

LOVING ALIKE

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I love McDonald's in the morning. Or at least I used to until I had to reduce my cholesterol and caffeine intake. There is nothing in all the world like a McDonald's Egg McMuffin and a cup of McDonald's coffee. Nothing quite like that high from caffeine, salt and fat to help me see at last that we are all one people, one nation, and one with the cosmos.

There is a sense of community at McDonald's, especially in the morning. People from every walk of life, from every race, class and generation come to McDonald's. In my younger and more indulgent days, I would take my journal and sit in a corner writing deep thoughts about the unity of all creation.

My favorite McDonald's was on Telegraph Avenue in Oakland, California where a regular group of older men of all races would sit in the same corner each morning. They were not prosperous men, but middle and working class folks struggling to get by in retirement. They would discuss the events of the day, politics, society, culture. They ribbed each other with that particular kind of male camaraderie. They carried a dignity and wisdom – down-to-earth and common sensical – and I loved to listen in. They would look up at me and smile as if they knew I was listening and they really didn't mind.

James Luther Adams, 20th century Unitarian theologian and ethicist, said that people are looking for two things in a religious institution – a sense of ultimacy and a sense of intimacy.

Ultimacy is about the “vertical dimension” of our lives. We spend much time living horizontally – feeling flat, rushed, disconnected – dancing on the surface. Ultimacy takes us both higher and deeper, giving us ground to stand on and raising our eyes in reverence and awe. Intimacy is about human connection, being part of a community of shared value and meaning, with whom you mark the passages of life, give thanks, offer compassion, gather strength and celebrate (as happened last night at the auction).

These qualities are mutually reinforcing. Sharing our sense of ultimacy, what we hold highest and best in our lives, deepens our connections with one another. The safety and support of intimacy in community encourages us to explore the ultimate questions more fully – going deeper together.

My McDonald's days were mostly long before I found the church and entered the ministry. I didn't realize it then, but McDonald's was one of the few places I found both ultimacy and intimacy – connected with the cosmos and with other people. Not that either were especially satisfying. The caffeine high ran its course in 15 to 20 minutes, and I never did create meaningful community.

This is perhaps a sad statement on modern culture, for McDonald's is a poor substitute for what James Luther Adams – who we affectionately called JLA in seminary – what JLA called the Free Church. A place that

“enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence,
that sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands...
[binding] together families and generations,
protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority....
[bringing] individuals into caring, trusting fellowship,...

[protecting and nourishing] their integrity and spiritual freedom”

JLA understood the depth of what it means to be a covenantal faith. At the center of creedal faith is a creed – a right belief for all. The Free Church is rather

“open to insight and conscience from every source.

It bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language,
to new and broader fellowship.

It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.”

Sound like any place you know?

Yet because it has no creed at the center, people often wonder what can possibly hold us together on this grand adventure. We are held by covenant, by the promises we make to one another. As Jewish theologian Martin Buber said, humans are “promise-making, promise keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creatures.”

JLA wrote, “the biblical idea of covenant is what I call a covenant of being. That is, the old testament asserts that the people’s covenant is a covenant with the essential character and intention of reality. It is not merely a covenant between human beings; it is a covenant between human beings in the face of reality.”

A covenant between human beings in the face of reality – I never found that at McDonald’s. Of course I didn’t. McDonald’s is part of the superficial, horizontal, fast-food culture that works against depth and connection in our lives. That I found any ultimacy or intimacy there speaks to the power of my yearning for both.

Which is why church came as such a revelation to me. I hadn’t known that what I yearned for could be met so powerfully. And *I* could only possibly have found such depth and meaning in *our* free church, our faith based on covenant rather than creed.

There are many ways we say it.

We value deeds, not creeds.

In the words of Francis David, 16th century Unitarian martyr: “We need not think alike to love alike.”

It’s in our third principle: “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.”

This is a covenantal, not a creedal church – not gathered around shared beliefs, not organized around a particular religious story or point of view. Rather, glued together by the promises we make to ourselves, to one another, to the world.

All of this arises in our tradition today because of our direct lineage to the Pilgrims and Puritans of early colonial America. This often surprises people because when we tend to think of them as rigid, harsh and, well, Puritanical....

Yet they came to this land seeking religious freedom, a freedom that had taken them beyond the dogma and creeds of the day. In his sermon to the Pilgrims as they sailed on the Mayflower, John Robinson declared “the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word.”

God had ever new things to reveal. A fitting message to people setting off on such a grand and hazardous endeavor. What new things might be revealed in this New World? New to them, anyway.

Yet this stance of theological discovery meant the Pilgrims and Puritans could not build a church around rigid beliefs. Something else must bind them together. A covenant – promises made to one another.

