

Cornerstones Sticky with Grape Jelly

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Beacon UU Congregation

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Several months ago, on June 6th, Beacon held the live portion of our annual Yard Sale extravaganza. Dennis S. had primed this pump with months on on-line sales. The yard sale is fun on some levels, and its hard work, too. It involves many church members devoting dozens of hours in order to raise a chunk of the money we need to pay our bills and support our mission. Everybody is invited to bring something special. New and shiny things, quality books, housewares, samplers and baubles, artistic treasures, bric-a-brac; in non-pandemic years – baked goods and preserves.

The way we come together specifically around this event is a stunning metaphor for how we come together generally as a Unitarian Universalist congregation. It all has to do with our "polity," an odd little word that defines how we are organized and how we govern ourselves. Understanding our UU polity is important, especially for come-outers from religions where there is central authority and financial support from a diocese or a district or a presbytery.

Here's a brief synopsis (very brief...I promise!) In the newly formed Mass Bay Colony, the Puritan settlers laid the groundwork for how we govern ourselves with a document called the Cambridge Platform of 1648. It was a revolutionary document that provided for an entirely new form of religious organization.

Rather than looking to a single individual or an ecclesiastical body to govern its churches, the Cambridge Platform planted the authority in the individual congregations. From the very beginning of the Puritan colonization, each church was granted the autonomy and responsibility to organize and govern itself, to call its own ministers, to conduct its affairs in a democratic manner, to pay its own bills and own its own buildings.

It wasn't always easy going, but the Platform charged congregations to find power, not in uniformity or in central authority, but in relationship. A natural consequence of our congregational polity here, today, at Beacon, is that we are brought together by covenant, rather than by creed.

What is a covenant exactly? Some early examples of covenant can be found in the Bible -- Moses on Mt. Sinai, for instance, receiving God's covenant with the Israelites. Later on, early Christians saw God as offering a "new covenant" through Christ.

And, we recited a “covenant” together this morning – a regular piece of our weekly worship. However, as my colleague Alan Taylor has astutely noted, “A covenant is more than words uttered in community on a Sunday morning. It draws upon the sacredness within each individual who shares the covenant. It is more than an intellectual agreement, for it calls upon us to make commitments.

In June 2021, the UUA Commission on Appraisal published a report entitled, “Unlocking the Power of Covenant.” It reads: UU is not a creedal faith. It is a covenantal faith. We promise each other to behave in certain ways and create common aspirations. We set our lives around the praxis of living out the promises we make to one another, the promises that hold us together. The authors underscore that we are inattentive to covenant at our peril. In their words: A covenant is living; a covenant is praxis; a covenant is powerful ritual, and most importantly, to my sermon today, a covenant is *embodied*.

Our Puritan forebears understood that there can be no covenant without relationship and mutual obligations. Each person playing a role in the sustenance of a settlement or community. Yet, the demands of the covenant are small compared to the deeper rewards which flow from the covenantal bond.

The Yard Sale absolutely epitomizes a covenantal relationship. We make promises to one another -- I'll set up the tables. I'll clean up, I'll price treasures, or handle publicity, or sort books, or sell things online. We make commitments and we sink and swim on the efforts of the whole.

If you are a brand spanking new newcomer, I don't mean to scare you off! On the contrary, I think its best that you know the score. We come together in covenant and in congregational polity. We are the congregation and the congregation is us. It is mutuality. Self-governance equals self-sustenance equals sleeves rolled up and hands ready to serve. As I like to say, “No free lunch in the free church.”

Naturally, if you are *really, really* new here, I don't expect that you'll be required to join a committee at your first coffee hour...unless you want to! The greeters will not issue you a time card or a pledge card as you enter the Sanctuary. You can bring your perfectly imperfect self, and nothing else, and we'll love you and welcome you wholeheartedly.

I'm remembering a funny cartoon brought to my attention by the Rev. Roy Phillips. In this cartoon, entitled "New Member's Worst Nightmare" an elderly man is explaining the workings of the church to a young couple. The old man tells them: "Most people are on nine or ten committees, but since you're *new* I'm sure people will understand if you only join six or seven to start." The committees have amusing names like: Plant watering committee, Thermostat control committee; committee for more comfortable pews, and committee for the promotion of committees. You

won't be surprised to learn that the young couple was aghast! Not to worry! I can assure you new and seasoned members alike, assembled here this morning, that we understand that you *did not* beat a path to our church door in order to be on committees!

