|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Monton Unitarian Church**  **20th September 2020**  **Keeping our promise of love** | |
| Light Chalice | Bring who you are as you enter our church this morning.  Bring your best self and your struggling self;  bring your mistakes and your triumphs;  bring your shortcomings and your re-commitment to good.  Bring yourself here and open your heart to beauty, to truth,  to the door that is open to the presence of God.  Here in this church we are trying to walk together on the  peaceable way; trying to hammer out division, and hatred, and all that separates one from another.  We try, and we will fall short, but held in love, we try again.  We come together this morning, as a church, to remember our promises and vow to live by them once again.  Rev Susan Frederick-Gray, wrote; As Unitarians, we sometimes say it is the absence of creed that is most important to who we are. This is wrong. Any one of us could practice religious freedom at home on Sunday mornings. We could practice religious freedom all day long, every day, and never come into community. It is covenant that brings us out of isolation, covenant that brings us out of selfish concerns, out of individualism, to join ourselves to something greater, to become a part of a community that is working to practice love, to dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge and wisdom together, to find better ways to live our lives and live in the world.  So let us begin to work out our covenant of love together. |
| Prayer  By [Maureen Killoran](http://www.uua.org/directory/people/maureen-killoran) | Love that is beyond us, and within us, You are the music that sounded before our world was born, sound and silence woven throughout the ages, far beyond the most profound wisdom humanity can touch.  Be with us, deepen our willingness to live without certainty; to take the risks of living on the edges of our creativity; to step beyond the boundaries of possibility and hope.  Help us always to remember that we are in our essence the magic of star stuff: that we are kin to all that is and was and may yet come to be.  Teach us to temper our impatience, to retain our conviction that what we do makes a difference; that even our smallest act can contribute to the good of a greater whole.  Be with us in our uncertainties. Rejoice with our small triumphs.  Comfort our losses. Remind us that we are never alone, not in our joys or in our tears.  In the blessing of our togetherness, may we feel the presence of love, something greater than we have yet been able to comprehend.  And may we know that the strength of loving community is both a Divine mystery, and an incredible, tangible reality. May we find that mystery, that real strength, both here today, and in our wider lives. Amen.  And let those of us who wish to do so join together in saying the Lord’s Prayer. |
| Story | **Parley Of Intolerance, by Naomi Linnel**    "This" complained the Death Watch Beetle "is my sacred space. I have my home here and am nourished by it."  "It's more likely you are spoiling my home with your selfish gnawing, and piles of dust everywhere and your arrogant claims to be superior." protested the mouse. "You've got no respect for my sacred space."  "Well that's a joke" said the Beetle. "What about that pile of mouldy crumbs and those disgusting smelly rotten apples you hide behind the old chairs? Uncivilised I call it."  "Watch out," squeaked the Mouse, "there's that awful Bat. Now, he is uncivilised and disgusting, with horrible noisome habits. I don't see why any of the rest of us should put up with him. Oh, no..."    The bat landed and hung upside down from the Beetle's beam.  "Room for a little one?" he squeaked.  "No, definitely not." they chorused.  "This is our space." said the Beetle.  "There's no room for anyone else." added the Mouse.  "You don't fit in with us." protested the Beetle. "You are not of our persuasion. And besides, you stink."  "Why don't you go outside, or into the porch with the Wren?" suggested the Mouse. "She's a flyer like you, and she doesn't trouble anyone - too obsessed with those eggs. She wouldn't mind."  "I would mind." snapped the Bat, "I am a mammal like you. Beetles I can put up with - they taste quite good. But I don't consort with birds."  "That, gentlemen, is enough." It was the Voice speaking in the darkness behind the curtain, through the crack in the door, from beneath the flagstoned floor, from the apex of the vault, louder than the loudest clap of thunder, more silent than the silence of the still feather. Whose voice it was depended on who was listening. It might be Bramha or G-d, Confucius or Amaterasu, Isis or Baku, or even Jesus.  "This" continued the Voice "is no one creature's space. It is sacred precisely because it belongs to no-one. It is made sacred because of the care and love of each for the others within it. We observe precious little of that love here, gentlemen." The bat began a shrill protest, but the Voice was not to be interrupted. "And by 'love' We do not mean 'like'. We do not expect you to find each other agreeable. We do not require you to worship the same gods, or indeed to worship any god at all. We do require you to look honestly at each other, to try and understand, even where you cannot empathise."  The Voice paused. The Bat, the Mouse and the Beatle moved closer together, looking outwards with wonder and awe, no longer glaring at each other.  "I'll give it a go." the Beetle muttered.  "I'll try." the Mouse said softly.  "I suppose it might work." the Bat admitted reluctantly.  "It has to work," responded the Voice, "or you betray that purpose for which you were made. And that would be very sad." |
