

Are We Ready?
Sermon November 30, 2008
First Unitarian Church of Baltimore

Occasionally I get drawn back into my roots, and particularly the historical roots of our faith. We have a rich and solid European tradition, and one of these days I'd like to talk with you about that, because it is a fascinating story of courage, intellect, and determination. But today, it's about our New England beginnings.

Not so very long ago, religion was much more centered and influential in people's lives. By that I mean the theological issues that religious life focuses on. The trinity? Three gods in one or just one god, as in Unitarian, Jewish or Islamic? The afterlife and how to ensure that it did not involve fire and brimstone, or the anxiety and anguish of purgatory? Who was Jesus? Did the king have a right to decide on a state religion? Should the state require attendance at Sunday services, or was the choice of a religious faith a free choice?

Under the charter granted to the Massachusetts Bay Company by the king of England, certain properties were designated for the Church, and attendance at services was required for the colonists.

Now, the Pilgrims who settled in Massachusetts came here under cover of the Massachusetts Bay Company so that they could have a legal mechanism to occupy land that belonged to the king. They came to escape from liturgically and intellectually boring services that they had been required to attend in England. The required religious life in England had stultified, stagnated, and services did little to warm the hearts or stimulate the minds of those who decided to leave for America.

When they arrived here, after spending some time anchored off Cape Cod in the safety of that little nook off Provincetown, they found their way to the mainland. Those who settled in Dedham kept written records of how they formed their church, and how they decided how to govern themselves and the church. This was a fascinating process. They were ever so sensitive to the need to "do it right" and not to set up the same kind of authoritarian structure and governance they had experienced in England. They were also respectful, and determined that no one person might dominate either the process or the outcome. They were, for their times, in uncharted territory. In many ways, they were developing a new paradigm, just as we are developing a new financial paradigm right now in our country. In other words, they weren't sure what they were doing, but they knew what they wanted and what they didn't want.

And so in 1637 the people of Dedham (mind you, this meant the men of Dedham) set about organizing a series of discussions about how to form and govern their community and their church. The Dedham church is the only church in Massachusetts that preserved its records. It is possible that the other communities destroyed or never kept records, to avoid creating evidence that the crown might use against them. After all they were still subject of the King.

I am greatly indebted to the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley and her 2000-2001 Minns (that's "MINNS")ⁱ lectures for the historical information I am sharing with you. All the quotes in this discussion are from those lectures, which are published as "Our Covenant: the 200-2001 Minns Lectures, entitled "The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church, the Sprit and the Promise of Our Covenant" published by Meadville Lombard Press in Chicago.ⁱⁱ

In Dedham, the citizens established a practice of weekly meetings in homes. Not unlike the house meetings of the early Christians, figuring out how to worship and how to govern their religious institution. To quote from the Dedham records, the meetings were "lovingly to discourse and consult together... that we might be further acquainted with the spiritual tempers and guifts of one an other." They met on Thursday nights in houses, in rotating order. Anyone was welcome to attend.

They were process-oriented and set up some simple rules.

First, they were to decide before leaving each meeting what to discuss at the next meeting, that they might be best prepared by thinking about the topic during the week.

Second, the host spoke first giving his ideas on the topic, and each person spoke in turn afterwards. Each person could speak to the topic, raise a related question, or state his objections or doubts about what other speakers had said.

Their third process rule was to speak "so it were humbly and with a teachable hart not with any mind of cavilling or contradicting." In other words, they spoke their own thoughts and understandings, or as we might put it, they used "I" statements. No arguments. Only discussions. They were searching for a way to develop by consensus an agreement about how to operate their community and their religious institution, the little church in Dedham. And according to the record, all their "reasonings" were "very peaceable, loving and tender, much to edification."

How many times have you attended a meeting and had that feeling about it? "very peaceable, loving and tender, much to edification."

Thus they met and discussed weekly for a full year, and an examination of the record shows that they used words such as "reason, deliberation, make trial of, clearing, cleared up, encouragement, advice, counsel, agreement, liberty, and promising." They also used "sweet, comfort, help, and brotherly." But by far the most common words used in these discussions were "affection, love, and embrace" and their derivatives.

Although they were "people of the Book," their discussions did not begin with studies of the Bible. Rather, they laid a basis for discussion of the church by first talking about "questions as pertained to the just, peaceable & comfortable proceeding in a civill society***."

What they decided was that "the foundational concern of a free church is for the justice, the peace, the laws and regulations – the conditions of -- any healthy, free society.

