

The 2000-01 Minns Lectures

**The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church:
The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant**

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Lecture 4: The Theology and Anthropology of Our Liberal Covenant

Love is the doctrine of this church. . .

Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.

These familiar lines are the theme of this year's six Minns lectures. I thank you for coming to hear this afternoon's Lecture 4 on the theology and anthropology of our liberal covenant. Our understanding of the way things are, and should be and could be with us human beings: That is our anthropology. Our understanding of what is holy, most precious, most salutary, most worthy of our devotion and faithfulness: That is our theology. The two subjects are inseparable. Each always reflects and implies the other. Everybody is a theologian and an anthropologist - to the extent that all of us have to try to make some sense of ourselves and the world, as a condition of sanity. I have been trying, in this Minns Lectureship series, to get us to see our liberal doctrine of the church as having been **shaped by events** of our history, for which we need a **critical appreciation** in order to understand who we are as a religious people. I will continue that effort later in this presentation. But I want to come at the topics of the day by talking about language.

An amazing thing happens when we human beings communicate, using words, on the most **ordinary** of occasions. Certainly, miscommunication is frequent, among any people. But that fact is easier to explain than that we ever communicate - or transfer meaning - at all, which we do, with astonishing precision, every day! We do so, even though **the meanings of our words change**, all the time, and at greatly varying rates.

Often, **old** words come to carry **new** meanings, right along with ancient meanings, **without confusion** and **very** quickly. For example, think of the new meanings **and** the much older meanings now carried by these words: enter, touch, send, return, save, scroll, click, icon, mouse, bite, memory, dot, window, web. Somehow, we are able **easily** to distinguish the new meanings from the old, according to the context of usage.

Not long ago, recently, a few computer geeks assigned **new** meanings to all these **old** words. And, a few years later, tens of millions of us have so integrated these new meanings that we can use them metaphorically. You could dash off a note, to a friend you haven't seen in years, and tack onto the end this sentence, "When I think of you, I click on save."

Just 10 or 15 year ago your friend might well have received that sentence as gibberish. But now he or she would **not** write back to ask, "What do you mean - you 'click on save' when you think of me?"

If he or she did ask, an explanation would go something like this: “I love you, faraway Friend, and I will love you in future, so much do I treasure memories of you from our past. But these days, if I said so straight out, I would sound too mushy, goopy. So, I will use the working of a computer as a **metaphor**, for my mind and heart. Computers, of course, are high speed, electronic machines, without mind or heart, so far as we know. But the way a human mind works is **somewhat like** the way a computer works. And, **for metaphorical purposes**, we can **bracket - or set aside** - the computer’s **unlikeness** to a human being. I **focus on** a certain likeness, and I **represent** a human being as working like a computer. I say, ‘When I think of you, I click on save.’ And you will correctly interpret my words as **pointing to** two realities, 1) my abiding affection for you, and 2) our shared understanding that a light-hearted tone is right for our time. Of course, **neither** affection **nor** the right tone of a message is **at all like** a computer. Still, you get my point: I am glad that you - though a long way off - are part of who I am.”

We use metaphors in our speech many, many times every day. Their effectiveness comes of our human ability to **compare things**, to **see how they are alike and** - for the purposes of communication - to **suppress** their **unlikeness** and **focus on a certain likeness**. Thus we communicate meaning in one area of our lives, with reference to another.

Isn’t this marvelous? A 10-year-old who never heard of metaphors and has never once thought about how they work, a child in our time could send - to a buddy his own age or to his grandmama - a note saying, “When I think of you, I click on save.” Yet **only if** the **new meanings**, of a whole cluster of words, **can be distinguished from old meanings in a nano second** by tens of millions of others in the same culture, according to the context of usage.

