

**Promise-Keepers**  
**Rev. Rod Richards**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona**  
**04/05/09**

We gather around a promise. That's what you hear every week in our welcome. It's written at the top of the order of service. We are a covenantal congregation. We come together not around a single set of beliefs but around a promise we have made...We gather around a promise.

So far, no one has jumped up during those words and said, "Wait a minute; I didn't make any promise." And I think that is because, not only are you all extremely well-mannered, but you understand and you are living out that promise. You know that I didn't pick these words out of thin air. I didn't make this stuff up. It is simply a restatement of things you'll find elsewhere among us.

What you'll find, for example, in the Covenant of the Congregation:

*As we journey together, searching for truth, working for justice and strengthening the web of life, we covenant to honor and care for each other.*

It is there in our Mission, where we pledge to create and sustain

*a welcoming community of caring people where all receive emotional support, intellectual stimulation, and respect for their individual spiritual paths.*

And when we say in our Mission that we will promote the principles of Unitarian Universalism, then we are saying also that we covenant—we *promise* to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person; acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth; justice, equity, and *compassion* in human relations...

If I say that we gather around a promise, it is because the promise is everywhere we look; it is there in the words that we choose; it is there in the work that we carry out together; it is there at the heart of this congregation; it burns within the flame of our chalice; it is there in the shining history, courageous deeds and compassionate acts of our liberal religious tradition.

We gather around a promise.

But is that all we have? Is it enough?

A promise can sound a little weak. We sometimes pull out a promise when we face the skepticism or doubt of others.

*You don't believe I'll do it? I will do it! I promise!* Scout's honor. Swear to God. Cross my heart and hope to kiss a crippled cricket, as my mother says.

And we often speak promises in the face of *our own* uncertainty.

In the midst of the oncoming storm we tell our children "Everything will be okay, I promise."

Everything will be okay...will it? We don't know. We promise what we can't technically guarantee, except to say that we are making a deeper promise to ourselves that, whatever happens, we will do our best to *make it* okay; that we will stand strong and protect those we love to the best of our abilities.

We promise in the face of a future reality that we cannot predict.

Will you love...comfort...honor...keep...in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, so long as you both shall live? Will you? Do you? Have you?

The truth is that relationships that we thought would last a lifetime, that we promised to sustain for a lifetime, sometimes end, and that even in our ongoing relationships we fail all too often at fulfilling the promises that we have pledged to one another.

All in all, promises, though well-intentioned, heartfelt, sincere, can feel like pretty flimsy hooks to hang our hopes on, let alone the hopes of our entire congregation, our living tradition.

When I am talking to couples who want to get married, I often ask this question:

“What happens when a promise is broken?”

There is often an uncomfortable silence. There may be meaningful looks between the couple, as if to say, “How did we ever pick this guy to do our ceremony?” Sometimes there are *anxious* looks between the couple or toward me, as if the individuals are trying to figure out if I know something that they don't.

Granted, it is something of a pessimistic question posed to two people who are usually completely submerged in optimism; the dissonance is palpable. And I don't ask it because I am waiting for the right answer...I have no right answer in mind. But for people who are making promises, I think it is an important question to hold onto.

A promise, to be meaningful, must hold within it the potential of being broken. A promise that deserves its name must challenge us to go beyond what we can achieve effortlessly. A promise that cannot fail is not a promise; it's a foregone conclusion that doesn't require our commitment to sustain it. And the promises that we are talking about carry on into the future, so that even if they are fulfilled today they may well be broken tomorrow, and if they are broken today...well, what then?

This is why some may scoff at a religious community that professes to gather not around a single set of beliefs but around a promise.

“A promise...really?” these imaginary critics might say. “I mean, your promise is nice and all that—treat each other with respect and compassion—we do that *too*, but we have the additional stability of our Scripture, of our God, of a common creed which unites us in its expression of our beliefs. You can't build a religious community on a promise.”

And I daresay that, though we love what we have found here, we sometimes feel vulnerable to those criticisms.

“So, do you believe in Jesus?” they ask.

“Well, ummm, some of us do,” we stammer.

“Do you read the Bible?”

“Well, yeah...and lots of other books and myths and...”

“Well what exactly is it you believe?”

“Uh, well, it depends on who you talk to...we believe...well, each person has their own beliefs...so people with differing beliefs can come...”

“So you don’t have any beliefs?!?!?”

And by this time *you* may be wondering why you’re a Unitarian Universalist. What *are* we, anyway?

We are a covenantal congregation. We do not come together around a single set of beliefs, but we gather around the promise we have made...

We need not be shy or embarrassed about our lack of common creed. We celebrate it! If I was to change anything about that welcoming statement today, it would be where we say:

The promise that sustains this community can hold a myriad of different beliefs and values and experiences...