| Reading | Two short passages, one for Rev John Buehrens, and his book A House for Hope, and the other by Rev Preston Moore.  Hope is key to every covenant. As I have told my congregation, which takes pride in a heritage of being non-creedal, our forbearers were wise in putting aside creedal questions – “What do we all believe in common? What ancient formulae of faith are we willing to confess together?” in favor of the more covenantal questions: “What spiritual hopes do we share? What shall we promise to one another and to God as we try to live together toward our hopes? How shall we then try to treat one another?” But sometimes I worry that in taking pride in their non-creedal freedom they can easily forget the deep responsibility that their freedom – if it is truly covenantal freedom – necessarily entails.  **~ Rev. John Buehrens, *A House for Hope***  A contract is a matter of law. A covenant is a matter of love. A contract speaks this way: if you do this, and only if you do this, then I will do that. It is hedged, cautious, risk-averse. Its most basic principle is “no surprises.”  A covenant speaks this way: you and I will do whatever is needed to achieve our shared purpose. We will remember that our covenantal relationship is more important than any particular action we take or fail to take to serve its purpose. If either of us fails to honor this shared commitment, the other has permission to call the one who fell short back into covenant, to ask what is happening, to be demanding and supportive at the same time.  In a covenantal relationship, there is an understanding that no one fulfills his promises each and every time. Sometimes you make a doubtful promise, and then put your heart into it, and then fail, and then you and your covenantal partners pick yourselves up and ask, “how shall we recover from this failure? How shall we keep going?” In a covenantal relationship, the message you get from your partners when you fail is as just as much an affirmation of self-worth as if the promise had been fulfilled.  ~ **Rev. Preston Moore** |
| Prayer | Spirit of Love, We have come here from many different experiences and backgrounds. Some of us have trouble speaking; others are so young that they’re still learning to talk. Some of us speak English as a second language, and others of us can speak several foreign languages. All of us share this in common: We speak the language of love.  In the moments before worship begins, and again when we return to the service of life, we greet one another with kind words; we chat about the days behind us and days to come, and  we speak the language of love.  We form a web of compassionate listening when individuals among us, embodying vulnerability, name the fears that grip their hearts, the joys that buoy their spirits.  We speak the language of love.  At times, our voices clash. We disagree. Tension enters our voices as we make room for different beliefs, different opinions, different perspectives. Through it all, it's our intention that...  we speak the language of love.  In this congregation, we welcome a multiplicity of truths, and invite them to be named out loud. We prophesy, summoning the age when justice and peace will be evident all around us, and  we speak the language of love.  Let us make room for one another as whole beings, tender hearts, hungry spirits, and curious minds. With our actions and with our words, let us ...speak the language of love.  So let us share a time of reflection – let us be quiet, together, now.  May we remember, every day, to live within the covenant of love. Amen. |
| Address | There’s a bible reading, that I’d like to share with you as we think about the covenant of love, from the New Testament, that you may recognise, from 1 Corinthians 13 –  If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+13&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-28653a)] but do not have love, I gain nothing.  Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.  You probably associate those words with wedding ceremonies.  It’s a beautiful sentiment- love gives meaning to everything, and without it, there is nothing.  But Paul wrote them not for weddings, but to correct some serious problems in new congregations in Corinth.  Paul attempted to impress upon the members of this church that their behavior was not Christ like, and they needed to walk the talk.  They needed to understand and commit to covenanting together in the love demonstrated by Jesus, and if they were going to be Christians, part of this new community, then they needed to act like it and love each other. According to Paul, it didn’t matter that they had energy and passion.  It didn’t matter that there were some good things being done.  