

# Covenant for America

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A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

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Some people shop for things to buy, but I shop for stores. Clothing stores that have clothes in my size and a style I like. Shoe stores that sell shoes a woman can walk in. Hardware stores that will sell you one washer just like the ragged piece of plastic you brought in. The way I figure it, if I choose the right store, lots of day to day decisions are taken care of and I can focus on my life. I'm just not a shop till you drop kind of gal.

When I go to scope out a grocery store, for instance, I ask myself questions: do THEY sell the brands I like? Is their store brand is good quality? Do they use shelf tags with a unit price and is it correct? Do THEY keep the aisles wide enough to move around in? Do THEY give a bounty when I bring my own bags? Do they sell produce by the piece so I can buy exactly what I want? If they have self check-out, does it work? If a store has these qualities, I will become a dedicated shopper, patronizing that store unless there are sales, promotions, or coupons for diet coke from other places.

My dedication has definite limits, however. If they start insisting that their employees card 60 somethings, if they sell me sour milk, or run out of the things I need, I start store shopping again. THEIR problems with underage sales, cooler repair or stocking are, to my mind, THEIR problems. If THEY don't keep meeting my needs, I'm out.

You may wonder where this is leading to. It is leading to a conversation about the difference between being a consumer and being a citizen.

Citizenship has a legal definition, of course, about where you were born and what kind of papers you have, but I'm talking here about spiritual citizenship, not legal citizenship. A spiritual citizen, papers and birthrights aside, is someone who has bound themselves by a national covenant of laws and ways, legal and social, decided, freely, that this is their country, the place their heart resides, the land they love, a reasonable manifestation of the values they cherish, the place of their people. This nation is their "situatedness," their place in the world. I have met people who are legal citizens whose heart resides in another country, and I have met people who are not citizens yet (they almost always hope to become citizens), whose lives shine with spiritual connection to America. I have also met people who are legal citizens but who have clearly decided not to cherish the covenants of civility or the spirit or letter of the

constitution, whose spiritual citizenship I have to doubt. I am seeing a lot of this sort of thing in this political season. It frightens me.

Being a consumer is a one way deal. If they do what I want, I patronize them. I don't consider myself a part of the management, or particularly loyal to the brand. I'm not a part of them. Citizenship, on the other hand, is a two way deal. I give and I get. I don't just shop America, I am America. And while plenty of things go on in America that I don't like, I'm not going anywhere else. One of the things I cherish about my country is that I am free to criticize it, and criticize it I do. But in a very real sense, it is my country, right or wrong. I know that most of you feel the same way. Most citizens do.

Spiritual citizenship, that covenanted relationship with a body of people, is not confined to nations. You can be a spiritual citizen of your town, your neighborhood...I've met spiritual citizens of the North Valley, haven't you? In this congregation, membership is a kind of spiritual citizenship, a freely made decision to lend a hand in doing what we do here, a general cherishing of the values we celebrate here, and an agreement to act here in ways which accord with those values. We don't snarl at each other, here. We respect each other's worth and dignity. We honor and even lean into human diversity.

And a covenant? What's that? We UU's should be very clear on this concept, because it is how we manage our congregations, and the reason we manage our congregations by covenant is because it is our spiritual ancestors, the Puritans, who brought covenant to America. A covenant is a moral contract between two parties, not enforceable by law but by sheer goodness and trust.

Now I am aware that there are some people who have poor associations with the word covenant. In my childhood, where I grew up, the only time I ever heard the word covenant was in relationship to neighborhoods where home owners had to sign an agreement which was called a covenant but which was actually, after a 1926 Supreme Court decision, an enforceable contract that you would not sell it or rent it to a person who was not white or even, who was Jewish. Neighborhood covenants were a tool of racism. These days there are still legally enforceable neighborhood covenants but they deal with neighborhood standards of practice like the color of roofs, the manicuring of lawns, and the keeping of chickens, rather than who may live there.