No: the promise that sustains this community *thrives* because of the myriad of different beliefs and values and experiences that we hold. That is part of what nourishes and sustains our promise. We don’t resist fashioning a common creed because it’s too hard or because we don’t want to offend someone; we resist fashioning a common creed because a creed can subvert the promise that sustains this community. Beliefs, common beliefs that are considered exclusively sacred, can subvert the promise.

How many of you have heard of The Promise Keepers? I’m talking about that particular Christian movement, beginning in 1990 that sought, [in their own words](#), to “to ignite and unite men to become passionate followers of Jesus Christ through the effective communication of seven promises that are listed in all of their materials. Promise keepers.

Sports stadiums filled with Christian men listening to speakers who railed against the societal pressures that seemed to mock their religious convictions and erode their family commitments at every turn; these men were challenged to reclaim their integrity by recommitting themselves to the promises they had made to their faith, their marriages, their children, their “fellow men,” their churches, and the world.

While I had many problems with the movement, not least of all their exclusion of the wide spectrum of family values that I believe deserves our respect and recognition (with hearty congratulations to Iowa!) and their sports-fan type of exclusivist theology (We’re number 1!), I couldn’t help but admire the attempt to meet the real-life challenge of the promises that we make.

This movement peaked right around the time that I was attending seminary. In 1997, an estimated one million men gathered on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. for “Stand in the Gap,” marking arguably the largest gathering of Christian men in modern U.S. history. In 1999, I was studying a story in the [book of Ezra](#) in my Hebrew Scriptures class that provided a rather ironic parallel story. (Remember, underlying this movement is a strong commitment to what the adherents consider the Word of God (the Bible), as well as to the commitments that they have made to their wives and families.)

Ezra is speaking to a large crowd of Israelites after the Persians had allowed them to return from their exile and to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. This is a huge crowd of people all coming to recommit themselves to their religious identity, to reclaim their integrity as the people of God, and as I read it I couldn't help but picture something like a Promise Keepers meeting, with one important difference.

Let's remember: the Promise Keepers are urging men to recommit themselves to God and to their wives and families.

Ezra was urging men to recommit themselves to God and, because some of the Jewish men had married foreigners, to *immediately abandon* their foreign wives and families.

Yes, that's right. In order to reclaim their proper identity as God's people and to cleanse themselves of foreign influences, they were urged to immediately abandon their wives and families. I thought of this as the great Promise-Breakers meeting.

And the deeper point for me, and the ironic context of hearing so much about the Promise Keepers at the time, is that they placed themselves firmly on the biblical foundation for family values...But obviously, Biblically speaking, there was at least as much support for promise-breaking as promise-keeping.

And if it were only this story we could chalk it up to my sometimes warped perspective, but this is only a small example of the story we've seen played out throughout history when religious beliefs, considered exclusively correct and unassailable, subvert the promise of compassion and understanding at the heart of the religion. At least, it reduces the active compassion for people outside the group. At worst, it results in horrible acts of violence and devastation. In every case, it breaks the promise.

And so it is that we do not come together around a single set of beliefs, but we gather around the promise we have made...and because the promise is all about coming together across the boundaries of different beliefs and experiences, coming together across perceived divisions, we do not simply *accept* diversity, we do not simply *hold* diversity, we are *sustained* by that diversity, we are a new thing under the religious sun and we are proud of that. We gather around a promise to treat each other with respect and compassion and we take that respect and compassion out into the world. We gather around a promise to listen to one another and encourage one another and we take our ability to listen, understand and encourage out into the world. We gather around a promise that is big enough to hold all of us and far-reaching enough to challenge us every day, and we fulfill that promise in exciting ways and we inevitably fail to fulfill that promise in other ways...

We don't *always* treat one another with respect and compassion. We don't *always* seek out and nurture our own best selves. (Sometimes, I am sorry to admit, I seek out and nurture my petty self; my lesser self.) We don't *always* encourage one another...We fail to rise to the promise.

Well, you won't be excommunicated for being crabby and thoughtless. I wish that we could

excommunicate my petty self, but it's just part of the package; it comes along with my best self.

But it does beg the question I spoke of earlier:

What happens when a promise is broken?

We can simply give up on promises. Too easily broken. They don't work. They're not strong enough.

Or we can recommit ourselves to the promise. If it was meaningful yesterday, it is not made less meaningful by our imperfect expression of it. It is not the promise that suffers when we break it, after all, but ourselves as we experience the disappointment in our own efforts. But there is nothing that says, having learned something about ourselves, forgiving ourselves and one another, we cannot return to the promise with a greater wisdom, a deeper humility, and a renewed commitment.. The strength of a promise is not necessarily in its perfect fulfillment, but in our willingness to let it shape us even as we imperfectly seek to meet its challenge. It pulls us outside of ourselves; causes us to stretch beyond our own beliefs; inspires us to reach farther than we thought we could...It is neither weak nor flimsy; it is made strong with our trust and our hope and our compassionate effort.

So it is that we gather, each and every week, around a promise.