

Together, Step by Step

the Rev. Edmund Robinson

First Parish in Hingham/Old Ship

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Our hard-working pledge committee has chosen “together, step by step” as the theme for this year’s drive here at Old Ship. That reminds me of a song Jacqueline and I like to sing on walks in our neighborhood in Lexington, written by my friend Bob Lucas out in Indiana. As we’re putting one foot in front of another, we sing about taking life “one step at a time:”

First part:

I like to travel one step at a time

Every step forward is one step I leave behind

One step, two steps,

Three steps and on and on,

Time goes by, and I

Simply walk along,

I like to travel one step at a time.

Second part:

One step at a time,

Life is sublime

When it’s one step at a time,

So easy and free

Just you and just me

Wherever we go

The world is aglow,

Oh, I like to travel one step at a time.

One step at a time. Some days, church life might change at the breakneck pace of a racehorse, but sometimes it moves forward one step at a time. Traveling one step at a time allows you to reflect on each stage of the journey. It's like we are pilgrims walking to Santiago de Compostela or some other shrine to see holy relics.

But it also reminds me of the idea of covenant. We UUs like to say that while more orthodox branches of Christianity are based on statements of belief, on creeds, Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists are based on covenant. What is covenant? Covenant is, at its most basic level, a form of agreement. It is a form of agreement so fundamental that it affects many if not most of the structures of our lives.

The word covenant comes from two roots. One is "venant," which means traveling, coming or walking, and the other is "co," which means doing it together. Put the two roots together and "covenant" means "walking together."

Have you ever had a good walk with someone and fallen into a good talk with them so that you lose all track of time and place? Walking is a great activity for ruminating, turning things over in your mind. One step at a time.

I am reading a book called "Reading Genesis" by the novelist Marilynne Robinson. She is an unabashed Christian and a great defender of John Calvin and I am finding, as I expected to find, much to disagree with in this book, but also much to interest, educate and enlighten me. This book is her reflections on reading the Biblical book of Genesis itself. She compares Genesis with other origin myths from the Ancient Middle East and argues the notion of covenant is what is distinctive about Judaism in world religions and about Christianity as an offshoot of it. In other words, the ancient Gods who figure in Babylonian myth such as the Enuma Elish and the Epic of Gilgamesh are not about making promises to the human inhabitants of the earth.

But I get ahead of myself. The original theological meaning of covenant stems from such promises God makes to humans in the stories of Genesis. After the flood, God makes a promise to the human race in the

person of Noah that he will never again attempt to eliminate all life on earth. The symbol of this covenant is the rainbow. Later in Genesis, God makes a promise to Abraham that he will make of Abraham's descendants a great nation. This seems impossible at the time, because Abraham's wife Sarah is elderly and barren. But the impossible happens and she bears the child Isaac. The covenant with Abraham and his descendants is reaffirmed two generations later with Jacob, or Israel, but then there is the Egyptian slavery and God makes a new covenant with Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery. It seems for a while that they will perish in the Sinai desert, but then God comes down with the Ten Commandments and the law of Moses and the covenant is revived.

These Genesis covenants are what we might call vertical agreements, between God and humans. What Marilynne Robinson does in deconstructing them, which I have never seen another religion writer do, is to note the parallels between the Flood, the source of the first covenant, and the seven-day creation story in Genesis 1. In a sense, that creation story can be seen as the first covenant and the moral judgment of God at the end of each day was that the work He had done was "Good." If the creation of the world is seen as a covenant, a promise God made to the human race, then how did it go awry? Was it from Adam's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, or from Cain's murder of his brother Abel, or from some cause lying beneath the text of Genesis?

Covenant theology is complex when questions like this are pursued, but the word covenant had other uses in our history. When our Puritan forebears set out from England to found churches and communities such as this one, they used covenant as a horizontal concept: people can create a body politic, religious and corporate by agreement among the humans involved. This is how New England congregationalism gave birth to American democracy.

When God is the maker of a promise to Noah or Moses or Abraham, that promise can be seen as a kind of blessing. This is how Marilynne Robinson sees it. But when we transfer it to the inter-human context, what is it, how does it differ from an ordinary contract?

