



Story--Jonah and the Great Fish

Sermon

Would it surprise you to know that the root of the ceremony recognizing our new members rests in the Jewish tradition of covenant?

In the book of Exodus, we are told that the people of Israel have been enslaved by the Egyptians for so long they can't remember freedom. God says to Moses, I want you to lead my people out of slavery. Not unlike Jonah, Moses says thanks but no thanks!. But God convinces him to do as he asks. When Moses appears before the Egyptians demanding freedom, they say no. But through a series of plagues, culminating in the death of the eldest son in every Egyptian family, God wears them down. The Egyptians relent and the Israelites flee into the desert. They are free. Moses is then called up onto Mount Sinai where he is enveloped in the cloud of God. When he comes down, he has a message from God: This is our covenant. You are mine and I am yours. I am your God and you are my people. We stand together.

Today, we spoke a covenant. Our new members have come here in freedom and said, we want to stand with you, you are my people. And the established members said, “Come stand with us. We will be your people.” And then we articulated our mutual covenant, to be faithful to one another and to the values that unite us.

In the Jewish Scriptures, God also makes promises. And the Israelites make promises. This is what freedom gives us. You can't make true promises if you aren't truly free because you can't really say yes unless you have the power to say no. So in their newfound freedom from slavery, the Israelites make their promises. And the rest of the Hebrew Bible tells the story of how those promises unfold. It is the humble story of a people trying to remain faithful, who time and again, fall short of their promises and look for ways to try again. Because what happens when they break their promises? They are drawn back into slavery, whether it is a slavery of the body or the spirit.

Look at the story of Jonah. God says, “Jonah, to go Nineveh and tell them to get their act in order!” and Jonah says, “Not on your life.” And it doesn't work, because we can't run away from the sacred promises we've made. We can change our understanding of the promises, how we live the promises, we might renegotiate the promises, but when we abandon our promises, they follow us. The story of Jonah is a poetic metaphor of what happens in us when we try to run away. We're swallowed up in denial, in fear, in powerlessness, in resentment. When Jonah realizes he can't run away, he tells the Ninevites what they need to do, and they listen and seek a return to their promises. And that's the grand narrative of the Hebrew Bible ... we see stories of individuals, whole cities, an entire people... who keep trying to bring themselves into right relationship with God... or as I like to say... the



ground of all being so as to return to the Holy Land. In the Hebrew Bible, sometimes that Holy Land is really and truly a place. Sometimes it is a powerful metaphor for the heart of humanity and God.

In 1821, Rev. Theodore Clapp became the minister of the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans. Clapp’s preaching was such a hit that people lined up to hear him. They had never heard anything like it before. His wasn’t fire and brimstone preaching. He preached unconditional love, human goodness, and an all forgiving God. This was absolutely radical for his day. It was also radical for his denomination. In 1833 the Presbyterian conference found him guilty of heresy and removed him from ministry. When he returned, disheartened and deflated, the church said, “We are your people. We stand with you.” They left the Presbyterian fold and renamed themselves “The Strangers Church” because their church turned away no one. It didn’t matter who you were or where you came from, you belonged. We are yours, you are our people.

Somewhere in this time, Clapp formed a deep friendship with Judah Touro, one of the most prominent Jewish merchants in New Orleans. It was an unusual thing for a Christian minister and a Jewish merchant to be friends. Anti-Semitism was socially acceptable, religiously preached, and politically entrenched. And yet, when Clapp shared with Touro that his congregation was struggling, Touro offered him the money to set things right. I am reminded of the Israelites at the base of Mt. Sinai. “You are my people and we stand together.”

The Strangers Church became the First Unitarian Church of New Orleans, and this was not the last time it would receive money from Judah Touro. In 1851 when the church burned down, Judah paid to rebuild it. Why would a Jewish man be so committed to the survival of a Christian church?

It’s remarkably simple. The progressive theology of Clapp’s Unitarian church made room for Judaism in a way that no Christian theology had ever done. It did this in two ways. Firstly, it changed the theological place of Jesus. In Traditional Christian theology the litmus test of faithfulness is belief in Jesus as God. That Jesus was God manifest in human form. The Jewish faith does not see Jesus as God. For Traditional Christians that has been seen as tantamount to rejecting God, denying God, and has been the basis for centuries upon centuries of Jewish oppression. Unitarian theology changed the place of Jesus in Christian theology. No longer was Jesus God. Jesus was a messenger from God, a prophet, a teacher, which meant that the true test of faithfulness was no longer a belief in Jesus, but rather living the teachings of Jesus. Love your neighbor as yourself. If someone asks for your shirt give him your coat as well. When Jesus told the Samaritan woman she wasn’t worth his time, she questioned him and he saw the error of his ways and that no one was beneath him. She was his people. By seeing Jesus as fully human rather than a divine God requiring unquestioning belief, Unitarian theology made room for Judaism in