In a real sense, then, even a private note, sent and received, is **not just** a private transfer of meaning between two people. Rather, it is one communication made possible by these two individuals’ participation in each other’s lives and by their participation in a **third** reality, a vast and **dynamic network of meaning**, in which all of us, who live in the same world and speak the same language, live and move and have our being. Though we may seldom - or never - think of this vast and dynamic network of meaning, we are utterly dependent on it, all the time, for the expression or understanding of any meaning at all. We can **distinguish** a private note **within** this third reality, so far exceeding ourselves. We cannot **separate** a private note from its **much larger** context . The private note could not **be** except that it is **part of** the other. The private note is **not** a separate **or separable** thing of itself.

I ask you to focus on this third reality, this network of meanings. **There are prevailing patterns in it**. These patterns are interactive with us; that is, with our

usage the patterns are modified over time. But, though they change, there **are, always**, patterns. With reference to language, we call these the rules of grammar. We try to teach these rules to children in school. But the fact is, toddlers learn them without instruction. Two-year old Susie says, “I want a cookie,” not, “Cookie a want I.” Even toddlers know that to communicate using words, we **must act in accord with prevailing patterns of the network**, its rules. We cannot arbitrarily scramble our words. You could not **meaningfully** write to your friend, “Save click think you, on when I of I.” Our freedom of speech is conditioned. Our freedom stands under judgment. To communicate creatively and freely, we must act **in accord with patterns of meaning** we did not make, **or else** ruin the possibility of free speech.

Right there we have an illustration of the great paradox of covenantal anthropology and theology: **Authentic human freedom is by necessity lawful freedom**. Moreover, the patterns or laws or rules of the network are **not rightly** understood if they are seen as there to restrain or inhibit or control us, although we **will be barred** from participating in meaning if we disregard them. Rather, these patterns make meaning possible. We **rightly** see ourselves as wonderfully **gifted** with discernment, gifted in that we can **perceive** these patterns and **learn more** of them **and be still more creatively free within them**.

I hope you see that I am now pointing to an analogy, a likeness: The patterns of meaning which make language possible are analogous to other natural laws. Though the universe within which we dwell is dynamic, not static, it is lawful. That is, there are consequences of obeying and of breaking natural laws; the universe is responsive to human beings, in that at least some the patterns vital to us as human beings change over time, in response to our usage, but there **are, always**, patterns we cannot flout without loss of meaningful life. That is a theological statement.

I am also lifting up certain features of an anthropology, a notion of what it means to be human. Namely, as a race or species of creatures, **we are both limited, or governed, by an authority greater than our own, and free**. We are supported by and gifted by the way things are, and we are obliged to be responsible for what we do with our gifts in our freedom. We **can be** appreciative and obedient, creative and constructive, and if we are, these actions will have consequences. And we **can be** willfully or mistakenly disobedient and destructive and mess up our own freedom; if we do these actions will have consequences.

Because, then, **authentic human freedom is** of necessity, **lawful freedom**, and because we receive the possibility of freedom as a **gift of the way things are**, an authentic covenant is: a **glad** promise to live freely together, insofar as we are able, in accordance with the laws of reality that make our freedom possible. This is true whether the agreement is between just two, as in a union of marriage, or

whether the agreement is among millions, as in a free nation, or whether the agreement is among members who gather to be a free congregation. Any authentic covenant will be based on a mutually shared understanding of the patterns or laws of a **third reality**. The third reality of a covenant is, not just of the network of a language, but the whole of being. Using a metaphor taken from the realm of ecology, we UUs have recently taken to calling this third reality “the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.” God is a shorter name for that reality greater than all, yet present in each.

A little more about language. “When I think of you, I click on save.” I have spoken of three realities of this one little sentence, 1) abiding affection, 2) a light-hearted tone and 3) a vast web of meaning, patterned yet also ever changing, a dynamic network of meanings. I trust no one would say, “But those are **not** realities.” Because, of course, they **are**. They are self-evident realities of our experience, part of our everyday lives, though they are **measureless** realities. We cannot locate the edges, the limits, of these things. That is, we cannot **define** them, as we can a house or a tree or a mountain or a computer. We can only speak of a **measureless** reality by comparing it with some limited, **measurable** reality. That is what we do when we use metaphors.

