

**Ingathering Service and Water Communion
First Parish in Hingham – Old Ship
September 10, 2023**

INGATHERING VILLANELLE:

Out of the bright Fall morning air
Through the meetinghouse open doors,
We gather again from everywhere.

Handshakes and hugs and the grins we bear
Friends reconnecting each to each
Our gathering here becomes our prayer.

With stories and samples from beaches fair,
Lakes and rivers and sunlit bays,
We gather again from everywhere.

Turning again to climb the stair
We settle into a favorite pew;
Our gathering here becomes our prayer.

We crane our necks to see who's there
Offering smiles to faces new
We gather again from everywhere.

Sadly, we are made aware
Of those no longer with us here.
Our gathering here becomes our prayer.

In their labor's fruits we share,
Drinking from wells we did not dig:
We gather again from everywhere.

From their foundation we can dare,
To further the work they began:

Our gathering here becomes our prayer

Our common spirit, to you we bear
This confluence of our summer past
We gather again from everywhere.
Our gathering here becomes our prayer.

Lighting of the Chalice words by David Roth

*May the light of love be shining deep within your spirit,
May the torch of mercy clear the path and show the way,
May the horn of plenty sound so everyone can hear it
May the light of love be with you every day.*

Opening hymn #361 Enter, Rejoice, and Come In

1 Enter, rejoice, and come in. Enter, rejoice, and come in. Today will be a joyful day; enter, rejoice, and come in.

2 Open your ears to the song. Open your ears to the song. Today will be a joyful day; enter, rejoice, and come in.

3 Open your hearts ev'ryone. Open your hearts ev'ryone. Today will be a joyful day; enter, rejoice, and come in.

4 Don't be afraid of some change. Don't be afraid of some change. Today will be a joyful day; enter, rejoice, and come in.

5 Enter, rejoice, and come in. Enter, rejoice, and come in. Today will be a joyful day; enter, rejoice, and come in.

Time For All Ages

CHORUS:

All God's critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher

Some sing out loud on the telephone wires
And some just clap their hands, or paws, or anything they got now

1. Listen to the bass, it's the one on the bottom
Where the bullfrog croaks and the hippopotamus
Moans and groans with a big t'do
And the old cow just goes moo
CHORUS

2. The dogs and the cats they take up the middle
While the honeybee hums and the cricket fiddles
The donkey brays and the pony neighs
And the old coyote howls
CHORUS

3. Listen to the top where the little birds sing
On the melodies with the high notes ringing
The hoot owl hollers over everything
And the jaybird disagrees
CHORUS

4. Singin' in the night time, singing in the day
The little duck quacks, then he's on his way
The 'possum ain't got much to say
And the porcupine talks to himself
CHORUS

5. It's a simple song of living sung everywhere
By the ox and the fox and the grizzly bear
The grumpy alligator the the hawk above
The sly raccoon and the turtle dove
CHORUS

Spirit of Life prayer

Spirit of Life, Father Mother God, Ground of our Being, Fount of Every Blessing, Ancient of Days, Weaver of our Lives' Design, Dayspring from on High, El Shaddai, Adonai, by whatever name or names we choose to call you, knowing they are only our attempts to name the unnameable,

come unto me, indwell here within each of us not in some hereafter and not in some heaven above but here in Hingham Massachusetts September 10, 2023,

Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion, let us loose ourselves to resonate with the divine harmony of the spheres, a music so vast that we hear it only in fragments, but which has been sounding since the beginning of time, the music of the force which through the green fuse drives the flower, the force which is the most powerful in the universe, the force of love

Blow in the wind, the clean breeze which sweeps our minds of the cravings and clingsings that imprison us,

rise in the sea, the salt blood which covers the earth and courses through our veins and reminds us we are each incarnated spirit,

move in the hand, these hands that are your hands, the hands through which all of your work in this world gets done,

giving life the shape of justice, the justice which has been the cry of oppressed peoples since the beginning of human history,

Roots hold me close, let us never forget where we have come from, in the chaos and uncertainty of life let us always be able to touch our familiar groundings,

Wings set me free, let us grow and blossom in unexpected and unpredictable ways as the spirit leads us without fetter or tether.

Spirit of Life. Come to me. Come to me. Amen.

