

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration
Words of Inspiration September 15, 2013
Rev. Dr. Kathryn Ellis

Covenant, Repentance and Forgiveness

This month our worship theme is community; last week I quoted Jean Vanier, a founder of L'Arche communities. L'Arche web site states (<http://www.larcheusa.org/who-we-are/communities>), "We make explicit the dignity of every human being by building inclusive communities of faith and friendship where people with and without intellectual disabilities share life together."ⁱ Vanier wrote, "To work for community is to work for humanity."

I have quoted Vanier often; he seems to be a wise man, a wise spiritual teacher. But I never actually read his book, *Community and Growth*. I thought it was time – if not past time to do so. When the book came, I looked at the table of contents and found chapter headings "Community, a place of healing and growth," "Community as forgiveness" and "Walking Toward the Covenant." And when I began to read, I thought, "Here is my sermon already written! He has said what I want to say." When I told Rick, my husband about it, he suggested that I just read the book to you!

Of course, Vanier didn't really write my sermon because my "words of inspiration" are for you, for us. They are about what happens in this community. Still, I want to share much from Vanier this morning. He is clear that he has learned about community by living in community, experiencing its sorrows and pains as well as its joys and celebrations. He reminds us that we learn from our lives, our communities by making mistakes – "messing up" as the author of "Coming Clean" named it.

Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year, the most important Jewish holiday. It is a day for repentance, atonement and then joyful celebration. Repentance means to turn around, to examine your own behavior and to change. Preparation for Yom Kippur includes making amends, apologizing to those you may have harmed, reconciling relationships, asking for and offering forgiveness. In taking these actions, the covenant with God and with others, with the community is renewed, re-affirmed.

Unitarian Universalists often have difficulty with the word, "sin." That trouble exists for good reason. If we think sin means that humans are born inherently evil and depraved as the Calvinists taught, then we who believe that all humans have inherent worth and dignity and that all have gifts, we will reject that idea of sin. If the word sin has been used by others to judge who we are or who we love, then we surely reject that.

As adults, we can consider another way of thinking about sin. Sin means “missing the mark.” We all miss the mark sometimes. As humans we make mistakes, we hurt other people. Sometimes, we especially hurt those closest to us, those we live with and those in our own community. Unitarian Universalist minister Fred Muir defined sin this way:

Sin then is anything that I do that isolates, ostracizes or separates me from the human community (. . .) which results in robbing or denying human uniqueness and potential. Call it evil or flawed behavior; call it missing the mark; call it brokenness; call it denial, repression or reaction formation – it’s all sin if it separates, ostracizes or isolates us from the ground of our being, from that which defines us as human beings. Sin is behavior that prevents a person from living out their potential for human being-ness.ⁱⁱ

In this sense, we do sin and sin repeatedly. This doesn’t mean that we are condemned. It means that we need to stop, examine ourselves, turn around and do our best to heal or fix what we have harmed or broken. Rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote about Yom Kippur:

So Yom Kippur has become the moment when most Jews individually and the Jewish people collectively experience the strongest sense of partnership and covenant with God – the strongest sense that if the people have striven with all their energy to redress the wrongs they have done, God will forgive them and give them a sense of harmony and wholeness. . . . No human is to be expelled from the communityⁱⁱⁱ

Vanier wrote that community is the place for meeting with God.

It is the place of belonging; it is the place of love and acceptance; it is the place of caring; it is a place of growth in love Community leads to openness and acceptance of others. Without community people’s hearts close up and die.^{iv}

I think Vanier, who is Catholic, describes the sense of wholeness and harmony, of covenant with God that is the aim of Yom Kippur:

The longer we journey on the road to inner healing and wholeness, the more the sense of belonging grows and deepens. The sense is not just one of belonging to others and to a community. It is a sense of belonging to the universe, to the earth, to the air, to the water, to everything that lives, to all humanity. If the community gives a sense of belonging, it also helps us to accept our aloneness in a personal meeting with God. Through this the community is open to the universe and to humankind.^v

Community life is inspired by the universal and is open to the universal. It is based on forgiveness and openness to those who are different . . .^{vi}

Vanier discussed community as a place of growth and healing.

