

BOUND AND DETERMINED

A sermon given for Membership Sunday

by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason

at UU Wellesley Hills on

Sunday, March 31st, 2019

Today, we are celebrating Membership Sunday; it is our annual worship service devoted to lifting up the richness of our shared congregational life. It is rich because so many of you here contribute to it, just as others in prior generations have for nearly 150 years now. A little while back, the Unitarian Universalist Association called itself “the Uncommon Denomination”, which seemed particularly apt, since it is not a denomination at all but rather, an association of congregations. In order to be a UU in good standing, you need not make a creedal declaration, renounce anything, endorse a certain platform, or perform a special initiation rite. Rather more simply, you must be a member of one of our thousand-plus associated congregations.

You must be a member of one of these, presently. So it is useful from time to time to remind ourselves of the meaning of membership here, much as we are doing this morning. What it means is not that we belong to this religious society or that other UU fellowship in one city or another town. Instead, it means that we more intimately belong to one another. In this past year of getting to know you all better, I see

how very seriously you take this sense of belonging. Together, you live into your covenant.

Admittedly, covenants are complicated. In her marvelous book on the Ten Commandments, my friend and colleague the Rev. Ana Levy-Lyons, Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Congregational Society of Brooklyn, observes that the combination of thou-shalt's and shalt-not's is hardly haphazard. Citing rabbinic commentary on the Decalogue, she notes those two tablets that Moses brought down to the Israelite from high atop Mount Sinai are connected in two dimensions: the horizontal and the vertical, up and across, acknowledging the importance of both our relationship to the divine and our relationship to each other.

As Rev. Ana explains in her work No Other Gods: The Politics of the Ten Commandments, there is a direct correspondence between between the first commandment and the sixth, the fifth and the tenth, the third and the eighth, and so forth. We don't take God's name in vain, for instance, because God's name was never ours to take in the first place and besides, we ought not to steal. How we treat one another inevitably reveals what we worship and hold sacred.

Rev. Ana's book grew out of a ten-part sermon series she delivered over the course of a church program year in Brooklyn, the congregation I served as Community Minister prior to my call to Wellesley. So I cannot possibly its complex teaching on the Decalogue in a single service. In the interest of time this morning, I will focus our attention on just one commandment: the seventh. Don't worry - you won't be asked to count them off; there is no surprise quiz! The

seventh commandment contains that firm injunction: “Do Not Commit Adultery.”

According to Rev. Ana, this religious teaching has spiritual implications outside of marriage. In her rendering of the commandment, Rev. Ana communicates an imperative for us to “reject throwaway culture” and “stay in for the long run”, even when - or perhaps, especially when - we are tempted to bolt and run far, far away. “This commandment gets at the heart of what it means to be in relationship,” Rev. Ana maintains, “to keep commitments even when one would rather not, to devote oneself to something flawed, to love someone imperfect, to work at something when it’s hard, and to stop shopping for something better.” All these choices are counter-cultural these days, she observes. “This commandment challenges us to de-commodify and re-enchante the people in our lives,” she concludes.

That can feel practically impossible when we have had disenchanting experiences, and I guarantee that if you’ve been involved with any faith community for a length of time, you’ve had at least a couple of those, maybe a handful (or two) of them over the years. “Loyalty to something imperfect is almost foreign to us today... Repairing something broken is also foreign,” Rev. Ana observes. Congregations become odd outposts in our consumerist culture, and they ask us to adopt unusual habits.

Now, in a curious moment of meta-ministry, I’m making mention of a colleague’s sermon series inside a sermon series of my own. All through our program year, I have been preaching about what we UUs believe, using the Rev. David O. Rankin’s popular ten-point outline as

a guide. His seventh point is this: “We believe in the ethical application of religion. Good works are the natural product of a good faith, the evidence of an inner grace that finds completion in social and community involvement.” The ethical application of religion involves a few non-negotiables. It demands that we lay claim to a community and then let it make claims on us. His seventh point echoes the seventh commandment in key respects.

“[T]he more successful we are, the more choice we have.... Our participation in consumer culture has taught us to center our own desires in decision-making of all kinds,” Rev. Ana remarks. “We understand the pursuit of happiness to be an ‘inalienable right’ and our happiness to hinge on our getting what we want.” Of course, not all the things we want and get bring us the degree of happiness we anticipated they might. “Just as secular culture offers freedom from religion’s laws, religious law offers freedom from secular culture’s laws,” she argues in No Other Gods. “The question is... *in which freedom are we most truly free?*”

Clerical types such myself believe — paradoxically, improbably, and indeed, religiously — that humans are most free when we are bound to something greater than ourselves and determined to be in service to it and to one another. “Mindful of truth ever exceeding our knowledge and community ever exceeding our practice, reverently we covenant together,” the late UU minister the Rev. Walter Royal Jones, Jr. wrote, “beginning with ourselves as we are, to share the strength of integrity, and the heritage of the spirit, in the unending quest for wisdom and love.” All of us are on a quest for love in communities with people on similar quests.