We suspect that, instead, you came here yearning for, hoping for, a sense of roots and wings, and a sense of family, of belonging, sharing and caring. That you've taken this path to Beacon because you yearn for a place to have hope, to laugh and cry; a community in which you can be an individual, a free thinker; a place where you will be welcomed at the door, a family of heart, if not of blood.

Family or "kin" can mean so many things to us in postmodern society, where we have shifted from a paradigm in which blood families lived in close proximity, sometimes for generations. When we say family now, we may be referring to friends, folks we sing with in the choir, engage with in social action, or members of our book groups. There is an intention about these bonds and they are followed by actions.

Indeed, actions are important in a covenantal relationship like the one we share here at Beacon. The staff can only carry so much of the load. Remember, in a covenantal relationship, the giving is reciprocal. The benefits of membership are balanced with the responsibility.

The need for volunteers and leaders in all areas of church life is an ongoing reality. There is no diocese or bishop to bail us out. The upside is that we can relish the freedom we have -- freedom of the pulpit, the pew, the governing process, the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." I believe that one of the most fulfilling and tangible ways to grow in community, to achieve that deeper sense of belonging is to play a role in the vitality and sustenance of this congregation. That's why I am launching an initiative today I'm calling "**All In**"

This initiative is not meant as a demand or a scold; but rather as a call to action, a charge to the congregation to join at least one effort here at Beacon. That could be serving on a team or committee, signing one Sunday a year as an RE volunteer or greeter (even if this isn't the thing you are most passionate about, but just because it is necessary?). You might help organize a social event or a social justice rally. The time commitment in many cases is relatively small and yet, the reward of having pledged your troth to Beacon through time and talent can be enormous.

The Rev. Robbie Walsh, our former minister in Duxbury, MA calls this mutuality and reciprocity "Potholder Ministry." He writes: "Walking around the church in the evening, when no one else is around I see things that bring to mind the contributions that people make to constitute the religious community. There are so many gifts we bring, and they combine in so many creative ways.

Among the many images, none carries more meaning to me than the humble potholder, he writes, which I think of every time I look into the Ruby Graves Parlor. Every Thursday morning, a group of women gather in that Parlor, and they sew and knit and make things for the Fair. They make many items, but the quintessential product is the potholder."

"There is a Potholder Ministry going on in that parlor," Walsh tells us. "For one thing, the potholders keep people's fingers from being burned -- that's pretty important. And the potholders are often used as gifts, so they become an expression of peoples' caring for each other. The potholders make money for the support of the church and its ministries. The potholders use cast off materials that might otherwise be thrown into landfills, and so the potholders are a ministry to the environment. "

"But the Potholder Ministry I like best," says Walsh, " is what happens between the members of the group: the neighborliness, the mutual support, the companionship. I see them as they sew and talk, and talk and sew, and occasionally have a few moments of silent sewing, delivering to each other a powerful message -- you are a person of worth and dignity. I care about you and about our relationship. That may be the heart of potholder ministry."

Through Walsh's keen description, I can envision that circle of sewing hands and warm smiles, can't you? This congregation really is, essentially, the work of our hands activated by the heart, or as the shakers put it, "Hands to work and hearts to God."

This is a sermon about what's important, now and evermore. When we leave this earthly form, we will leave behind, through the labor of hand and hear, our quilts and honeycomb and flower gardens, and lifelong friendships, and photographs of baby dedications and dried flowers from memorial services here, an enduring legacy of something deeper – something like wisdom, something like belonging.

I am not espousing some fanciful myth of community , but rather the reality of what we build together (just as you built these beautiful additions and backyard) together. And, as with all sturdy structures, we must begin with a foundation and a cornerstone – the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation, important since all other stones will be set in reference to this stone. Your cornerstone was laid years ago as a fellowship when “all IN’ was all you had. No staff, just you.

Now, as a congregation, there are new cornerstones to lay and if we've set these well here at Beacon, future generations can build on, can be dependent on, the cornerstones laid with your hands, your hearts, your sweat, your dreams.

