

We have a tall order in this faith.

If you listen to James Luther Adams as he wrote in our reading today

Our goal is the creation of prophets who preach liberty, justice

And priests, ministers, who offer healing to the world.

Today I hope we can talk

About one way those things happen in our faith

But first, a story. A *KUNG FU* story.

No. Seriously. A Kung Fu story. Everyone likes a story, right?

Some of you may wonder what you have done inviting me here

If I am going to tell Kung Fu stories instead of talk about covenant.

Yet there is some implied agreement between us when I take this pulpit

An implied agreement that what I say up here will be relevant

Meaningful, thought-provoking and maybe if I am so blessed by some spirit

A spirit that “maketh things new” then maybe I could even be uplifting or insightful

Your part of our implied agreement, our implied covenant is that you will listen

With an open mind, attentive presence, and even, for a moment

Suspend any disbelief or suspicion. So friends.

First, a *KUNG FU* story

There is a young man, the middle child in his family.

Not the oldest, so he won't inherit the family business

Nor the youngest, apprenticed to a trade

Certainly not the strongest, working the family farm,

Not the prettiest, destined to marry to increase family prestige

No. This child was like many of us. Average.

Outside the structures of his family. Even dare we say.

Marginalized in his own home.

None of those more privileged people around him

Did it intentionally. They were his family. They loved him.

It was just the way things were. The tables were already in place.

The structures already set. And this child, was just outside them.

Now as he reached adolescence his father gave him the option of going

To study at the monastery in the mountains far away

Father said it was to seek meaning and purpose for his life.

Which is a pretty good thing to say to the marginalized

When they don't really fit into things, and you feel bad about it

"Hey, why don't go over there to that other place and study something"

"It will help you figure out why you don't fit in"

So they sent this youth to the monastery, with his father's letter

Explaining how he would probably fit in better in their youth program over there

The abbot met him at the gates, and showed him around the community

And said to him, “If you come here, you may learn Kung Fu with us”

“Kung Fu that will change you and how you are with people”

“If you can learn it, then it will change your whole world.”

“If not, I will have to send you home.”

Of course our young man was very excited

“When can I begin?”

The abbot replied. “Right now. Come with me.”

And gestured to the stream ahead of them

“All you need to do is get down on this rock here.”

“Like this? Here?”

“Yes, there, close to the stream, like this”

“Yes? Yes?”

“And slap the water with the palm of your hand”

The young man looked at him funny

“Just...hit...the water?”

“Yes. Hit the water” - The abbot seemed totally serious

“How many times?”

“Until I say stop” – Again, the abbot seemed totally serious

So the young man started hitting the water, and the old abbot watched

For a few minutes...and then the abbot turned away and went up the hill

When the young man started to follow, the abbot pointed back at the stream

Hours later, at dusk, another monk came and said the young man could stop

And join them for a silent dinner.

The young man struggled all evening to keep quiet.

He wanted to ask why he had been slapping water all afternoon.

The next morning, the abbot introduced another monk who brought the young man

To the water and said simply "Again"

At the end of that day, another monk came and said he could stop

The next morning...you get the idea...and so it went on and on for days

Until days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months

And every day, all day long, alternating his hands, the young man slapped the water

Finally, at six months, the young man stormed in to see the abbot

"Months and all I have done is slap water. This is useless! I have learned nothing!"

The abbot looked at him sadly and said "You are impertinent. Go home."

When the young man returned to his family, whom he had not seen in months

The father was excited to see him home, clearly transformed so that he would

Probably fit in better somehow, with the rest of the family

Surely in six months, the monks must have taught him something

The family could leverage for more prestige and privilege.

His father prepared a feast, and invited all the neighbors

As they all gathered at the large oak table

Established in the family for generations.

Our young man sat in the center at the place of honor

And though his family feasted in celebration of his achievements

He sat, and fumed, and thought about how awful it was going to be

When they discovered that actually, for months

All he had done was slap some stupid stream, and there was nothing new

He could offer them.

When the time came, and his father rang his glass for attention

And said “Now my son will show us, tell us, what he has brought back to us.”

Everyone turned towards the young man

The pressure building in him, in an outburst

He raised his hand and brought it down on the oak table, like he had

Thousands of times before, over the past months and months

Shouting “I have learned NOTHING!”

As his hand hit the table there was a resounding crack. The ancient, sturdy oak

Inches thick, split in two, the table cracked all the way across the middle,

And everything on the table, with a resounding crash, fell into the break in the center

In the silence that followed, everyone stared in amazement.

His father whispered “You have learned magic. MAGIC.”