It is more than an agreement. It can be the cause which calls you to devote your life to it. It doesn't have to be mysterious or mythical or

supernatural. As I look at the three-quarter centuries I have been walking on this earth, I think I answered the call of something at mid-life, maybe it was the cause of liberalism, the idea that truth and wisdom emerge from a dialogue between different viewpoints in a setting of mutual respect, mindfulness and empathy.

But I think it can be expressed more simply than that. Covenant is the agreement to walk together on the road of life. The most explicit articulation of congregational polity as it emerged in New England in the seventeenth century The Cambridge Platform of church discipline, uses the phrase “walk together.”

I have studied the Cambridge Platform but think I have a simpler and more basic definition of covenant for liberal churches. There is not one thing which is a covenant, but it is different for each person and for the same person at different times. A practical definition is “covenant is what gets you out of bed on Sunday morning and motivates you to go to church”

Face it, folks, humans are social creatures. Some of us more so than others and some of us more or less under different circumstances.

There is an old song that expresses this idea in a way that I like, called “A Pleasure To Know You,” and the chorus goes

It's a pleasure to know you
A pleasure to see you smile
A comfort to know
We'll share the road awhile;
Pleasures are fleeting
Comforts are far between
It's a pleasure to know you,
And the comforts you bring.

What is a liberal church, at its best? It is a place where we agree to share the road awhile. A place to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. A place where we can have adult conversations about real things, where we can enjoy a good laugh, where we can offer support and

friendship and practice how we think the good life should be lived. Where we can pay back the privileges under which we live and ever so slightly bring into being the better world we would like to see our children and grandchildren inherit. Or as my mentor Victor Carpenter used to say, where we can get together to eff the ineffable.

A few days ago the nation marked the 4th anniversary of the Covid Pandemic. We have not yet totaled up the entire impact on our spirits and bodies of that plague.

Yes, most of us adapted to the extreme social isolation that was required of us, and there are probably some who are listening to these words today that still shy away from theaters, concerts or sporting events where people congregate en masse.

I think of the challenge of the pledge campaign and the pandemic and it reminds me of something Jacqueline and I did in the early days of Covid. We have two grandsons in England and we had watched kids cartoons with them on one of our visits just before Covid broke out. One of the cartoon heroes was a construction contractor named Bob the Builder. The plot of each show was the same: Bob and his friends, which included talking trucks and cement mixers, would tackle whatever construction problem presented. His theme song was “Can We Fix It?” The answer was always “We Can Fix It.”

As our Covid grandparents project, Jacqueline and I decided to use our cell phones to make a video spoof taking off on Bob the Builder, which involved making breakfast in our jammies in the kitchen with all kinds of non-food hardware. We both sang the theme, “We Can Fix It!” It was a hit with the grandkids.

That’s the attitude we are looking for. We can fix it, one step at a time. As a country we have been through a lot in these years, and Old Ship has certainly been through its share of challenges.

But we are rebounding slowly. We are reporting almost as many members to the UUA as we did before the pandemic, we have a Coming of Age program which will be reporting its credos to the larger congregation in a few weeks. In its deepest essence Unitarian Universalism is still going strong on the South Shore. We have a hard-working committee planning

the construction of new community space. We have leadership in touch with the UUA about seeking an interim minister.

Step by step, together. It is a pleasure to share the road awhile.

A couple of days ago I went into the Old Book section of the bookcase in our Parlor to do a little research to find out what congregational life was like in Old Ship 100 years ago, to give you some perspective as you contemplate your pledge cards this year. In the annual report from 1924, there was a message from the minister of that time addressed to the Non-Residents of Hingham. He was trying to make the point that if circumstances kept them from living in Hingham, there were still ways they could support Old Ship. They even had a fund called the "Absent Members' Fund." He listed 47 "absent members" in Massachusetts, 5 in the rest of New England, 16 in the rest of the US, and 4 abroad. I don't know that any larger demographic trends can be extrapolated from these facts, but I do hope that any Old Shippers who want to contribute to the pledge campaign will feel invited and appreciated for doing so.

Rome wasn't built in a day or rebuilt either. It takes a group effort to recover from the blows like this pandemic. It takes a commitment to the value of community.

Step by step. One step at a time. You don't need to fly. You don't need to leapfrog. One step at a time.

I found a great old Union Song that goes with the theme, so let's turn to #157 in the hymnal, and it has an old Irish melody to boot. Let's sing it twice while you're thinking of how much you want to pledge in this year's drive.

Amen.