One example: Consider the word base. We speak of the **base** of a house or a tree or a mountain. We speak of the **basic** binary mathematics of a computer. We are talking about measurable things. But suppose your sister is puzzled by a friend of yours and by the fact that you have begun going, often, to her church. And so she says to you, “What is the **basis** of your affection for this person? I find her **basically** calculating, cold as a computer. And that religion of hers - what is it **based** on?”

I trust you hear the metaphor in these questions. Does affection or a religion **rest its weight on a base**, as a house or a tree or a mountain does? No. Affection and religion don’t have **weight**, except metaphorically, in comparison with some measurable thing. Nor is human temperament a function of a mathematical design, except metaphorically, in comparison with a machine. Yet a metaphor is effective **so long as we focus on the likeness** of measurable and measureless realities **and bracket - set aside - their unlikeness**. On the other hand, though a metaphor may have worked well for many, many people for a very long time, it will break down and be useless to us once we **focus on the unlikeness** of things we are comparing.

Let’s look at one example of a broken religious metaphor. Recently, some UU ministers were having a conversation. One got to talking, whose UU church is in a predominantly Lutheran part of the country. As you may know, most Lutherans address their minister as **Pastor** Luopa, or Pastor Morgan, or just Pastor. This UU minister was saying how awkward she feels when folks out in the larger community - even people who aren’t Lutheran, Catholics - address her as **Pastor**

Jones. She doesn't want to correct them. That would seem nit-picky and make them feel awkward. Still, she feels funny - phony - letting people call her that when our UU members never would.

Other ministers tried to ease her discomfort. They said things like, "But we talk about the **pastoral** side of ministry. All our students for the ministry have to do CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education. When we have to be away, we ask a colleague to be on call for emergency pastoral care and so on. So, don't worry about it."

But another minister said, "**I hate** the word pastor. *Pastor* is Latin for shepherd. People in UU churches are **not sheep**. I never let anybody call me that."

I thought, O dear! Why is this good man so prickly about a word? I'm pretty sure Lutherans don't think of people in their churches as **sheep**. But in **their** anthropology, Lutherans have historically focused attention on the common need, of all human beings **and other creatures**, for **loving** care. When Lutherans call their ministers Pastor, that's the **likeness** to many living things they're focused on. Lutheran pastors are leaders of groups of people for whom loving and caring are **very** important. We in our tradition have historically focused more on the need of human beings for independent thinking. When humans can't think with a measure of independence, we act like sheep and can be herded about. It's not that we want our ministers to be unloving or uncaring! But in our anthropology, we focus on the **unlikeness** of people and sheep, herd animals. So the metaphor of the minister as shepherd, or God as shepherd, has broken down for us. We can't use that metaphor, or if we do, we're restive with it. It doesn't feel right. The tone is wrong.

Well, my attention had wandered. I was not - sheeplike - following the conversation, but thinking my own independent thoughts. But a bit later the same minister, who had declared so strongly that UUs are not sheep, was again speaking. He was recommending, for reading in a worship service, a favorite poem of his titled, "Be Like a Duck."

I thought, Gee! This colleague thinks it's bad to be like a sheep, but good to be like a duck. I'd better listen. He read us the poem. It was about a duck gliding along on a placid lake on a beautiful day. I would say the message of the poem was something like this: We can **trust** the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, even though, sometimes, all about us is trouble and confusion. At the core of our being, we can be, religiously, in spirit, not fearful and distressed, but like a duck gliding along on a placid lake on a beautiful day.

Hm, I thought. The message of that poem is very like another. "The Lord is my shepherd. . . He leadeth me beside the still waters. . . Yea, though I walk

through the valley of the shadow of death, . . . thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

The **aim** of valid religious, metaphorical language - though it be of shepherds and sheep or lakes and ducks - is to communicate the meaning of measureless realities which, though they be measureless, are very important, **everyday realities** of our lives.