When people enter community, especially from a place of loneliness in a big city or a place of aggression and rejection, they find the warmth and love exhilarating. This permits them to lift their masks and barriers and to become vulnerable But then too, as they lift their masks and become vulnerable, they discover that community can be a terrible place, because it is a place of relationship; it is the revelation of our wounded emotions and how painful it can be to live with others^{vii}

Community is the place where our limitations, our fears and our egoism are revealed to us In each one of us there is such a deep wound, such an urgent cry to be held, appreciated and seen as unique and valuable. The heart of each one of us is broken and bleeding . . . (in community we learn that). We are broken, but we are loved. Community becomes the place of liberation and growth.^{viii}

In order for community to become that place of healing, liberation and growth, we need to stay with our communities. We need to stay past our initial disillusion, past our irritations and past our hurt. We stay not by ignoring these things but by facing them. We need to seek, offer and accept forgiveness.

A few years ago (before I was here and before many of you were here), this community experienced intense conflict and distress. People were angry and mistrusting. The minister was asked to resign and left before the end of the year. Many people left the congregation. When I first came here in the fall of 2010, the pain was still strong, too intense to really touch.

Those of you who stayed rebuilt community, rebuilt trust and created a new covenant. That covenant is in our order of service. Covenant promises are sacred promises, sacred vows. They are not easy promises; we will miss the mark at times as we try to live up to our covenant promises. Honest and healthy community is not easy; beloved community is our aspiration. So some of the promises the members of the Restoration community have made to each other:

To abide in friendship.

To build a strong and vibrant congregation.

To resolve our misunderstandings in a spirit of cooperation, by:

Assuming that others behave with good intentions;

Listening sincerely to each other's opinions, ideas, life experiences and concerns;

Working honestly through conflicts directly with those involved in a spirit of kindness and understanding;

Offering and accepting forgiveness;

Respecting differing voices and dealing considerately with dissent;

Cooperating in a spirit of compromise and consensus.

This covenant acknowledges that we are different, we don't always agree and sometimes we get on each other's nerves. It acknowledges that and we promise to do our best to work out our misunderstandings and disagreements. The covenant explicitly names "offering and accepting forgiveness."

Vanier wrote of community and forgiveness:

Community is the place of forgiveness. In spite of all the trust we may have in each other, there are always words that wound, self-promoting attitudes, situations where susceptibilities clash. . . . If we come into community with knowing that the reason we come is to learn to forgive and be forgiven seven times seventy-seven times, we will soon be disappointed . . . To forgive is also to understand the cry behind the behavior To forgive is also to look into oneself and to see where one should change, where one should also ask for forgiveness and make amends.

To forgive is to recognize once again –after separation – the covenant which binds us together with those we do not get along with well; it is to be open and listening to them once again. It is to give them space n or hearts. That is why it is never easy to forgive. We too must change. We must learn to forgive and forgive and forgive every day, day after day. We need the power of (Love) in order to open up like that.^{ix}

What do you need for further healing and growth in this community? Today, this community is strong and welcoming, full of energy and full of care. What will help us to sustain this strength and continue to grow? What will help us to continue to live into our covenant?

For those of you who were here in the hard times, I wonder if it's time for another healing step. I wonder if it's time for deeper healing. Is it time for some open conversations about what happened, what hurt, what you regret doing or

not doing? I think it might be time. It might be time to let newer members know what happened and to let them know how all that pain led to growth, led to change and led to a stronger community. Secrets harm communities. Perhaps it's time to share our understandings of that history and find ways to let go of more hurt, regret and sorrow. What do you think? Please let me know what you think.

I close with a few more words from Jean Vanier:

Communities are truly communities when they are open to others, when they remain vulnerable and humble; when the members are growing in love, in compassion and in humility.^x

May it be so. May we continue to grow in love, in compassion and in humility together. We return to ourselves, to the home of our souls.

Amen. Ashe. Blessed Be.

ⁱ <http://www.larcheusa.org/who-we-are/identity-and-mission>

ⁱⁱ Muir, Fredric John. *Heretic's Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals*. Annapolis, MD: Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, 2001, p193.

ⁱⁱⁱ Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1982, p. 27.

^{iv} Vanier, Jean. *Community and Growth, Revised Edition*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989, p.8.

^v Vanier, Jean. *Community and Growth, Revised Edition*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989, p.17.

^{vi} Vanier, Jean. *Community and Growth, Revised Edition*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989, p.19.

^{vii} Vanier, Jean. *Community and Growth, Revised Edition*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989, p.25.

^{viii} Vanier, Jean. *Community and Growth, Revised Edition*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989, p.27

^{ix} Vanier, Jean. *Community and Growth, Revised Edition*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989, pp. 37-38.

^x Vanier, Jean. *Community and Growth, Revised Edition*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989, p.19.