They understood, in that cold wilderness, that there could be no fully functioning free church unless it was set in a "larger society in which concerns for justice, peace and reasonable laws can be freely and effectively voiced, without suppression." So the conditions of the larger society needed to provide the undergirding for a free church,

which could then function as a strong, clear voice in society for justice, peace and reasonable laws in society once the church was established. The primary task of the free church was to love God and one another so well that in their discussions, regardless of their disagreements, they might learn together the divine will of God as it related to justice, peace, and reasonable laws, and to proclaim it and bring it to bear in the larger society.

These people had been wounded. They wanted freedom to learn and to discuss and to comfort one another and to be comforted in a just and peaceable society. And that is how they set it up.

So after discussions about the way they wanted civil society organized, they set about talk of a church. Now there is little question that they thought of the church as a place they could be united together with Christ. But these days that might just as accurately be communicated as living and being together in genuinely deep, religious love. According to Alice Blair Wesley, they “understood the role of the church as filling needs of both the members and the larger society.”

Their conclusion after weeks and weeks of meeting and talking, was that “members of their new free church should be joined in a covenant, (a covenant), of religious loyalty to the spirit of love.”

In the records of the founding of the Dedham church there is no mention—no mention – of original sin, predestination or hellfire. Rather their language of reason and affection and love makes it clear that “the integrity of the free church comes down to our loyalty to the spirit of love at work in the hearts and minds of the local members.”

The people of Dedham and the 20,000 or so that had left England and established new homes for themselves in New England, came here primarily because, “They wanted to establish free churches in what they called ‘the liberty of the Gospel’, in which they could gather for worship, study and discussion...without the restraint or control of either government or church hierarchies.” The patterns and practices they set in theology, organization and authority are still alive and well in our Unitarian Universalist churches.

“They saw that if the free church is about the working of the spirit of mutual love, then that fact ought to shape the organization of the church, everything from how you join, to what joining means, to how church decisions are made.”

Now you may wonder why I am speaking to you about this today. I imagine many of you have picked up on the general theme of love and process in governance of both church and state. I reread these lectures by Rev. Wesley recently, in preparation for attending the Harpers Ferry Ministerial Study Group week before last. I had read them in seminary, and enjoyed them, but I suddenly realized this time how critical our past history and theology are to us this particular year. We are in preparation. We are getting ready for your new minister. We are polishing the way we do things. And you are already on a healthy path. Your Board of Trustees had a covenant, the group that is working on a Safety and Security policy for the church is developing a covenant. The staff is building a covenant. Now, for some of us, a covenant means something that was handed down and an agreement that was made between Moses and God. Our covenants are made by humans, but to the extent that they encourage us to treat each other

affectionately and respectfully, to discuss rather than to argue, to speak in turn, and to strengthen our ability to live and function in the world inside the church and outside the church, we practice better, perhaps even “best practices” in human communication, behavior, business, and government.

We are, as a nation, right now in the process of redirecting our civil society, setting new goals and priorities. We are, as a church, searching for a leader to be with you for a new future, and to work with you to make your dreams come true as individuals and as a congregation. By following the example of the Dedham church, which was finally established in November 1638, we can set a tone, build a climate of covenant with one another. And that covenant can promote your success with your new minister.

Officially, our governance or “polity” is known as congregational polity, because our congregations, rather than any bishop or church official, make all the decisions related to how you operate. It is from the bottom up, democratic, rather than top-down, authoritarian. That’s something we need to be grateful for to the New England pilgrims and the Dedham church.

But I would like to extend the notion of congregational polity, to **stretch** that concept, to go back to the spirit in which it was developed. Our governance was developed as a covenant among free-thinking people who wanted a free church. The strength of that covenant was built on love, affection, reason, discussion and a deep, deep caring for what it meant to be a member, and what it meant to build a free church.

So that’s why I’m sharing this story with you today. We are warmer, better fed, better schooled, healthier than the 20,000 who first arrived in New England. Surely we can make it a point to build a covenant in the near future that emphasizes that love and affection, and the covenant to speak freely and listen respectfully, as this church, 360 years after the founding of the Dedham church, and over 150 years of our own founding, prepares to welcome a new minister and begins to chart a new a even more vibrant and radiant future.

I have spoken these words in reverence for all that is holy and sacred. Amen

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ⁱⁱ Wesley, Alice Blair. 2002. *Our Covenant, the 2000-01 Minns Lectures: The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant.* pp. 1-26. Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press.