Traditional Covenant Language: To What Everyday Realities Did It Point?

The word covenant has come to us by means of the Bible. The covenant is a metaphor taken first in our cultural history, not from the phenomena of language, but from the realm of politics. In the very ancient Near East, politics seldom rose above the level of a protection racket. Various war lords, or just gang leaders, having acquired a following of tough guys and some weapons, made their living by raiding defenseless farmers and herders, stealing their crops and animals. In an agricultural economy such raids, especially repeated raids, meant a very hard life indeed for many people.

Eventually, a war lord might come along, strong enough to call himself a king. This king and his army would round up the smaller gangs and do them in, or bring them into his army and discipline them. No more freelance raiding. Then the king would call together all the heads of families and clans of the region he had pacified, and say something like this:

“My name is Great So-and-So, king of your world. With my great power I have put down your enemies. Thanks to me, you may now live and prosper in peace, on certain conditions. You will send me an annual tribute. Whenever I require your service in my army, you will send at once the number of men I call for. And you will sign a covenant, promising to keep faith with me, your king. Moreover, just so nobody forgets, you will store this writing in a sacred place, and you will come together like this, annually, and read it aloud to the whole population, so that everybody will know: You are my people; I am your king. You keep your word; I’ll keep mine, and things will go well with you. Break your covenant with me, and I promise I will make you very, very sorry.”

That way of keeping down raiding gang leaders and war lords became the traditional way kings established their realms and kept order throughout the region. A scholar, George Mendenhall, in the 20th century CE, found such covenants all over the ancient Near East. Sometimes, perhaps, this was a good enough arrangement, if the king and his generals did not get too greedy. But, as the history of the world amply demonstrates to this present day, where peace and prosperity, for the vast majority of the people, depend on the **moderate** desires of human kings and generals for wealth and power, the people can depend on nothing but oppression and misery. When those on top get greedy and build for themselves

splendid palaces - while the people live in hovels - and get addicted to ever more power than they need to keep order, the shape of a monstrous pyramid is the shape of the entire social structure. It weighs very heavily on, crushes, the freedom of the masses at the bottom.

At some point in time - at what point is for anthropologists and historians to argue - some genius, somebody who had seen much of how kings and generals generally operate, came up with a new metaphor taken from the protection-racket model of politics. This metaphor is based on an **unlikeness**: The King of the Universe is **not like** these human kings.

“The Ruler of the realm of all nature is generous, not greedy. He makes the grass and the fruits of the earth to grow, the rains to fall and the sun to shine for all the creatures of the earth. Thus he shows his love for all the world. How can we not love God in return! Moreover, our Creator causes us human beings to love one another and our land and animals, as he loves us. We do not need these human kings. We can enter into a political and **religious** covenant with each other and with God the King of the Universe to be ruled by **his holy ways** of love and generosity.

“We must draw everyone into this covenant, even the least and the weakest, even the gang leaders who sometimes rise up among us. For if we have **not** lived by the ways of love, our Creator has made us so that we can change our ways, start over and live by his laws. Our freedom to change is a gift of his forgiveness and mercy. If we freely cooperate, **because we love**, we can protect ourselves against would-be kings and other invaders. We can assemble to fight at the sound of the shofar. But when we have done what we have to do to protect ourselves, we will return to our homes and lay down our weapons. Let the nations around us fight and rage. We will not. We will live every one under his vine and fig tree and keep covenant with one another and with our God, King of the Universe. **All he requires of us - blessed be he - is that we love him and love our neighbors as ourselves, and keep the natural, common sense laws of a peaceful community because we love.**”

Who was the genius who invented this covenantal metaphor? Assigned new meaning to the old words, king and covenant? Was it Noah? Or Abraham? Or Moses? It doesn't matter. What matters is that **the idea of a freely entered covenant - with the very nature of loving and lawful reality - became the root idea of the political religion of a people, the ancient Israelites**. The Israelites told each other and wrote down stories about their political and religious covenant and their attempts -and their failures -to keep covenant with each other and with God. They created a literature which nourished their memories and their hopes. They fed their dedication, to **a loving and freely cooperative way of life**, with stories of their great King of the Universe and his care for them, as well as the

wrath of his anger when they broke their covenant with him, by doing wrong to one another. Our modern understanding of political democracy evolved from our ancestors' engagement with and adaptations of Israelite stories. American democracy was born when members of our own oldest churches in New England focused their attention on the oldest stories in the Bible and said, "We don't need a human king either. We, too, can be free to live in covenantal fealty, in faithful love, to each other and to God."

