



301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

At Neighborhood Church, our Sunday worship services are an ongoing conversation we have with one another about the things that matter to us as a people and how we live in the world according to our values. Worship can be instructive, but never didactic—it helps us to understand our tradition and tell the story of who we are as a religious community. While each service has distinctive themes and liturgies, our worship life is more than the sum of its parts. Each Sunday is like a brick in the house of our church life—it is the layering of our weekly experiences, one upon another that creates a strong foundation for the conversations and commitments that flow forth for our congregation. When I step into this sacred desk each week, as your Senior Minister, my call to this pulpit is to lead but also to share it, for the pulpit belongs to the people of this congregation and of our faith, as a platform to amplify and elevate our diverse voices. It is not through a single voice of the minister, but through many voices that our spiritual understanding increases and our humanness becomes more complete. I offer this sermon this morning conscious of the call to covenant our Board of Trustees offered us last week, and the passionate articulation of faith that our 9th graders will offer next week, followed by an invitation for them to become members of the church.

As our Board of Trustees mentioned last week, they will soon be leading the congregation in creating a covenant together. Covenanting strengthens our bonds by articulating how we intend to be accountable to one another, and creates a path to come back into right relationship when we have hurt one another or are in conflict. As we begin this process, its important for us to talk about the theological foundations for covenant. Because we are a religious community, we need theology to guide us towards the right relationship we seek with one another.

To be covenant with one another depends first and foremost on the value of what each of us brings to the table: our beliefs about God, spirituality, and the sacred, our racial



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and cultural heritage, our bodies and their various abilities, class, and the way we express our sexualities and gender. At its core, covenanting cannot be a reifying of a singular norm or a mandate to be “nice” to each other. The process will invite us to look deeply at the patterns ingrained in our congregational life, including the ways that white and European cultural norms have historically dominated our congregation and our denomination.

One example is the Western cultural norm Matt lifted up today in his story for all ages. A process of covenanting must state why we appreciate our individual differences, but also how community together makes us more fully human. Our Unitarian Universalist theology is often highly individualistic. One of our principles affirms the individual search for truth and meaning as a common human quest. We might say that Unitarian Universalism is a faith for people who like to think for themselves—our members often have come from other faith traditions seeking a community where their individual beliefs can coexist with others who share their values. The story of religious freedom we often tell is based in European history, of triumphant migration away from religious persecution—often by choice. Now there is nothing inherently wrong with the way we tell this story, but we must be mindful of the ways we are habitually situated in a Western expression of our faith that is culturally bound, and how this can limit the promise of our seven principles and our authentic wish for our congregation to have a wide and inclusive embrace.

Exploring Archbishop Desmond Tutu's African theology is a helpful way for us to see this more clearly. As a South African Anglican Priest, Tutu is deeply embedded in both Western and African theological and cultural understandings. As he explains, the African concept of the individual is vastly different than the Western one—in our Western culture, the individual has a singularly unique identity, while in African culture, the concept of the individual exists within a community, of their ancestors and of the living. In this spirit, to flourish and reach their fullest potential, human beings need not only pursue their own individual path, but to develop their relationships within a community. Tutu puts it this way:



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In the African worldview, a person is not basically an independent solitary entity. A person is a human precisely in being enveloped in the community of other human beings, in being caught up in the bundle of life. To be is to participate. The summum bonum here is not independence but sharing, interdependence. And what is true of the human person is surely true of human aggregations.

As an African Christian living under apartheid, Tutu took it upon himself to develop a theological counter response to racism. From his writings:

We say a person is a person through other persons. We don't come fully formed into the world. We learn how to think, how to walk, how to speak, how to behave, indeed how to be human from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human. We are made for togetherness, we are made for family for fellowship, to exist in a tender network of interdependence. That is why apartheid and racism are so fundamentally evil for they declare that we are made for separation, for enmity, for alienation, and for apartness.

After Apartheid was dismantled, Tutu was a key architect of the Truth and Reconciliation efforts, which he insisted would be conducted in what he called the "spirit of Ubuntu:" an interdependence that calls every person to reconcile with one another, because the very essence of their humanity is bound up with one another. Tutu's broad and naturalistic concept of the divine echoes this understanding of interdependence.

He writes:

As scientists understand more and more about the interdependence of rocks, rivers—the whole of the universe—I am left in awe that I too am a part of this tremendous miracle. Not only am I a part of this pulsating network, but I am an indispensable part. It is not only theology that teaches me this, but it is the truth that environmentalists shout out from the rooftops....

It is precisely because you are you and I am I that God says "You hold on together." The divinity, the holy is within each one of us—how much we need one another. For if we are interdependent, as the whole network of nature declares us to be, we destroy ourselves when we destroy each other.



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Friends, we have before us an opportunity with our covenanting to face the deeper questions of reconciliation. How do we reconcile with this nation's history of genocide, slavery, and oppression? With whom do we need to pursue right relationship, within and beyond our congregation? Living in these chaotic times of ours, we are more than aware of how history is not healed, as heartbreaking acts of white supremacist violence continue to ravage our country. We need to hold up the meaning of reconciliation and to yearn passionately for right relationship, for our congregation and for our nation. White people, we will be called upon to move through our own fragility to be active allies to people of color within our congregation. To move past our own discomfort, we must acknowledge first that our common humanity can only be fulfilled in accountable partnerships which lead to the possibility of reconciliation.

I close with these words from Rev. Rebecca Savage, former chaplain for the United States army and currently serving at the Unitarian Universalist congregation of Rockville, Maryland.

We are called to fulfill the promises once made in the name of faith and proclaiming Beloved Community. We are called to match our words with our actions, to bring the holy into our midst by truly and without fear honoring the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

This is a beautiful time of opportunity, Beloveds, born of truly listening to people of color and beginning to repair the fabric of community that has been torn. Ripped asunder by years of broken and empty promises: words of good intention, unmatched by purposeful action. Beloveds, now is our time to lead with love and make right the ways our denomination has fallen short of our shared principles. We are a powerful, aspirational covenanted people and we are being called to account for our historic moral and spiritual failings, in order to move into authentic Beloved Community.

Now is our time to harness our ability to reflect inward in order to reemerge with a power greater than ourselves that gives rise to a new day. Beloveds, with love and peace in our hearts, may it be so.