The young man stared at his hand, and the next day, he returned to the monastery

To the abbot he said “I am sorry. I understand. Thank you for all you have shown me”

The abbot said “You are welcome. Now you may begin.”

You may be wondering what that story

Has to do with covenant, James Luther Adams

And a free church built upon free conscience

Full of prophets of liberation and ministers of healing.

Nothing at all. I just like the story <pause>

But if that were true, that would be a violation

Of the implied promise we share, wouldn't it?

Theologian Martin Buber famously declared that we human beings

Are the “promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, and promise-renewing” animals

Promising is not just something we do; it defines us as social beings

There are implied promises around us every day, our very social structure

Is built upon implied promises,

Like the one implied when I agreed to preach here today

Implied promises of service, of quality, equality, fairness, relationship, reciprocation

And when those implied promises are kept, things work well for us

When those implied promises are broken we feel let down, even angry.

I call that church free which brings individuals

Into a caring, trusting community, that protects and nourishes

Their integrity and spiritual freedom

While yearning to belong to something universal

And protects against the idolatry of any human claim

To absolute truth or authority.

This *COVENANT* is the charter and responsibility

And joy of worship in the face of death as well as life.

A covenant is a promise. It is a special kind of promise.

Special because it brings groups of us together in a way that is sacred.

The heritage and origin of covenant, is sacred to Unitarian Universalists

It is the backbone on which the governance of our communities is founded

Covenant is the keystone in the arch of our faith.

The practice of Covenant is a way of being with one another

Caring for one another, even when we are different, diverse

Is our Kung Fu. Our Unitarian Universalist Kung Fu.

Do any of you know what the word Kung Fu *actually* means?

The actual translation of Kung Fu is “Hard Work” or “To Work Hard”

In our heritage as a faith,

We have worked hard building intentionally diverse beloved communities

Enjoined together by covenant where we transform members

And through those members, transform the world.

Rev. Alice Blair Wesley, recognized for her writings about covenant, in the forward to the book *Walking Together* writes:

“The center of the free church, the heart of the whole thing, is a promise of fidelity, a covenant, which each member freely makes upon joining. Actually also, each member begins again with, or renews or renegotiates, his or her promise many times in the course of the life of the church, in the privacy of renewed conscience or spiritual growth.”¹

Over and over, each member begins again, renews and renegotiates their promise

Many times during the life of the church, through conscience and spiritual growth.

¹ Walter P Herz et al., *Redeeming Time : Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999). Page 3.

Covenant is more than just a promise. It is a promise we must practice.

<Slapping Gesture>

Over, and over, and over again. Covenant is a practice that demonstrates

Ways in which we value not only our relationships with one another

But how we honor the individual dignity and worth of each member

How we build beloved community on relationship and collaboration

Instead of belief or dogma.

As a community, if you do not yet have an explicit covenant

Then Friends, truly I say there is an implied covenant among you,

One that implies how you want to be with each other

Like the implied covenant when I took the pulpit today

Explicitly stated or implied, the covenant you share IS there.

In the book *Redeeming Time, Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant*

A collection of essays on the practice of covenant

Rev. Alice Blair Wesley goes on to write:

“Our covenant is simply (simply! What a word!) 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, and to support one another in doubt in those times when we can’t find or can’t decide what the relevant truth is”²

² Walter P Herz et al., *Redeeming Time : Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999). Page 4.

We practice covenant,

Even when the practice takes discipline

<Slapping Gesture>

Even when the practice seems to produce little

Whether we feel doubt, fear, or inspiration

Our practice continues

<Slapping Gesture>

Even when it seems small, simple or unimportant.

Such as when we make amends with one another in our communities

Or challenge each other to growth, to deeper respect and awareness

Every small work of caring for each another

Of tending to our diversity while minding our community

Builds upon our practice of covenant, our Kung Fu

Our practice of covenant has been handed down

Through the congregational origin of our faith for hundreds of years.

It was in 1648 when The Cambridge Platform was established

By the Pilgrims who came to the Americas

The Cambridge Platform is the spiritual origin of our practice of covenant

The Pilgrim settlers, wanted to start a church

Yet, having no common doctrine or dogma

History or relationship with one-another

What kind of church to establish?

They felt that the foundation of their church would shape

The freedoms and rights given to people,

Their church had to be free, it had to be based on how they wanted

To BE with each other - rather than on beliefs or doctrine by which

They might exclude one another

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence,

Sustaining and transforming power that is perhaps beyond human hands

That can bind together families and generations

Protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority.