The most ancient Israelites were a rural people and, probably in the earliest days, a polyglot people of many races. For their small country was at the crossroads of great surrounding empires. They did not themselves long do without a human king, maybe a few centuries. Then they had the same kind of problems too much power in the hands of too few always brings. Yet again and again, there also rose up preachers - prophets, in Hebrew *nabi* - to speak hard truth to power. The prophets said, over and over again, "**The ways of greed and coercion are in violation of God's patterns. These ways will not work. If you think they will, you are deceived. They will suck you and the land with you into ruin. Turn to the ways of love and justice for the oppressed. For these ways are the ways of the King of the Universe, whose laws are loving and just because he is loving and just, and he demands that we be like him in all our ways.**"

Ancient Israel broke into two kingdoms, northern Israel and southern Judah, when their third king, Solomon's son, tried to assume the throne. Eventually, the northern kingdom was defeated and the people exiled by a neighboring empire in the eighth century BCE. Judah was also defeated and the people exiled to Babylon in the sixth century BCE. When Babylonia was defeated, the Persian king Cyrus allowed the exiles to go home. Cyrus is spoken of in our English translation of the Old Testament as God's anointed one. The Greek word for anointed one is *christos*, the Hebrew *messiah*.

But ancient Israel was never again a self-governing country, except for one brief period, before the Romans took over. Israel was ruled by the satraps of great empires. Yet this most political of religions lived on into Roman times, even when there were more Jews in the great cities of Egypt, Persia, Greece and Rome than there were in Palestine. In Roman times, another prophet began to preach and teach, Jesus of Nazareth. The books of the New Testament tell of his life and the lives of some of those who learned from him, his disciples. Testament is a synonym for covenant. The New Testament tells stories of Mediterranean people, ruled by Rome, who entered a new covenant, **not as a nation, but as individuals of many nations, in the covenant of free congregations.**

What was new about this new covenant? The meanings of words change, all the time, at varying rates, as old metaphors are broken and new ones are invented. So I shall try to say what was new about the covenant of the earliest Christian

churches, using other words than those we associate with orthodox Judaism or Christianity. **Freedom to use new words to transfer old meaning is part of the authentic and lawful freedom of a liberal.**

Jesus thought like a sociologist and a linguist. That is to say, he understood that the metaphor of the covenant with the King of the Universe had become hopelessly confused with the language of coercive governments. His people were now thinking of the King of the Universe as **more like than unlike** human kings.

So, Jesus basically said, “Look, you are obsessed with Caesar and his power. Bracket Caesar. Set Caesar aside. Sure the government controls much of your life, far too much. But no human ruler, not even the Roman Emperor, can control all life. You want to know what is holy? What we can count on? What we ought to be most faithful to? How we ought to shape our own lives, insofar as we can? Look at the flowers of the field and the birds of the air. Look at how seeds sprout and grow. Focus on these things. Appreciate and be grateful for the generous ways of God the Father (rather than the King of the Universe).

“Above all look at ordinary, everyday human love, of parents for their children and children for their parents. And look inside your own heart at your ability to change, to go from treating others as crassly and meanly as Caesar treats you, to the more normal, healthy ways of a loving spirit.”