But that's not the kind of covenant I'm talking about. This morning's kind of covenant is not a legal thing but a moral thing... an agreement among people to be together in a particular way, usually more general than specific, not really enforceable except by appeal to a person's better

nature and desire to belong. That's the kind of covenant that came to America with our spiritual ancestors, the Puritans.

Here is the story. It is our founding story; it is what makes our congregations different from a supermarket and we, its' people, citizens rather than consumers.

In 1607, a Rev. John Robinson, Englishman, scholar and brilliant preacher, a man who believed in the gradual growth of the spirit in persons, rather than in what we now call, a "born again" experience, and for that had had his church taken away from him by the bishops of England, he and a small group of devoted followers swore to each other that they would begin their own church. This church was to be devoted to the mutual teaching, prayer, and study of its members, all of whom freely joined. It was to be run democratically and was organized, not around obedience to a king or a bishop, not by assent to a creed or to the authority of a book, but simply by the promise, one to another, to be together.

John Bradford, then 17 years old, later elected many times mayor of the Massachusetts Bay colony, remembered the covenant this way.

*The lord's free people joined themselves by covenant of the lord into a church estate, in the followership of the gospel, to walk in all His ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavors, whatsoever it should cost them.*

I want you to just glance down at your order of service, at the affirmation we shared this morning, because it is a modern restatement of this 400 year old covenant. I'll read it again.

John Robinson's covenanted group suffered persecution and went to Amsterdam, then to Leyden, then to America, and built a colony at Plymouth. As a part of their building they built a church: the First Parish of Plymouth. That church is still there, and still houses a covenanted, religious community. If you ever visit that church, you will see that later generations changed its name, which is now, "The First Parish of Plymouth, Unitarian Universalist."

Through nearly four centuries, The Pilgrim establishment of New England morphed towards a more liberal understanding of the religious quest. Early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it split into the Unitarians and the Congregationalists, with each town's parish church voting which way to go. The Unitarians, the more liberal group, continued the Puritan trust in the people and never adopted a creed, and the theological center of our faith morphed through the 19<sup>th</sup> century into a non-Christian Transcendentalism, through first three quarters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into an ever more atheistic Humanism, and since into a theological diverse and respectfully spiritual place so beautifully expressed in this church by our mural.

So, our faith has changed substantially from that of John Robinson and William Bradford. But there are also many things we share with our forebears of Plymouth. Like them, we covenant together to walk in truth and to search for truth. Like them, we gather as free people, binding ourselves, not to an authority structure or to a book or to a tradition, but to each other in democratic process which relies, in smallest and largest matters, on respect, persuasion and commitment to growing truth. Do you recognize those ideas?

This church exists by covenant, not by creed. We'll explore that more in a couple of weeks, but today, in honor of the Fourth of July weekend, I want to return to the national scene, to the kind of covenant that makes us spiritual citizens of this nation.

There's no written American Covenant, but we all know when it's been broken. When a public figure resorts to personal insult to diss people he doesn't agree with, we recoil. That's not the way we do things here, we say. We've bumped into the covenant. When politicians talk about doing things that are patently unconstitutional, we are restive. Our national covenant involves respect for our constitution and for our fellow citizens, even the ones who don't know all of its provisions. These days, the covenant we Americans share involves a respect for a diversity of persons that would have astounded previous generations. Even those having difficulty honoring the widest bands of diversity extend their willingness to be civil to more kinds of humanity than most of their great grandparents.

I think that this part of our covenant arose because there was never a royalty here, and because of that everyone has a certain worth and dignity that once was accorded only to the few, and because the history of our nation since the Civil War is that circle of "everyone" who must be accorded worth and dignity has gotten more and more expansive in more and more places, in spite of the discomfort that brings into the lives of those who are already comfortably in the circle and can count on almost everyone respecting their essential dignity and worth. Much as we struggle with this, we slog on because...well, because that's our covenant with America and the American dream.

Living our lives by honoring covenants does not only make a particular kind of social order. The covenants within which we live...and most of us are a part of several; civic, family, friendship groups, organizations like this congregation... They ask certain things of us, situate us in a certain part of society, give us a launching pad, a place of comfort, a home, even a framework to rebel against. They limit our absolute freedom, but they create meaning and relatedness in our lives.