In 1648, these new churches in America declared their faith in covenant in what is known as the Cambridge Platform. My good colleague, scholar Rev. Alice Blair Wesley, summarized their 17th century language this way:

We pledge to walk together in the spirit of mutual love. The spirit of love is alone worthy of our ultimate, our religious loyalty. So, we shall meet often to take counsel concerning the ways of love, and we will yield religious authority solely to our own understanding of what these ways are, as best we can figure them out or learn ... them, together.

Only such promises, made freely and individually, to walk together in love really make a free church. Though the Pilgrims and Puritans shared strong beliefs, it was this covenant, freely made, that formed them into religious community.

It took some 400 years, but this non-creedal, covenantal faith, open to new revelations of the Holy, ultimately led from the Puritans of the 17th century to all of us here today.

So what does being a covenantal faith mean today?

One of the things that people often say about finding one of our congregations is that they are so glad to have found a community of “like-minded people.” I know just what they mean, and I think they have gotten it a little wrong. For if all we are is a group of like-minded people sitting around being like-minded, then we are not living by our values – values which honor diversity, reason, acceptance – an openness of mind and heart and spirit.

Indeed, “we need not think alike to love alike.” We are decidedly not like-minded and it is one of the great joys of our tradition that this is so. Rather we are like-hearted, sharing values that lead us to being the people we long to be.

Like-hearted people agreeing to walk together.

Or as Bob Dylan put it:

I ain't lookin' for you to feel like me
See like me or be like me.
All I really want to do
Is, baby, be friends with you

And the only way such a people are woven into a lasting community is by covenant – the promises they make to one another. For human community also can fail us. We make promises that can always be broken. That can always be renewed. Herein lies a richness, power, depth and meaning.

So how do we live as a truly covenantal community?

One place to begin might be the new Chalice Circles coming in March. These are small groups where you can bring your whole selves, connect to others, and share “the adventure of the spirit.” Building intimacy by engaging around questions of ultimacy. Groups of 8-12 meeting over about three months. You will share your lives as you engage in questions of theology, philosophy, ethical living, being part of a liberal religious tradition, that is “open to insight from every source.”

Chalice Circles are not a meeting of like minds necessarily, but a meeting of humans, covenanting in the face of reality to walk together a while. Fostering ultimacy and nurturing intimacy. Oh and it’s a lot of fun, too.

Another thing many congregations develop is a Covenant of Right Relations – guidelines for living in covenant. Some have said they’d like to take up of writing such a covenant in this interim time.

A Covenant of Right Relations can guide you through the challenges of creating community. For being in covenant with one another does not mean there is no conflict, rather it means walking together when all are getting along and when the road is rough, too.

A covenantal community sometimes means loving and living with people you may not like very much.

There was a man in my home congregation, I’ll call him Fred, who I could barely abide. I thought he was passive aggressive and disrespectful, especially to women. He sat right behind me in the choir and would say snotty things about our choir director, either directly to her or under his breath. When I was chair of the Religious Education Committee, Fred disagreed with almost every decision we made and would go off and do his own thing without consulting us.

One Sunday after church, I reached my limit. I told him angrily that at church we were supposed to work together and share, “And you’re not sharing!” I said and stomped my foot. I felt like an indignant kindergartner which just made me madder.

Then one day I was forced to see Fred in a new light. It was at choir practice. A much-loved couple in the choir had split up. Greg got “custody” of the choir, and we all missed Lauren. Then love won out; Lauren and Greg reconciled. Lauren just showed up at choir practice again one evening. We were all thrilled. Fred gave Lauren the most tender and loving hug. And he had the temerity to hug her not three feet from where I was standing.

I crossed my arms with an incredibly sour look on my face, and thought, “No. How dare you act like a nice guy? I can’t just hate you with this self-righteous fervor if you can be a nice guy. So stop it.” A friend who knows me well saw the look on my face and just laughed. I was so busted.

I can’t say that I ever came to love Fred. Yet being with him in community over time, I came to see the whole person. To acknowledge that he too was someone who only wanted to offer love and be loved in return.

A community takes all kinds – the witty people, the passionate people, the dreamers, the know-it-alls. Those we love easily and those we learn to love. Community teaches us compassion and acceptance. When we are out of line, someone tells us – maybe with a stomp of the foot, maybe with a knowing laugh.

Stick around in a community like this and eventually you will see almost everything. Every manifestation of human suffering and human nobility. Being in covenantal community teaches us that love is possible. It teaches us how connected we are. The whole of your humanity is accepted in covenantal community. Both the ways you are broken, in need of healing, and your unique gifts that enrich us all.

Being a Unitarian Universalist and part of this congregation indeed does ask something of us. It should change your life, though I cannot tell you how. Change your understanding of the promises you make to yourself, to others and even to the cosmos.

It asks you to show up. Be seen and cherished for who you are. Perhaps challenged to live more fully by the values you hold dear. This is the tapestry of love we weave. From it arise the covenant we have with one another. I invite you to engage in this work tenderly, joyfully, seriously.

I invite you to be a pilgrim church, a servant church. Come along on this adventure of the spirit.

Amen.

Blessed Be.