposes have served us well, even as I agree with many of my colleagues that any statement about Unitarian Universalism needs to be a living document, just as we sing in one of our hymns, "revelation is not sealed." In fact, our Fourth Principle, which is "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning," means that we have to keep up that search and that we might one day be compelled to state what we covenant to affirm in a different way, congruent with that search.

Today I also continue to think the Principles serve us well, as we use them to teach our children and our selves what it means to be part of our congregation and how to live our lives with meaning and integrity. As Morgan grows in this congregation, she can learn what it means to affirm our first principle, "the inherent worth and dignity of every person" or as our children say it, "respect all people." Just as we covenant to affirm that each person is important and we help Morgan and others learn how to live that into being, we too are stretched by this faith which recognizes that each person has inherent worth, all the while knowing that her or she may not live that way. What do we do then? Does it mean we accept everybody and every behavior? I think not. But we do affirm that everybody has inherent worth. Knowing that each of us has inherent worth is not easy...but nobody says it would be. Or that living by affirming any of the seven principles would be easy. That is what a faith community is for, to provide companions on the path of discernment.

Indeed, our seven principles ask a lot of each of us, if we truly try to live by them. Let us take up that challenge together in 2010, as we discover together how these core values can give us insight into our faith. Which of the principles means the most to you or is the most challenging? Do you use them to guide how you live your life? I would like to know. May these principles and the frame they give to what we do here serve our lives, our spirits, our community and what is holy. May they be an affirmation if all that is good and true. May it be so.