They make us who we are.

Once we are grownups, 25 or so years old, we are mature but not finished, for we grow in wisdom, spirit and love throughout our lives. Mostly the way we do that is with the friction created between ourselves and our covenants. Who we become as adults, you see, is not a matter of the most amazing 50 things we have done once. They are a matter of the things we've done 50 or more times, whether we felt like or not, because we are related to other people, because we have obligations, because of love. That amazing trip to Hawaii and the helicopter ride over those amazing mountains there? That was beautiful and refreshing and a great bonding experience. But what gives us character is the 50 visits to a shut in friend or distant parent, the care we took to write a will, The four year term on the volunteer board, the reading of "Goodnight Moon" to our 4 year old, yet again, the way we attend to what our spouse wants and needs, day after day. It's picking up litter in our park, dropped by accident, we hope, or by someone who has not grown up enough to feel good about honoring the covenant. It's volunteering with homeless families and honoring their resilience and hard work when we do...and not only next week, but again in three months, and three months again, because some things...this human care and regard, are more important than grocery stores, and because we while we look for deals when we shop, we look for meaning and relationships in our lives, and they make us who we are.

Civic covenants are informal. They are not written down, they are in the landscape of what is and isn't done. They are enforced, not by law but by shock, disgust, and shame. Most people take notice when they realize they have shocked or disgusted others, and they have to ask themselves if they are sure that what they are doing is justified to avoid feeling ashamed. That doesn't mean that shocking or disgusting people is always bad. The first women to wear practical bloomers under their skirts deeply shocked and disgusted their neighbors, but they had, they felt good reasons for their actions and, well, I'm sure glad they did what they did. A few people sure enough of themselves that they are willing to brave the withering glances of others is often the starting place of good changes in the social covenant. History, in the end, judges.

Some people don't notice the effect they have on others or don't ask themselves if they are sure what they are doing is worth the disruption it is causing or, most dangerously, have no sense of shame. They just do what they do. They can't keep or even understand a covenant. But they are an unfortunate and difficult minority. Most people find meaning, mooring, and personal benefit in monitoring their actions and their effect on others, and carrying on, for good,

Covenants change with the times. The civic covenant that helped people think of racially exclusive neighborhood covenants as pragmatic and neighborly has changed since 1960 because we have a wider understanding about race and justice than they did then. Some of

that is about laws, but a lot of it is about attitude, feeling and behavior. Most people wouldn't feel good about doing that any more.

The civic covenant does not always change for the better and is malleable. It only takes a few highly placed and frequently quoted persons...sports personalities, politicians, entertainers, to start speaking or acting outside the covenant to morph it. We thought we had come to a place in our nation in which blatant racism and bigotry were outside of the covenant, but we have a candidate for president who doesn't keep that covenant and it is changing us for the worse, and that morph to the national covenant, to what it means to be a spiritual citizen, will outlast the election.

David Brooks proposes that we notice and cherish the part of our national covenant which enjoins us to treat each other with worth and dignity and celebrate a nation in which progress towards the goal of "everybody, without exception" is the thrust of history. He calls keeping that covenant patriotism, and along with love of the land, appreciation of freedom, and honor to those who have fought for freedom, it's what we do. And while its great fun to sing the songs and to see the fireworks and eat the hotdogs, the work of patriotism is not just the work the military does patrolling the seas, it is the work of all of us who offer those around us the dignity of their humanity and love our country and use our moral energy to keep it heading towards justice. We keep the covenant of civility and relationship and ever growing circles of understanding. Whatsoever it may cost us...because that's who we are.

We're about to sing one of our heroic hymns, We'll build a land, and while the images are of grand movements, hard work, and nation building, it is really about the covenant made in the privacy of our hearts with the society at large, to do the simple things...honor all of our neighbors. Vote. Pick up a little trash in your neighborhood park. Take care of the people in all the ways you do. It's patriotic. It makes our nation what it is.