And Jesus and his disciples spoke politically; that is, with regard for organization. They said, “Lord knows, it is not always easy to figure out what **are** the ways of love! But even in this empire, we can form covenanted congregations we decide to enter, one by one, and **help each other** live in a context far larger than the puny Roman Empire which - however strong it looks - will fade sooner or later, as all empires do. Caesar will not like us forming congregations and meeting to worship and to help one another discern what is love requires of us. He will hound us and persecute us for presuming to claim our ultimate loyalty is to something bigger and more important than he is. But, unless we **let** him intimidate us, he **cannot** stop anything like all of us from organizing to worship and to learn to **live freely** in accord with **the laws of love.**”

What would Jesus’ message sound like if addressed to our time? I think, something like this: “Look, I know some of you think all the power that matters is in the human hands of Wall Street traders, the grossly deceiving advertising industry and the grossly shallow entertainment industry of America. Well, if you are obsessed with **that piece of** the world, if all you do, basically, is go to work, watch television and seek out other entertainment, you might think **that piece of** the world is the **whole** world. It is not. There is a great deal **more** to life than working for huge corporations, finding some ever new distraction or buying ever more things. Be gathered into communities of love. **Find, together**, what is more meaningful, more loving, more worthy of your attention, and **be empowered in**

devotion to these things. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened to you. The truth will make you free.”

Our Contemporary Liberal Covenant

I begin this section by giving utterance to some questions. I put it to you that there is one correct answer to every one of them. The correct answer is **not an explanation** of anything but, rather, a fit, an appropriate **exclamation**. The correct answer to all these questions is: God! I don't know!

How big is the universe in which we are this moment alive?

How long will it last?

Why - not how but - why is there such an event as human life?

Every person we know is more than we will ever know; we never even know all of ourselves. How is it we so often forget that we dwell all our lives in mystery?

Why do human beings need so urgently to love and be loved?

Is love just a human requirement, or is it a feature of the whole universe?

Why is it, even when we human beings have all our bodily needs met, we can become so alienated that we hate our own lives, and are only terribly bored or angry or lonely or frightened, though the world holds much that we could not help loving, if we but noticed and paid attention, let these things speak to us?

Why is it we human beings can come to love things and devote all our energies to gaining access to things patently bad for us, even poison, like drugs or alcohol, or to acquiring far more money than we need, or far more power over others than anybody needs, or status, or fame - when none of these things turn out to be worth what we have to do to get them?

How many events are going on right now which will greatly affect us in future, of which we presently know nothing?

Why is it that we are gifted with such imagination that we can learn of and understand and love realms of reality and other cultures in which we have never set foot, and yet we may also be led by our imagination into delusion and craziness?

How is it that we can sometimes see patterns in the way the world works, and sometimes not? How many times do we wrestle and wrestle with some problem, work and work with the data, and then suddenly, just **see** meaning we **didn't see** earlier? We say, “Why didn't I think of this before?”

Or, we hear somebody else's good idea and we say, “Of course. Why didn't I think of that?”

Or, we are reminded of something very important, which we already knew, and we say, “How on earth could I have forgot this?”

Language itself can serve as a metaphor. It is metaphorically correct to say reality addresses human beings, speaks to us, and summons our love. our

understanding and our humility - when we are open, passive, receptive to what it has to say. Thus the compound meanings of the word *logos* in Greek. The *logos* is the **word** reality has spoken to us; the *logos* is **natural law**; the *logos* is **reason** or **logic** greater than all, yet present in each.

The questions I read are not questions we human beings just make up on our own. Rather, to be human is to be engaged in a ceaseless dialogue, a conversation, not only with each other but with the nature of reality. Reality addresses us, and we respond with questions. Or, as Martin Buber once said, we may have it backwards when we suppose we pose these unanswerable questions. It may be that God always poses the ultimate question, as in the Book of Job. "Where were you when I created the world?" The only correct answer is, "God! I don't know!" And strangely, the rational humility of that answer is not humiliating, but salutary, healing and empowering. When Job is rightly **humbled of heart**, he can get up from the ashes of despair and get on with a blessed life, taking advantage - whatever has gone before - of the new possibilities reality constantly presents to us.