Joys and Concerns

Meditation and Silent reflection

Religious naturalist prayer by Ursula Goodenough

Our Mother, who art within us,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy ways evolve,
Thy will calls forth
This earth that is now our heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,

And fill us with tenderness
As we repair our trespasses.
And lead us not into destruction
But deliver us into harmony.
For thine is our source
And our substrate and our glory
Forever and ever, amen.

Offering

Let us exercise our gifts of generosity with joy.

Water Communion

Let us bring forth our samples of water and pour them into a common bowl. You may pour your water in silence, or give us a few words fo that the water means to you. This is not designed as a travelogue of your summer vacation but a way of sharing with the congregation what the water reminds us of what is in our hearts.

Sermon reading;

“Confluence” by Jim Yerman

In geography it's called a confluence.
It's such a lovely word.
It's where two bodies of water come together
and meet to form a third.

The geography is not specific...it can be two rivers...or it can be a few
and I think such a lovely word...can be used for people too.

When a family comes together...memories are shared and hearts are warmed
and in that moment of togetherness...a confluence is formed.

When old friends come together...smiles are shared and memories related
and in that moment of affection...a confluence is created

Individually we are wonderful creatures
as we flow along our space
but when we come together
something magical takes place.

We flow into one another...and something wonderful transcends

for we don't know where our river starts...or where their river ends.

Yes, I think confluence is an enchanting phenomenon...
though it's easy to explain...
how...when two or more bodies come together...
no two bodies leave the same.

Sermon: Confluence and Covenant
the Rev. Edmund Robinson

Good morning, Old Ship! This, my first Sunday leading worship, I want to invite us to think about this concept of confluence. Our word confluence, literally, means a flowing together of bodies of liquid, as our water samples were gathered in a common vessel just now.

Have you ever stood at the intersection of two rivers? Many people in olden times settled at such a juncture of rivers because in the era before paved roads, rivers made for good transportation and transportation favored trade and trade led to prosperity. This past summer our UUA General Assembly was in Pittsburgh, PA, which is at the spot where the Allegheny River and the Monogahela join to form the Ohio River. It is an inspiring vista to stand at the intersection and see the broad and steep valleys of the rives falling away on either side.

How is this service a confluence? It is a meeting of the waters. You are meeting me and I am meeting you. I am the minister which your leadership chose to serve as contract minister for the current period, a period which is deliberately left open-ended.

I have always seen ministry and preaching especially as a two way street, a dialogue between minister and congregation. Sop my door is open for your feedback, good or bad. Inevitably I will step on toes here, and if I step on yours, you do me a favor to tell me. A large part of my job is to point out factors in church life which may not be working that well and to encourage people to think outside the box. We all want to use this time productively.

Yes, I can play the banjo like your beloved Ken Read-Brown, but that does not mean I am in all respects like him.

But I think there is another thing that he and I have in common: neither of us can work miracles. One of the tasks in the meeting of a new minister and a new congregation is to manage every one's expectations.

This is best illustrated by the story of a ministerial candidate in a place far away who had finished a very positive candidating week, preached her candidating sermon and then joined the congregation for its annual picnic on an island in the local river. As the boats left the dock, however, someone looked back and realized that all the food had been left on shore. The ministerial candidate said, "don't worry, I'll get it!" And with that, she stepped nimbly over the side of the boat and walked across the water to retrieve the food. All the church members gasped to see their ministerial candidate walking on water; all that is, except for the two church curmudgeons in the back of the boat, one of whom turned to the other and said, "isn't that just like the search committee, they get us a minister who can't swim." And I don't even walk on water, folks.

This congregation has been through a lot lately. Like most of the churches in this country, you have been hit hard by the pandemic; you have lost members and each of you has had the experience of being isolated in your own home mush more than you had been before.

Then you had a serious disagreement on a major issue of real estate, and feelings ran very high on both sides. Some of those feelings might settle down now that we are downriver from the point of decision. But more decisions will lie ahead as we try to figure out what to do to replace the parish house, and that can lead to an anxiety about whether we can navigate those shoals without stirring up the bad feelings. Do we have a vision for where we want to go?