a way that no other Christian theology had ever done, because it meant that not accepting Jesus as God was no longer a rejection of God itself. Mind you Jesus still had a central place in Unitarian Christianity. He was referred to as Messiah, Savior, Son of God, Christ, but in a different way. He was the Messiah in that he was seen as anointed by God. He was Savior in that his message saved us from lives of sin. He was Christ as in the perfect manifestation of the divine in human form, but not God himself. He was seen as chosen by and sent by God, but not God. In a way, 19th century Unitarian Christianity became monotheistic similar to the way that Judaism was monotheistic - with a focus on one God, undivided.

So that's the first way that Christian Unitarian theology made room for an acceptance of Judaism as a path of faithfulness. The other way was through the doctrine of universal salvation, which is what got Clapp booted out of the Presbyterian Church. Clapp adopted the idea that there was no hell. The will of God is that all are reconciled. None are left out of the promise. That meant you could not be condemned for not believing the right things. Universalist teaching said we have no business condemning each other. Are you serving your brothers and sisters? Are you engaging the suffering of the world? Are you teaching your children kindness and generosity and compassion? Universalists pointed to the story of Jesus telling followers to pull out the plank in their own eye before criticizing the splinter in someone else's. You make sure you're living faithfully. That's what matters. Universalist Christianity made room for Judaism in a way that no Christian faith ever had, because it proclaimed that no one had a right to judge a people for what they did or didn't believe about Jesus. It was their actions that mattered.

Now think about what this would have meant in 19th century America, when anti-Semitism was simply accepted by the dominant Christian society as a legitimate belief, and where no Jewish person could ever feel truly safe. You were told in a thousand subtle and not so subtle ways that you would never be an equal. When you are part of an oppressed minority, you are acutely aware of where your safe places are. Your life depends on it. In cities and towns across this nation, Unitarian and Universalist churches became, for many in the Jewish community, an indicator that safety was present. If something happened to you, it was possible that you would have an ally in that community, someone who would stand with you and say, "These are my people." When Judah Touro supported the Strangers Church, he was investing in his people's safety. He was also saying, "You are my people. And we are yours."

Now to be fair, this wasn't a ride into the sunset. Anti-Semitism was so deeply entrenched that it would be unfair to say there was none of it in Unitarian and Universalist churches. Of course there was. And the experience of Anti-Semitism had so defined the Jewish community that many continued to view any Christian as a potential



danger. But, the seeds of acceptance and tolerance had been planted and sometimes those seeds bloomed in wonderful ways.

There is a rich history of growing mutuality between Unitarian Universalism and Judaism in the 19th and 20th centuries. There are numerous examples of congregations and synagogues opening their doors to each other when they needed a place to worship. In Augusta Georgia a Unitarian congregation was established in 1840. It didn't survive and the building was bought by a Jewish congregation. A hundred years later, when a Unitarian fellowship was re-established, that same synagogue offered their space for worship and the Rabbi performed their weddings and memorials until they had their own minister. Before we bought this property, Emerson Chapel met for some time at Kol Am, a reform Jewish congregation in West County. In Springfield Missouri, when the Jewish cemetery was defaced, Unitarian Universalists helped clean the stones. When the Unitarian Universalist church in Hamilton Ontario had its building dedication, a local Rabbi said at the ceremony, "We need you here." During World War II, the Unitarian Service Committee was established to help Jews escape Nazi controlled Europe. And in the last half of the 20th century, when Unitarian Universalism moved beyond its Christian roots, our congregations became an option for many interfaith couples seeking a religious home where neither has to give up who they are to worship together. You can be Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Pagan, Hindu, Muslim, Humanist, or just plain spiritual, and worship together in that Ground of Being.

Who is waiting at the base of Mt. Sinai? We are. Who is at the top of that mountain enveloped in the cloud of God? We are. Who is coming down the mountain with the offer of a covenant of mutuality and faithfulness? We can be. The story in the Hebrew Bible is both the story of a particular people and the story of humanity. Whether you believe in God or not, whether your hero is Moses or Jesus, whether you consider yourself religious or spiritual or neither, we stand at the base of the mountain with a promise that we can choose to make or not. Will we promise ourselves to freedom, to friendship, to living as if all are brothers and sisters? In Exodus, the people of Israel proclaim, "You are our God." That is more than a declaration, it is a promise. If you see God as pure love, as the ground of all being, if you wish to be a servant to the spirit of life, then the question at hand is, will we actually walk in the steps of our promises? Will we use our freedom to say yes to what really matters?

Who are your people? And to whom or what will you say, "I am yours." That is the question. Perhaps it is the answer.

May it be so.