

More Important Than Ever

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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This Old Ship Meeting House has been standing here since 1681, built not all that many decades after English settlement on this land which had been taken from the Massachusetts and Wompanoag peoples, since our First Parish congregation has been here since 1635.

Maybe eleven or twelve generations or so. Which means we've been through a lot – been here through our nation's many wars, from King Phillips war against the Wompanoag, the Revolution, 1812, the Civil War, and on and so on. Been here through economic depressions, through tumultuous elections, and much more.

And been here as well through whatever internal squabbles and disputes have afflicted us from time to time.

Yet here we still are.

And for all but the early years of our congregation no one was forced to be part of the church or to come to church. Which makes it all the more remarkable, it seems to me, that we are still here – particularly since we can share stories of times of conflict and division within our congregation: Goodness, our third minister, Ebenezer Gay, was a loyalist amidst many patriots in the congregation during the revolution, and then managed to serve for another nine years; a few decades later a large group of members split off to form New North Church in the midst of bitter controversy over the selection of a new minister; much more recently a fair number of folks left Old Ship during the Vietnam War. The stories could go on.

But the congregation, this religious community, has endured, and here we are still.

Maybe it has something to do with the fact that we are a congregation joined by covenant rather than creed. For we have no shared statement of belief, but right from the start our congregation, like most of the early New England congregations, was joined by covenant. The early covenants reflected shared Christian affirmations, but, again, were not creedal in nature. Covenants were and are agreements having to do with how we choose to be with one another and how we choose to be in relation to the wider world.

Our current covenant goes like this, as many of you will recall:

As a congregation committed to Unitarian Universalist Principles, we join with one another in the spirit of respect, reverence, humility, and love:

To seek the truth freely,

To nurture spiritual growth and ethical commitment,

To care for one another,

And, seeking justice, peace, and ecological sustainability, to serve life.

I could preach many a sermon based on the words of this covenant – in fact, in one way or another just about every sermon I preach draws on this covenant – sermons about love and respect, sermons about our search for truth, about how to tend to our spiritual growth, how to become the sort of human beings we would like to be, as we care for one another and reach out to care for the world, “to serve life.”

Now, do we always live up to our covenantal agreements? Well, of course not – we are human; and this is why we need the words, to call us back to how we want to be... as human beings with one another and in the wider world.

This said, I think we often do pretty well.

Quite recently I've seen how well we do as I learn of the phone calls and emails Old Shippers have been making to one another in the midst of pandemic isolation.

I've seen it in stories of tears shed as a loaf of bread was delivered to a parishioner.

I've seen this in the number of Old Shippers who have taken leadership roles or simply showed up, and showed up again, at Black Lives Matter demonstrations or climate justice lobbying.

Over the years and decades of my ministry I've seen us live our covenantal agreements every time people show up at a memorial service for a dear one among us; I've seen us strive to live our agreements when I observe respectful disagreements, and when I observe Old Shippers seeking to make amends when they feel they have fallen short of respect and love; and our shared work for equal marriage rights, for peace, and for climate justice also manifests our effort to live the spirit of our covenant.

Of *course* we are not perfect, but I am so grateful – now more than ever – to be part of a congregation that seeks to live as best we can our shared covenant, a covenant which perhaps can be put this simply: to serve life with love.

So, these days, as our nation feels increasingly fractured, the very health of our democracy at stake, I'm also grateful to be able to affirm that our Old Ship community feels resilient even in the midst of need for physical separation (which itself manifests care and love, as we hold the safety and health and well-being of each of us in our hearts).

I don't know about you, but I think I've been carrying a sort of grief, sadness, during these past few months, grieving the loss of connection with you that is more personal than an image on a screen. It is a grief or sadness magnified because I know and feel myself – as we all know – that there are plenty of worries and anxieties to go around among us, in our personal lives as well as in relation to national and global events, all this woven into whatever measure of loneliness many feel in our relative isolation from one another.

But we are still Old Ship!

So there is plenty of good news here too: As together we have been finding ways not just to sustain but to deepen connections within our community, to bring love and joy to one another: Live-streamed worship, Zoom classes, groups, and meetings, phone calls, emails, distanced outdoor conversations.

In short, we have been and are sticking together – as we must. For community *is* more important than ever – for our own individual well-being, and also in service to ideals of justice, peace, and the health of the earth upon which we depend.

Some historians have said that the American Revolution was won before the first shot was fired – that it was won because of the small groups, the committees of correspondence throughout the colonies, that had been meeting for years to share grievances and strategies.

Well, our Old Ship community has been meeting for centuries! And though community is a word we may sometimes use too easily or glibly... it is one of the most powerful words and realities in our lives.

Thank you, each and every one of you, however much or little you are able to be involved, thank you for being part of and enriching our Old Ship community... and therefore the wider world as well.

Thank you.

Together we continue.

So may it long be.