So these Pilgrims turned to their sacred source, the Bible

To help them establish a radically lay-led church

Gathered by mutual consent, not mutual belief

Founded upon and governed by a covenant, a promise

Made between faithful people. About how they wanted to treat each other

Similar to the covenants found in the Bible

Where God promises how he wants to be with his people.

Covenants like God's promise to Abraham in Genesis

“If you follow me then I will make of you a great nation”

Or God's promise to Moses in Exodus

“If you challenge Pharaoh to free the people, I will be with you always”

God's promise to Noah

“I regret hurting you. Never again, will I destroy the world by flood”

Or the promise of the gospels

“If you love one another, care for one another, you will live eternal”

Our pilgrim ancestors, wrote a document about how they wanted to be with one-another

In congregational community - a document that is still the direct foundation

Of how we are with one-another today.

In the introduction to Peter Hughes book *The Cambridge Platform*,

Rev. Alice Blair Wesley writes:

“The Cambridge Platform explains and justifies how congregational churches work. It is heavily footnoted with references to passages from the Scriptures illustrating the understanding that the substance of the congregational way is the same as that of the very first free church, the family of Sarah and Abraham. For the authors of the Platform, free churches are groups of people who have covenanted to “walk together,” as they are called by God to do, in the spirit of mutual love.

People have covenanted to do this over a great stretch of time, they pointed out, first as families, beginning with Sarah and Abraham; then as the nation of ancient Israel, beginning with Moses; and since the time of Jesus and his disciples, as local congregations without reference to nationality. These congregationalists understood the Bible to be mainly about the free and covenanted social practice of love. As they understood church history, the “substance” of a free church has always been the same, the holy spirit of mutual love. (That is why they found the Old Testament as instructive as the New.) The living, gathered bodies of the members are the “matter” of the free church. Its “form,” the covenantal promise, defines the membership, determines its organizational structure, and imbues the church with promise, the potential to be a life-giving organization in the larger world, “a city set upon a hill” that gives light to all.”³

I love it. “A life-giving organization in the larger world”

“A city set upon a hill that gives light to all”

Make no mistake friends, the power of our Kung Fu

Is the transformation of All Believers into prophets of liberty and equality

And the spiritual growth of All Members into ministers of healing

The Cambridge Platform states:

“...real agreement and consent they do express by their constant *practice* of coming together for the public worship of God, and by their religious subjection unto the ordinances of God...not only by word of mouth, but by sacrifice...and also, sometimes, by silent consent, without any writing, or expression of words at all.”

(Cambridge Platform, Chapter IV, Section 4, “Voluntary Agreement, Consent or Covenant”)

³ Peter Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Platform: A Contemporary Reader's Edition* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2008). Kindle Location 111.

<Slapping Gesture>

Constant practice of coming together in “the ways of God”

I recognize that for some of us here, “God” may be a challenging word

So I say to you, consider the historical and cultural context of those words

Translated for us today, those words could just as easily say

“The constant practice of coming together in ways that are sacred gathered by consent,
sacrifice, giving, and caring for one-another...and in hope for the greater world.”

Those who wrote the Cambridge Platform used biblical concepts

To express ideas still relevant and meaningful for us

Hundreds of years later.

Make no mistake friends, every time you return to be with each other

After heated debate about belief, about right and wrong

Each time that you return to make amends with one-another

For the sake of your community

<Slapping Gesture>

When you challenge one-another to deeper kindness

Stronger tolerance, richer welcoming.

When you draw strength from one-another

To speak up for justice

When you welcome the stranger, partner with the other

Minister to the sick or the suffering

You are practicing the Kung Fu of covenant

<Slapping Gesture>

Recognize then that when seated at that table in the greater world

A world where people kill each other

Because they believe differently.

Where people take their own lives

Because they cannot find anyone to accept them as they are.

Recognize that your work, your practice, your Kung Fu

<slapping gesture>

Has taught you ways of being with each other

Ways by which you can call one another to your better selves

Your practice has deepened your awareness and sensitivity to others

Built up your kindness, curiosity and welcoming souls

That practice of covenant has taught you again, and again how

You can be a “promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise restoring” people

It has transformed you into prophets of liberty

And ministers of healing.

Truly I say to you, that Kung Fu practice of covenant

Has the power to splinter and shatter structures of inequity

As strong and established as that oaken table.

Split in two in the story of our marginalized youth

Just think about that for a minute.

What would the world look like? If all people knew this practice?

If *ALL BELIEVERS* were prophets of liberty and ministers of healing

<Slapping Gesture>

IMAGINE

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