

A Covenantal Faith

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This morning I would like to talk to you about secret shoppers. Secret shoppers – you know what they are? People employed by a company to go undercover as regular customers in order to evaluate the quality of the service they received. There are two basic types: the secret shoppers could be evaluating the culture of the establishment, reporting on the overall quality of the shopping experience; or they could be undercover moles reporting on the behavior of individual employees.

These can produce a range of outcomes. There could be an increase in anxiety in the workforce coupled with a resentment of management's devious tactics. On the other hand, if used well, it could lead to understanding how to improve the overall experience for employees and customers alike.

I used to know a fellow who created a consulting business doing this. He was imaginative and resourceful, and he managed to carve out a quite profitable niche in the corporate marketplace. Companies hired him to go to amusement parks and resorts to evaluate the quality of service. His reports were highly detailed but general in nature. He didn't usually mention specific employees but rather focused on providing an in-depth analysis of the overall system – its strengths, shortfalls, and opportunities for improvement.

Sometimes secret shoppers are like secret agents. You never know who they are but if you treat one especially well you might get a bonus or a promotion. Conversely, bad service could lead to a reprimand or termination. This approach is designed to keep folks on their toes, treating every customer as though they might be special.

Well, this is how religion worked back in the old, old days. God had secret agents called angels who would reinforce good behavior and punish the bad. So we have the story of Abraham and Sarah out in the desert, old and childless, traveling to a new land. They look up and see strangers coming toward them.

Now this is out in the wild where strangers might be dangerous, but Abraham and Sarah chose to welcome them with open arms and generosity instead of defending themselves. They invited the travelers join them and served them all their best food, even though the only food they had was what they could carry.

These strangers, of course, turned out to be God's secret shoppers. They were looking for evidence of God's main message and concern at that point in history – hospitality: welcoming and serving the stranger with generosity and warmth. So these secret shoppers gave Sarah and Abraham a bonus: even though she was old and barren, she conceived and bore a son, Isaac.

But God's secret shoppers didn't limit themselves to rewards – there were punishments as well. Abraham's brother, Lot, had settled in the city of Sodom, about which much has been said. But the actual story is as simple as the one about Abraham. Three strangers – God's secret shoppers again – visit Lot in Sodom and they are treated quite badly by the people of that city – so badly, in fact, that the secret shoppers called down destruction upon the city, not because of any kind of deviant sexual behavior, but for the crime of inhospitality.

Once the Hebrews became a civilization rather than wandering individuals, there was a need for a more regulated society. Secret shoppers weren't enough any more, God needed an agent – Moses.

Now Moses was the only one who met with his client, God. He would report his meetings to his people and tell them about his ongoing negotiations on their behalf. Moses finally felt he had a good deal for his people. He brought back a list of ten things they needed to agree to do in exchange for God's support – a contract, if you will. Most of them are good rules for a stable society. There are a few surprises, though. The rules require that they take one day off each week – making this the first known negotiated labor contract. Another surprise is that it didn't include the obligation to welcome the stranger, which had been a vitally important part of the covenants with Abraham and Lot.

In each case, though, religious community was created by covenant: promising to be kind and welcoming to strangers, for example. Or by agreeing to the rules we call the Ten Commandments. Thus, history happened. And one thing that happened in history is that people took it upon themselves to be God's secret

shoppers and agents, the sole representatives who were in touch with the big guy, knew how to talk to him and how to negotiate on their behalf. We all know how that turned out.

Although the history of religion makes it clear that there really is a transpersonal source of insight and wisdom about nurturing the potential of the human spirit and building healthy communities, history has also revealed that there's a problem with secret shoppers and agents. You never get to see the source of their wisdom, and this has led to a lot of misrepresentation along the way. Like I said, history happened, centuries of domination, oppression, persecution, and war.

So there was a need for a different way of organizing churches, a way that wasn't based on the tyranny of an absent authority, an inflexible doctrine, or a self-important demagogue. There was a need for a church that was based on the agreements its members entered into with one another.

It was in this spirit in 1607 that a group of people in the little English town of Scrooby met under the leadership of a young minister named John Robinson. As Alice Blair Wesley wrote in her book, *Myths of Time and History*, [Robinson] "was troubled in conscience. He could not agree with a number of recent rulings of the bishops and the magistracy. These rulings imposed certain doctrines and practices on the Church of England, to which all citizens were obliged by law to belong. . . He became convinced that the church is misconceived if it is conceived as something done by reason of any outside authority.

"In his conception the church was to be constituted, not by obedience to hierarchical authority, not by assent to a [creed], and not by confession of a transforming experience (salvation). This church was to be constituted by a promise, a covenant venture together as individuals in the ways of the Spirit, with entire integrity."

". . . the seventeen-year-old William Bradford (as an adult he was repeatedly elected governor of Plymouth Colony) was one of this new congregation."

Wesley describes the nature of the covenantal basis of the Free Church tradition. "Our covenant is simply our promise that we shall together seek truth

and support one another as we dare, whatever the cost, to live by the truths we cannot help believing we have found at any particular time. . . . The Free Church is held together by, insofar as we live by, the spirit of this promise.”

