

Getting Past Tense
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Do you prefer Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts? When you think about your favorite meal are you more likely to think of something along the lines of a meat and potatoes dish or would you lean more towards spicy dishes like chicken curry? Would you rather drive a Prius or a pickup truck?

These questions are indicative of a person's worldview. There are many factors that determine worldview, such as where a person was raised, if something traumatic has occurred in their lives, their culture and race, even when they were born, but there is one fundamental factor that has tremendous influence on worldview and that is how much the person perceives the world as dangerous. Fear dramatically informs a person's outlook on life and therefore shapes their values, the way they relate to other people, the jobs they do, even the way they raise their children.

If a person sees the world as a dangerous place, a world threatened by terrorists and criminals, they are also more likely to stick to the things they know and the foods that are familiar to them. They will raise their children to be respectful of elders, be obedient, and good-mannered. And they will most likely vote Republican. If a person sees the world as less perilous, a world that is full of good people, then they are likely to be more interested in trying new things, meeting all kinds of people, and eating foods that are unfamiliar and new. They will value independence, self-reliance, and curiosity in their children. And they will most likely vote Democrat.

Over the years, the worldviews of many Americans have become closely aligned to either of the political parties creating the polarization we are experiencing today. This polarization means not only do the two parties disagree on how to solve problems, but they also disagree on what the problems are. Partisans on either side view the other with bewilderment and disbelief and even with hatred and contempt. People speak of feeling angry or afraid. Family members find they can no longer talk to each other. Most importantly and manifestly urgent, the polarization of politics in the United States leaves our democracy vulnerable and manipulable by authoritarian, anti-democratic politicians whose interests are served by a failed democracy.

The polarization of the politics in this country is important for every American to understand and work to unravel. When I first envisioned this sermon a month or so ago, I thought that looking at polarization might help us understand the tensions in this congregation that came to light through the listening circles and other conversations I and the transition team led. In reading Ezra Klein's book *Why are we Polarized?* and another book called *Prius or Pickup?* by Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler, I discovered that polarization and the US political situation is fascinating and compelling but maybe not as relevant to navigating the tensions we experience in this congregation as I first thought. Yes, there are differences of opinions, there are disagreements and disappointments, there are misunderstandings and miscommunications, and a general

wide variety of interpretations about Rev. Carol and her ministry, but these are all normal and par for the course when people gather in community.

There is healthy tension but there really isn't any polarization in this congregation. I spent these last few minutes focused on polarization because there is always the possibility of what is out there finding its way into this sacred space. There is definitely the possibility of judging and even condemning others for who they vote for and for their views of the world, for their support of a particular candidate or for the way they choose to live. I know I have fallen into that ugly place here and there. A liberating faith such as ours invites us each to into the spiritual work of empathy and mercy, for those not like us and for ourselves when we fall short of living our values and principles into the world.

In this community, and any other Unitarian Universalist community, political polarization like in the country is unlikely because the bottom line is we are a people not shaped by fear but by the radical idea that there is no other, that all people are welcome. There can be polarization of another sort, of course, that can tear congregations apart. Most often, as I said, there are healthy tensions, and yes, sometimes unhealthy ones. Polarizations are difficult to navigate but the tensions, healthy or not, are often managed through covenant. It is through covenant that we get past tense. So let me talk about covenant for a minute.

Unitarian Universalists' tradition has us bound by covenant and not by creed. Our ancestors, the Congregationalists and then, further back, the Puritans and Pilgrims, gave us this tradition of covenant. Victoria Safford, in an article called Bound by Covenant printed in 2013, wrote:

In 1630, John Winthrop, soon to become the first governor of Massachusetts, spoke to a soggy, stalwart band of fellow Puritans, sailing with high and pious hopes aboard the Arabella toward a new life in New England:

{Winthrop said, } Now the only way to avoid . . . shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. . . . [W]e must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

It was an extraordinary declaration of interdependence. Despite their stone-cold reputation, their caricatured intolerance, these were people who promised to bear each other's burdens as their own, to subvert their separate, private interests, their "superfluities," for the public good of all. Humbly, gently, patiently, they would serve a vision larger than any single eye could see; they would hold a larger hope. Those who heard John Winthrop speak would surely have grasped the metaphor of danger: they

would have been afraid not only of foundering, literally, on New England's rocky shore, but of failing in their errand to establish this commonwealth, their "city on a hill." The only way to avoid shipwreck, spiritual or otherwise, was to "keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace"—to make and keep a sacred covenant together."ⁱ

So, we have and so we continue to do; to make and keep a sacred covenant together. The covenantal tradition continues in this congregation and throughout the other congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association. The covenant of the UUFCC reads "We, the members and friends of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Centre County, covenant to: come together in a spirit of trust and respect; to love, listen, cry, and laugh; shaping a mutually supportive community that nurtures our minds and spirits, and celebrates the worth and dignity of us all. We commit ourselves to do this with caring, compassion, and understanding through open, honest communication."

A covenant is not a mode of behavior or a set of rules but rather a mutually agreed upon way of being in relationship. Your covenant is well crafted and speaks to relationship from beginning to end, from coming together in a spirit of trust and respect to open and honest communication. Each week the covenant will be here in the order of service. I hope you will take the time to read it each time you see it. My hope is that as a community you will renew your commitment to living this covenant and as individuals you will carry it in your hearts as you navigate the tensions of relationship, of life, of being connected to others- in this community and outside of it.

Could covenant really affect those on the outside? Could it have any impact at all on the polarization of this country?

We are a covenantal faith and not a creedal one. This means we live and breathe in the world considering how we walk together and how we are in relationship first, before anything else. When we do this, the world starts to look a little differently as Gretchen Haley writes:

The world talks about winners and losers in life; covenant offers us a vision of mutuality and reciprocity- where all are one and all are for all.

The world imagines limitless accumulation as limitless good; covenant reminds us of our boundaries and that our actions have consequences, near and far.

The world tells us our worth is justified through individual effort and independent accomplishment- covenant reminds us we are saved, we are made whole, and we are made human, through partnership-through relationship.

The world believes there are clear endings and beginnings, that time works in a straight line- covenant illuminates that we step into the middle of a story already in the works, and our job is just to pick up and carry forward the promises that we can, as we are able, for the time we are here.

The world teaches us to ask: what's in it for me? Covenant says: we're all in it together.

The world gives us laws that we must follow for fear of punishment. Covenant gives us the gift of being responsible together, being accountable together, out of a sense of love, and loyalty to a bigger project.

And covenant knows that we will fail to live up to our ideals, and invites us to make amends, to atone-that is to return to at-one-ment and to promise again.ⁱⁱ

Covenant, binding us to one another and beyond. Covenant, keeping the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

There are all kinds of forces trying to pull us apart out there. And it is inevitable that there are challenges ahead of you in here that will attempt to rupture this community. We will not be bound by fear, but by a larger hope and courage and love, too. Even in moments of tension. Even as things lean towards polarization. Even when fear tries to move us from being our best selves.

We are bound to each other. We are in this together.

Amen

ⁱ Bound in Covenant by Victoria Safford, UU World Summer 2013

ⁱⁱ Sermon “Walking Together” by Gretchen Haley