_____ It makes sense to me to believe all the great religious traditions of the world began with somebody's extraordinary insight into **what**, in all this great buzzing banging, blooming and silent mystery, **really matters most for human beings to love, to understand, to trust and be faithful to, because it is life giving and life enhancing**. If anybody wants to call such extraordinary insight revelation, it's all right by me. The question of revelation is: Why should one person or one group ever understand anything and others not? God! I don't know why. But what is truly wonderful about extraordinary insights is this: They can be communicated, shared, taught to others who then see them too, and then whole cultures are generated from them. Our word religion derives from the same root present in the word ligament. Without healthy and importantly true religious insights into the mystery of our lives, we're like Ezekiel's pile of dry and unconnected bones, with no ligaments. A vital religion keeps us tied together, so we can stand up and move and get things done and live, with love and meaning, together, when a healthy cult is the heart of a culture.

All religions must use metaphors to express insights into the nature of reality, metaphors taken from our everyday experience, because there's no other way to express them. Some metaphors may serve very well and last a long time. But all of them are ultimately fragile and subject to erosion and distortion. Hence, the need for reform of the language of every religion, over and over and over.

You and I stand, as Unitarian Universalists, in the long tradition of the covenantal free church. We add the adjective liberal and say ours is a liberal free church, meaning - our everyday world has forced upon us the recognition that no one religious tradition has a monopoly on right love and truth. We infer, from our

encounters with other traditions, that there have been and are people of extraordinary insight, into what really matters for human beings, in every time and clime. Therefore, though the depths of our own tradition are more available to us - through inheritance - and are the depths from which we must live, we want to and we will try to be open to others. We are not exclusivists, claiming our way is the only good way. Yet, we do specially treasure our own religious tradition precisely for its **political relevance**, for its constant reminder to us that **human freedom and human health is a function of how we organize socially, what is the shape of our economic and governmental - and religious - institutions.**

You and I stand, as Unitarian Universalists, in the long tradition of the covenantal free church. We add the adjective humanist and say ours is a humanist tradition - meaning our everyday world has forced upon us the recognition that **valid religious insights, even the most extraordinary, are always rooted in ordinary human experience of concrete events.** To know anything at all about reality in general - or God - we make inferences from our limited experience to great encompassing truths, not the other way around. Therefore, even those insights we claim and stake our lives on are to be stated humbly, not in a doctrinaire fashion, always with the awareness that we might be wrong. **Faith is best understood, not as certainty, but as sufficient confidence and trust in what we have been given and called to do that we can be faithful, together, covenantally.** We can - thank God! - be faithful to what we cannot help believing is true about the way things are with us, and should be and could be, because it makes sense **to us.** And when we break faith and break our covenant we can - thank God! - many and many a time accept opportunity to begin again, begin anew to live faithfully, starting now. For this we cannot help believing: While the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part judges us and frustrates us, not only as individuals but as peoples, when we disregard or violate its laws, it is also gracious, offering us, over and over, new chances for the practice of authentic, creative, lawful and loving, redemptive freedom.

I will try in a few words to state, as simply and straightforwardly as I can, the anthropology and theology of a covenantal, liberal and humanist free church in our time. Can I do so in such a way as to win universal approval among us? Of course not. Even so, I trust that our - my and your - efforts to communicate our understanding of the most important realities of our lives are almost always beneficial - or as our ancestors would have said - good for our mutual edification.

We human beings are promising creatures, in more than one sense. We are born with promise, potential, we do not and cannot create, with the promise of intelligence, of appreciation, of creativity, of cooperation - and most importantly - of love. Our very capacities and capabilities are a gift to us of the way things are.

Therefore, it is appropriate to begin our worship services with songs and prayers of praise and gratitude for all gifts, not made by human hands but by God. Even so, we are and ought to be pretty sparing in our use of the word God. It's a word easily abused, and most authentically used as an **exclamation**, in face of the wonder and splendor and mercy of our lives, even in the hardest of times.