Let me explore the notion of confluence a little more. Waters come together and once they are together they can't be separated. Boston is at the confluence of the Mystic and the Charles, Pittsburgh, my wife's hometown, is, as I said, at the confluence of the Allegheny and the Monongahela, New York at the Hudson and the East. Confluence comes from the play of natural forces. Rivers don't decide to flow together, they are led there by gravity.

We bring our water samples to church by choice, but in nature, flowing together is just something that happens. Change itself is something that happens. The Greek philosopher Heraklitos pointed out that you can't step into the same river twice, and he could have gone further and pointed out that it isn't even the same you stepping in the second time. This principle that nothing is constant except change is expressed in, of all places a bluegrass song whose chorus goes, "A raindrop fell into a river, That's all that heaven would allow, A raindrop fell into a river, It's a different river now."

It's a different river now. We observe tomorrow the anniversary of that day twenty-two years ago when terrorists took over airplanes and flew them into buildings. I don't know whether any of you were connected closely to those events; I know that I had some connection though not a close one. But all of us had certain reactions to those events and we are in a different place than if the plot of 9/11 had failed. Eighteen months ago, a deadly virus was loosed upon the world; it's a different world today as we struggle to contain the damage done by the virus.

I think about how much Boston has changed since I first came here in 1995. What has changed for you?

A river is an apt image for time because, like time, it only flows one way. That is a simple truth. Think of all the things that have passed down the river of time since this church was built in 1681. The beliefs of the people in the pews has changed and the covenants which express the agreement to walk together have changed.

There is a story – I don't know how true it is, but it is said of Fanny Holmes, the wife of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes and a great Boston Brahmin in her own right, that she was once asked why she was a Unitarian. She replied, "Well, my dear, in Boston you have to be something, and Unitarian was the least I could be."

That may strike some of us as just right. In my childhood, I was an Episcopalian, as were my parents and my family on my mother's side for ten generations back. In an orthodox Christian faith, you are defined by what you believe, and you come into church every Sunday and recite a creed which has a lot of statements of doctrine: Jesus was fully divine, he was fully resurrected in body after his crucifixion, his death redeemed us from sin and gave us life everlasting. That doctrine in those creeds was inculcated in young Episcopalians and Lutherans and Catholics in a

document called a catechism, which you had to learn before you could be confirmed or take communion as a teenager.

It was that process that gave me pains when I was a teenager and which led me eventually to Unitarianism, and when I found it, I thought similarly to Fanny Holmes that I had discovered the least I could be, a religion requiring the least suspension of the laws of nature, the least offense to reason, the least belief in miracles.

But now, after being a UU for almost fifty years, I think Fanny Holmes had it backwards. Being a Unitarian Universalist is not the least we can be; it is the *most* we can be. For compared to orthodox creed-bound religions, Unitarian Universalism, and liberal religion generally, allows us the broadest range of answers to the deepest questions of life. We are not bound within the confines of any creed or formula of words put together by the sages of ages long past. The glue that binds together a Unitarian Universalist congregation is not a set of common beliefs about whether there is a god or where we go when we die. It is a commitment to each other simply to walk together, for that is what the word covenant means, "walking together."

This covenant, this walking together, is what connects us in Old Ship today to Ebenezer Gay and the founders of this town and of this church. The Puritans who came here from Hingham, England were looking for a place where they could create community to walk together in ways of holiness.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had laid down a standard of love among peoples: don't just love your friends, love your enemies as well. If you are slapped on the cheek, turn the other cheek as well. Live your life in public view, for a city on a hill cannot be hid. No one lights a lamp in order to put it under a bushel basket, but puts it on a lamp stand so it can illuminate the house. When John Winthrop wrote his famous sermon on the ship coming across the Atlantic, he told the passengers that the community he envisioned would be a beacon of the kind of love of which Jesus spoke, a city on the hill. So almost their first act when coming ashore near the Great Hill was to create a written covenant.

What's the difference between a confluence and a covenant? Both involve coming together. But a confluence, a flowing together of streams, is an act of gravity on water. A covenant is an act of choice, a promise to do and to refrain from doing certain things. The word covenant is a central theme of the Hebrew Bible. The first covenant in the Bible is between God and Noah. After the flood waters receded, God promised Noah and his descendants that he would never again try to destroy all life, and God specifically said that the rainbow was the symbol of this everlasting covenant.

Then there are covenants that God makes with Abraham, with Jacob and with Moses to make the descendants of Abraham a great nation and give them the land of Canaan.