What mattered to him was that they were in “right relationship” with each other because that is what it was all about. What mattered was the covenant between them.  Covenant is one of those words that can initially sound kind of stuffy, academic and out-of-date. But when you unpack its meaning and its practices, covenant holds a whole vision for how to live in this complicated, beautiful and broken world. It is a vision that says we are most human when we bind ourselves in relationship. But not just any relationship – relationships of trust, mutual accountability and continual return.  This is not what our culture teaches us. Our culture teaches us that what it means to be human is to be an individual – self-defined, self-determined, separate even. But covenantal theology affirms that being human comes down to the commitments we make to and with each other – the relationships we keep. We become human through our promises to and with each other.  And even more than that: covenantal theology doesn’t just say that we become human through our promising, but also when we break those promises, and yet somehow find ways to reconnect and begin again – when we repair the relationship because we know we need each other, even when we think the other isn’t doing enough, even when the other is annoying us, or isn’t listening well, or isn’t doing things the way we want them done, or is downright hurting us – even then. When we realize right then, that we are still connected, and we can’t give up – and so we return, and begin again. This beginning again, says our faith, is when the holy and the human meet.  Let me tell you right now, sometime in the next year, maybe in the next few minutes, the people you most believe in and care about are going to disappoint you. I’m going to disappoint you. This church is going to disappoint you. This world is surely going to disappoint you. Like, all the time. We are all walking wounded and weary from the way this world and its people can – and does – break our hearts.  And what our faith asks of us, what our faith imagines for us, is that somehow, right at that moment when our hearts break, we will find our way to see through that heartbreak. We will stay put – not close off, not run away, not hurt back – but keep on being in relationship, doing what we can to repair the world and each other, keep on opening our hearts with greater love. And, right then, our covenantal faith says – we will feel not only most human, but also most whole and most at home.  When we say, we are bound by covenant and not by creed, we mean it. What we believe, or believe in, each as individuals, matters less to the church than how we behave, how we will be together, as a people. What matters is the plane of conduct where we agree to meet. You need not think alike to love alike, said Francis David, a Unitarian centuries ago, which is not to say there are no creeds and no convictions here - there are many, maybe an infinite number, and they are tested in practice, lived out (we hope) as much as spoken. What matters more, from the standpoint of the institution, is the covenant, the way that we will walk together, the principles that bind us. “Freedom of belief” is one of them. “Compassion” is another, what the Buddha meant by “lovingkindness,” which was not all warm and fuzzy, sweet and simple, but difficult and complicated, a deliberate orientation of the heart, defying logic, sometimes, defying common sense, and sometimes defying even rules of justice, when mercy is an option. We wrestle with these principles together, and in so doing may discover, each of us, what we believe most deeply about God, or mystery, or love, or death.  It will take time to create and live a covenant of love – it may take disagreement – it may even mean a time of hurt as we acknowledge the times when we have not lived together with compassion and care, but have instead harbored anger, or bitterness, or dislike. But it will begin the task of healing wounds through forgiveness, and of building a community of good purpose, of loving kindness, that, in Prophet Micah’s phrase, does justice, loves mercy, and walks gently - with God – and each other. Amen. |
| Closing words | And so we come to our blessing.  Covenant means that we walk together, open-minded, open hearted. It is old-fashioned, centuries old, and it is radically new.  When we welcome babies in our church, when we welcome new members into the community,  when we celebrate the love of beaming couples,  when we say farewell to friends who have walked with us,  when we are standing on the side of love all who need us,  we prove by fierce kindness that ours is a living faith, we are testifying to our promise that no one stands alone.  We are saying, we will walk together with you, friend; we will walk together with you, child; we will walk together toward the lives we mean to lead, toward the world we mean to have a hand in shaping, the world of compassion, equity, freedom, forgiveness, joy and gratitude.  Our great covenant of love is the work of deep, right relationship, with one another, with the holy, with this whole wide world.  May we go now in peace with each other, and go out to live our covenant with the world |