We human beings are promising creatures, too, in the sense that we can only do great and worthy things - indeed we can only survive - when we make and keep promises of loyalty and faithfulness to the ways of love **with others**. For distinct and different as we are as individuals, we are also thoroughly social creatures. The options and choices we have as individuals are effected and affected by those of others; our decisions and actions and inaction effect and affect many others. None of us can fulfill our promise as individuals without the faithfulness and loyalty of many others. Therefore, the aim of our worship services is a renewal of our sense of gratitude for and loyalty to the spirit of love which summons and creates and re-creates right loyalties within us.

What is spirit? There's no saying precisely, because the reality we are talking about is measureless. Best point to our everyday uses of the word and leave it to each to make their own analogy. We talk of a spirit of generosity or a spirit of cooperation. We talk about the *esprit de corps* in a vital army unit or workforce. We talk about a healthy school spirit. We talk about spirited horses. When a friend is ill, we ask the family, "How are his spirits?" We **do** know what we mean by the phrase spirit of mutual love, and that a free church exists wherever we enter into a covenant to live in this spirit, together, gathering regularly for public worship and for seeking truth together, for listening to and responding to each other, that we might teach and be taught. The mutual spirit of love is alone worthy of our greatest, our ultimate loyalty. For when we kill it, life loses its savor and we open ourselves to destructive, deadly evil, unworthy doing.

We human beings are also promise-breaking creatures. We violate our covenants in petty, small ways and in tragic, disastrous ways. Whether we do so out of sheer forgetfulness or poorly ordered priorities or ignorance or for motives we ourselves cannot admire, ill consequences are real for the whole interdependent web. Therefore, our worship services need to include time for reflection on our failures and mistakes, that we might be people of tender conscience, easily provoked to turn again toward the ways of love and do better tomorrow than we have done today. Love is a response to the loveliness, the charm, the good, the worth of an other. To be life-long, passionately religious lovers is to learn and practice the precious disciplines of paying attention and being still, receptive to the lure of that beyond ourselves which awakens love in us. For when we rightly love, we rightly spend ourselves for the sake of the beloved and for the just character of our whole society.

We human beings, especially in a culture so complex as ours, are part of many communities. We need one - our freely covenanted church community - in which our purpose is to be reminded of and to take account of the promising character of human beings in the widest possible sense, that we may answer the **summons, the call** of all that is holy to live with authenticity and integrity and joy and resolve. For responsibility is a response to the way the world presents itself to us when we are paying attention and trying to discern the word it speaks to us, as mediated by and tested for sense in earnest and intentional, social dialogue.

It is certainly possible for people to be in an implicit covenant without saying so. They just gather and act together, freely, in love and for good ends. Recognition of this fact is at the heart of our concept of the church universal, that measureless company of people whose goodness has been and is effective in shaping human history throughout history. Yet it is also very important to distinguish between the church universal and a particular, concrete and local free church, lest our understanding of the free church become an empty abstraction, a fuzzy ideal bearing no relation to the everyday lives of actual people. Our local church covenant needs to be as clear and explicit as we can make it, that we may teach it to our children, as the reasonable explanation they deserve of why we do things as we do in this church, and that we may invite others - as many others as will - to join us in **making and renewing**, again and again, **our promise of loyalty to the ways of love** that matter most in human life, **that we might fulfill our promise**. For the free church covenant is at bottom the covenant a free society requires. The creative freedom of our whole society will endure for just the length of time we together understand and teach and keep our covenant and speak with our own mouths the words of love and truth and freedom the whole world always needs to hear.

An appendix to Lecture 4: One version of our liberal covenant

Though our knowledge is incomplete,
our truth partial and our love uneven,
From our own experience and from
the witness of our faith tradition

We believe

that new light is ever waiting to break
through individual hearts and minds
to illumine the ways of humankind,
that there is mutual strength
in willing cooperation,
and that the bonds of love keep open
the gates of freedom.

Therefore 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
with words and actions
of peace and goodwill.