Being faithful to covenants and unfaithful to them is a theme throughout the rest of the Hebrew Bible. When the fortunes of the Israelites are low, a prophet such as Jeremiah will arise and say that they are having a bad time because they have forgotten God and his covenant. Covenant is used to explain peoples' fortunes, much the way that karma is used in Hinduism and Buddhism to give a name to bad luck.

This covenant between humans and God is in the background of the stories of the Hebrew Bible, and when the Christians go to write their scripture, they adopt these themes. At the Last Supper, Jesus is described as saying the act of remembering him by eating the bread, symbolizing his flesh, and drinking the wine, symbolizing his blood, makes a “new covenant” in his blood.

All of these Biblical covenants are what you might call vertical covenants. They are between a human or a group of humans and a divine being, God or Jesus. But the covenants we are concerned about are as much between human and human as between human and divine.

And what was new about the covenants of the English settlers of the seventeenth century is that they were horizontal. They assumed the right to make a social unit just by the consent of the people involved. This happened with the Mayflower Compact, and with the First Church of Boston covenant. These were radical documents and they paved the way for the revolutionary fervor that swept the country in the following century.

So let's focus on the Puritans and the city on the hill which they attempted to set up. The fundamental difference between creed and covenant is that creed is a statement of belief and covenant is a statement of loyalty. H.L. Mencken famously described a Puritan as a person who “lives eternally with the suspicion that someone, somewhere, may be having fun.” But Alice Blair Wesley, one of the most astute students of early New England religion, says that the central value of the covenants was a kind of ecstasy which would lead to salvation. She says, “The generation that founded our churches came to New England with what I will call a ‘Cinderella’ concept of salvation. Every soul, they held, is like Cinderella, born into a very low estate she is powerless to change, but from which she may be rescued by the power of divine mutual love.

What the central value was was not the ecstasy but the divine mutual love. And that can be the value today if we interpret “divine” broadly.

We will have to adapt. Alice Blair Wesley says, “To worship and serve and grow and thrive, as we have it in us to do, we need now to invent new covenantal structures for more free cooperation among us than we have even had since our earliest days on this continent. We've come a long way in many ways since the founding of our oldest churches in the 1630s. The spirit of mutual love is yet that reality most worthy of our ultimate loyalty, our religious loyalty. Our love, though seldom of the ecstatic variety, is warm and steady and deep and powerful to redeem and to enhance our own lives and many more lives in the larger world.”

One definition of covenant that I have used from time to time is “anything that gets you out of bed on Sunday morning and down to church.” It may be the camaraderie, it may be specific obligations to groups and your sense of responsibility in fulfilling them, it might be a special person or the pleasure of talking to like-minded people or being among people whose passion for a better world mirrors your own. Think about it, what got you down here today?

Where did the Cinderella covenant go awry? What happened to alter the Puritan covenant was the Enlightenment. The notion of helplessly falling in love made sense in a Calvinistic world where everything was set in motion before any of us was born. But when reason became enthroned later in the eighteenth century, religious sentiment appeared as a threat to that order.

This speaks to the rise of that thinking we have come to call Unitarianism, which is a story for another time.

But let's step back and compare covenant and confluence now. I said that confluence happened without any choice, but in that it looks like the Cinderella understanding of covenant. In the folklore of falling in love, the lover is without power to change it, as the drop of water is without power to refrain from falling into the river.

I said at the beginning that covenant comes from roots meaning walking together. When we join a covenanted community, it is not like we are marrying for life. I would bet that many of you can name several significant groups which you joined at one point in your life and then moved on at another time, whether that transition was smooth or bumpy. Another way of putting this is that what we covenant to do is to share the road of life awhile. And I have kept to this idea of covenant for my two-plus decades of UU ministry, and most of my comings and goings and welcoming of new members have been accompanied by a song which was not written by a UU and has no mention of church or covenant, but still seems appropriate. It's by Karl Williams of Philadelphia, and its called "A Pleasure to Know You." I will leave you with the chorus of that song and invite you to take it home with you. And I leave you with this question: What is the covenant that binds this church together? Amen.

Benediction

Go forth into this world bringing the joy that is in your hearts; sharing it with all you meet on the road of life. Blessed be.