I'm reminded now of one memorable Peanuts comic strip in which Charlie Brown is eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. He looks admiringly at his hands and says: "Hands are fascinating things. I like my hands...I think I have nice hands. My hands seem to have a lot of character. These are hands that may someday accomplish great things. These are hands that may someday do marvelous works. They may build mighty bridges or heal the sick, or hit home runs, or write soul-stirring novels. These are hands that may someday change the course of destiny." Lucy looks down at Charlie's hands and says, "They've got jelly on them!"

Lucy's comment, although characteristically insensitive, is right on target. And so is Charlie's assessment of his amazing, potential-laden hands. As my colleague, Tom Owen-Towle notes: "We start by recognizing that our hands are covered with jelly, and they always will be. But they are all we have. They are who we are. Messy to be sure, we keep using our hands in acts of justice and kindness that life may be less evil." Take a moment to look, really look at your hands, the way Charlie Brown did. Whether yours are arthritic or limber, wrinkled or smooth, graceful or stubby, jelly-covered or pristine, aren't they a marvel?

At the First Religious Society of Carlisle, MA, (the town adjacent to Concord) some of their strong, eager hands have become sticky with jelly – REAL sticky, REAL grape jelly, as their own annual Fair Day approaches each year. They have a "Grape Jelly Ministry" - a microcosm of all we are and can be in our UU congregations, regardless of the season.

Many years ago, when I had a relationship with this congregation, I asked Susan Emmons, a long-time member there, a stalwart volunteer, and the grape jelly doyenne, about her church's jelly tradition, and she told me: "It was a family and neighborhood tradition to make jelly from wild Concord grapes found in our neighborhood. And when this group started including my twin granddaughters and her friends from Sunday School, it became a tradition to sell the jelly at the Fall Harvest Fair to raise money - usually for the Heifer Project."

Susan continued: "Some years, the kids came to my house and we picked grapes together and then came to my kitchen and squashed the grapes and the kids actually watched while the adults boiled the juice to make jelly. More recently, we prepared the grapes (pick them clean, weigh and wash then and then squash) in the church kitchen, either during Sunday school or, with a big crowd, on an early School release day. And one year, the group went picking at Fox Hill, a local conservation area with LOTS of grapes."

"I always end up with purple hands," Susan told me, "and purple counters in my kitchen, purple dish cloths, too, and purple wooden spoons!, a cheery reminds of the fun we having making jelly together."

Throughout my ministry, I have loved listening to stories like Susan's about the sense of community that embodies covenant and engenders an obvious pride and delight. Yes, warm and fuzzy thoughts abound. So, perhaps you'll grumble and think that it's unsporting of me to talk about the work that was still there for us on *June 7<sup>th</sup>* after all the work that went into the Yard Sale. *Mea culpa*.

One of my favorite anthems asks: *What will we promise, what will we give?* I'm encouraging you to ask yourself this question: "Over the long haul, how will I share my gifts here at Beacon?" In what ways will I steward this place? On September 27<sup>th</sup> or November 16<sup>th</sup>, the church will still need your energy and your commitment, and the work of your hands, pristine or jelly-stained. We will still be covenantal, self-governing and self-sustaining, and volunteers will still be the locomotive on the train.

As we dig our hands deep into abundance and gratitude, the act of volunteering, of stewardship, of simple presence, empowers us to accomplish something worth accomplishing. And with our sticky hands, we lay and sustain the very cornerstones that support this religious family we cherish, and we teach our children that to be a UU, this free faith with a polity of eager hands, is to do nothing less. And, then, only then, might we stare down at our sticky fingers, lift them up to taste a sweet reminder of something important, and whisper, "Amen."

Look at your hands. What do you see? Jelly? Dirt? Power? Potential? Love? Faith? Bring those hands gnarled or smooth, and your yearning spirits, your brokenness, your joy here to Beacon; your "All In" spirit, your spare change and your vision; your need for a Sunday Sabbath and your garden gloves. Bring with purple stained fingers and your open hearts.

And, its never too soon, so if you wish to volunteer for next year's Yard Sale or you have any nifty old whiz-banger things to sell online, please give Dennis a call. He'd love to hear from you!

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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