Honestly, in our ethical application of religion, what choice do we have apart from beginning where we are and how we are? Taking that seventh commandment to heart means understanding why we should be adulterous sorts, regardless of whether we are married. Thinks about what adultery involves: it means committing infidelity, being unfaithful. Whenever we choose to remain faithful, we make a choice “to cultivate dignity”, Rev. Ana contends. “It teaches us to take pride in our lives, choices, and relationships, even though they are flawed. It teaches us to live with integrity, keep our word, and earn the trust of those around us,” she adds. “This leads to a richer and more meaningful life.”

Ultimately, this "commandment is countercultural because it teaches us to stop shopping,” Rev. Ana concluded. “It teaches us to commit to what we have instead of scanning the horizon for something better.” If we are constantly scanning, she points out, “the appraisal phase never really ends” and the committed phase never truly begins. Whenever people casually tell me that they have been church shopping for a lengthy spell, I cannot help but feel nervous for them. In the absence of deep commitments, human beings tend to suffer. We yearn to be bound to one another.

“Blessed are those who yearn for deepening more than escape; who are not afraid to grow in spirit. Blessed are those who take seriously the bonds of community; who regularly join in celebration... who come as much to minister as to be ministered unto,” the Rev. John Buehrens, former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, wrote in his beatitudes for churchgoers. “Blessed are those who...

invite their friends to come along, to join in fellowship, service, learning, and growth. Blessed are those who support the church and its work... and who give of themselves...” We bless them because of the models they provide each of us.

This past week, I witnessed an amazing, week-long cooperative effort here at UU Wellesley Hills, culminating in what the locals know simply as Rummage. Rummage is an intensive undertaking that begins several weeks, if not months, in advance of the Saturday sale. By that Saturday morning, both our Chapel and Sanctuary contain sundry wares; rooms on different floors of our Religious Education wing get converted for Boutique and Holiday shops; Parish Hall gets outfitted with dressing rooms alongside racks and racks of used clothing. People in the congregation both donate goods and purchase them. A number of you have told me about seeing your friends wearing your clothes or having your friends see you in theirs. The entire event seems to resemble a Yankee Swap more than a sale. But Rummage is a big fundraiser for us, and whatever we don’t sell is soon donated to charity. We place greater value on what we can contribute than on what we have consumed.

There is both a make-do and can-do spirit to Rummage that impresses me. All throughout the week, people shared their time, talent and treasure with one another, in every department from linens to books. Although it is a sale, Rummage is not designed as a conventional shopping experience. Instead, it encourages people to those countercultural activities that Rev. Ana describes, such as “reject[ing] throwaway culture” and “stay[ing] in for the long run”, by making minor repairs, salvaging the imperfect, repurposing the worn, and

upcycling items whenever possible. It allows this congregation to challenge the dominant ethic of disposability and uphold a higher ethic of durability. Against the dictates of commercial culture, we learn to adopt distinct practices of making things last and putting them to good use.

Yesterday we had our Rummage sale and today we conclude our 2019 Stewardship campaign. I think it's fair to characterize both these as successes this year. Next weekend, those of you who are members here at UU Wellesley Hills will install me as Senior Minister of this congregation, the 13th in nearly 150 years, and Rev. Ana will be with us then to preach the Installation sermon. We have a lot that we can celebrate together. But what we must remember is that everything is possible only because we believe that we can count on one another.

What No Other Gods makes clear is that the distinction between public and private morality is not so clear as we imagine; as Rev. Ana explains, we need personal relationships that support each of us in ethical living and call on us to remain faithful. Our commitment to “dignity, honesty, and integrity ripple out and create webs of relationships that are more trusting and compassionate,” she maintains, and the wider world benefits from that.

In this Uncommon Denomination, we UUs gather into individual congregations because that is both our religious tradition and our spiritual discipline. What we celebrate this Membership Sunday is not that people have joined this congregation, but that they are joined — joined to one another and in the service of their highest ideals, connected in the horizontal and vertical dimensions of life, for the

good of the whole. They have chosen dignity and they practice fidelity. They belong not because of who they are, or what they do, but whose they are, which is to say, our very own. Here at UU Wellesley Hills we are bound and determined to make a find a way forward together.

*** * ***