She describes the nature of spirit as “the whole inseparable complex of ideas, understanding, memory hope, will, learned social skills, and affection, . . . the results of our engagement with the world. The word spirit points to the interior life, which makes for the quality of our visible, exterior actions. . . . So, in the spirit of the covenant . . . each member is called to give utterance, to ask, say explain, defend what is the truth she or he sees. To be unforthcoming is to be disloyal, for how can we learn from one another without candor! Each member is also called to yield the floor with humble courtesy, to listen, to be open to, and try again and again to imagine what others see. To be unwilling or to forget to hear is to betray, for how can we receive what others may impart without their counsel! Our covenant is an abiding commitment to take and give counsel.”

Wesley closes her chapter with a paraphrase of the covenant of the Pilgrims whose journey began at that little meeting in Scrooby, and founders of the American Free Church tradition, to which Unitarian Universalists are the heirs: “We pledge to walk together in the ways of truth and affection, as best we know them now or may learn them in days to come that we and our children may be fulfilled and that we may speak to the world in words and actions of peace and goodwill.”

The Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams, wrote in his book, *The Prophethood of All Believers*: “Human beings, individually and collectively, become human by making commitment, by making promises. The human being . . . is a promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creature. . . . Traditionally our churches have been grounded in a covenant binding us together . . . but this enterprise of maintaining the network is itself not to be understood as simply a human enterprise. It is a response to a divinely given creative power, a sustaining-power, a community-transforming power. This power is ultimately not of our own making.”

Adams further points out that “the covenant includes a rule of law, but it is not fundamentally a legal covenant. It depends on faithfulness, and faithfulness is

served by loyalty, by love. Violation of the covenant is a violation of trust. What holds the world together, according to this dual covenant then, is trustworthiness, . . . love. Ultimately the ground of faithfulness is the divine or human love that will not let us go.”

In her essay, “What They Dreamed Be Ours to Do,” Rebecca Parker comments on Adams, pointing out that “There is room to imagine this source larger than ourselves in multiple ways: Earth itself, the Spirit of Life, the Buddha, nature, the communion of all souls, universal love. The point is, there is a power that undergirds our covenant-making that is more than the power of our will and decision-making. In fact, our covenant making is a response to this power, a co-working with this power. We make this response, most fundamentally, not by what we say, but by what we do – by coming together in peace, committing ourselves to be co-workers with the source of life. Covenant is, first-most, not a verbal agreement, but a practice.”

Our congregation has agreed on several basic fundamental values, values with a rich heritage in religious tradition as deriving from a relationship with the source of life which is larger than ourselves. We have agreed to be a compassionate community, nurturing personal growth and working for justice. These are wonderful values but they point to the need for further exploration, so that we can, as the Pilgrims said, “walk together in the ways of truth and affection, as best we know them now or may learn them in days to come.” I invite you to consider what we have yet to learn about how to be a compassionate community; how best to nurture the unfolding of the human spirit; how best to serve love in action, which is justice.

There are a number of covenants which other congregations have developed to help them answer these questions. One of the best known is “Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.” This expresses lovely sentiments, but, as I have seen in action, lacks the specificity necessary to guide groups when passionate differences arise.

Covenants are often too vague to give the kind of guidance we need to walk the walk of our talk when the going gets rough. And, in order to be truly effective,

a covenant needs to be a living document, a set of living promises made and renewed by people to each other rather than a bunch of high-sounding ideas sufficiently abstract to avoid cutting too close to the bone.

Gilbert Rendle wrote that a “. . . covenant is a written document developed . . . agreed to and owned by its creators, and practiced on a daily basis as a spiritual discipline. It is a way of developing common language, common commitments, . . .”

One example of a congregational covenant rooted more in action than ideology is this:

We will listen from the heart.
We will speak honestly from the heart.
We will respect confidentiality when requested.
We will not interrupt.
We will not give unasked-for advice.
We will not judge others by what they say.
We will not treat other people’s problems lightly.
We will honor the diversity of thoughts and feelings.
We will honor the times for reflection with quietness.
We will honor and respect our time together.

Another comes from Brattleboro, VT:

We build our church on a foundation of love and covenant with one another,
To freely explore our values and honor our diversity as a source of communal
strength,
To accept responsibility for our individual acts and promote justice and peace,
To celebrate the joys of discovery, embracing the fullest measure of our
humanity,
To communicate with kindness and support,
To serve with compassion and commitment,
To openly share our laughter and tears and,

To show reverence for the divine in all that is.

Finally, here is the covenant from All Souls Church in Washington, DC:

We practice hospitality, welcoming all those who enter.

We work to foster a multicultural and multigenerational community that sees diversity in all its manifestations as a sign of our strength.

We listen with respect and attention and speak with care.

We serve our church community with generosity and good humor, and we will acknowledge the service of others.

We resolve conflicts directly, using openness and compassion.

We acknowledge our mistakes and shortcomings and are willing to forgive those of others.

We support each other in times of joy and need.

What will be our covenant? What promises will we agree to make one another in the fulfillment of our values of compassion, growth, and justice? What will be revealed to us about how “to walk together in the ways of truth and affection, as best we know them now or may learn them in days to come?”

Let’s find out together. We have scheduled two congregational covenant workshops to begin this adventure together. The first will follow next Sunday’s worship on February 24 at noon in the Community Room, with lunch and child care provided. We’ll repeat the workshop at noon on March 10 to give everyone a chance to participate.

May we continue to walk together in the ways of truth and affection, as best we know them now or may learn them in days to come.

May it be so.