

“And to Help One Another”
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This morning we bring to conclusion the four-part series on “Our Great Covenant” – those four promises that we make to one another each week as part of our unison affirmation. Last week, in the midst of the High Holy Days of Judaism, I talked about the Jewish concept of *lashon hara*, “the evil tongue,” and the ways we all fall short when it comes to our habits of speech. I spoke of what I think it means, “to speak the truth in love.”

Tomorrow at sunset, the Jewish festival of Sukkot begins, and it will last for seven days until nightfall on the following Monday. During Sukkot, observant Jews will celebrate by eating their meals outside in temporary dwellings, each called a sukkah, which they will have built in their yards or courtyards or on their porches. Each sukkah will be made, most likely, of wood or of canvas and covered with branches that are meant to provide shade from the sun, but which must be spread thinly enough that those within the sukkah can still see the stars at night.

These sukkot – and the commandment to dwell in them for a week – are intended to serve as reminders of the fragility of all of our lives. We are such small inhabitants of such a massive universe. Nothing in our lives is permanent. In the flash of an eye, it can all disappear. We are at the mercy of forces that we don’t always acknowledge let alone entirely understand. We are vulnerable.

Well, this fall we haven’t needed Sukkot to remind us of our vulnerability, have we? The economic and financial news of recent days has been enough of a reminder that we all live in real and metaphorical houses built on foundations that are less than solid. The Dow Jones average down 18% for the week as of the closing bell on Friday, never before having had a week that bad in 133 years; banks hoarding money; credit drying up.

Many of us are caught up in the media frenzy of anxiety and fear. We’re wondering...How will this affect me? How will it affect my family? My parents? My children? If our car should breathe its last breath this winter, will we be able to borrow the money we’ll need to replace it? Will we be able to afford to pay for college for our children? Will we be able to retire? If we’re already retired we may be wondering how the economic downturn will affect our immediate futures. What will happen to the value of our homes? Will we be able to hang on to our jobs or our businesses? Or find other work?

The great 20th theologian Karl Barth once said that we must all do theology – and that preachers must therefore preach – with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. And I think that’s very true – to insure that what we think and what we say is rooted in the reality of the time; to insure that it’s relevant. What I’m doing this morning is a variation of that – preaching with the newspaper in one hand and the fourth promise of our “great covenant” in the other. In the

context of the current economic crisis that is almost certain to affect all of us in some way or another, what does it mean to promise that we will help one another?

In truth, we help each other in ways both small and large every week. We promise to, and we do. Perhaps you've been on the receiving end of a meal or a phone call or a visit when you've been under the weather. Perhaps you've gotten a card from the Caring Committee, or a ride to or from the hospital or a doctor's appointment. Perhaps you've had your walk shoveled in the past, or your leaves raked. All of these things are examples of how we try to help one another on a regular basis.

In addition, we promise on occasion – as we did this very morning – to help to support the families of the children we dedicate. Last week we promised to support the youth who are beginning this year's coming of age program. A few weeks before that, we promised our support to the religious education teachers and youth advisors.

We agree to help out here at church in other ways, too – by ushering, or greeting, or helping with major building projects, or changing light bulbs, or directing the children's choir, or providing hospitality after the worship service, or serving on a committee, or by pledging our financial support to help to keep the church as we know it functioning. We make promises to help one another all the time in a myriad of ways. The opportunities for helping abound.

But it is in times like these, the difficult times, the challenging times, in times of widespread and broadly shared struggle, that we have an opportunity to see what we're really made of when it comes to this promise. It is in times like these when we realize just how much we really do rely – or *could* rely – on this community to make a real, substantial, and meaningful difference in our lives. It is in times like these that many of us realize that we really do need help...and we wonder where we can turn...can we turn to our church?

This past Thursday in his weekly communication to the members and friends of the Sojourners community – a progressive Christian community based in Washington, DC – Jim Wallis reflected on the economic turmoil we're witnessing these days and asked how religious communities should be responding. “What should people of faith be thinking, saying, and doing? What is the responsibility of the churches to their own parishioners, to their communities, to the nation and the world?” He asked:

“What do pastors, lay leaders, activists, and practitioners say about creative opportunities and new solutions that could come out of all of this: like the possibilities of mutual aid, congregational and community credit unions, and new cooperative strategies for solving problems like health care, housing, and even jobs?”

As one of my UU ministerial colleagues pointed out earlier this week, in times such as these we need places for connection and support. To know we're not alone. We need for our churches to offer more and different ways to connect with one another...more opportunities for discussion and small groups for support; more family nights and church outings and other opportunities for inexpensive entertainment, recreation, and connection.

We need to figure out what is most needed in our communities – both in and beyond our churches – and then respond to those needs. Perhaps offering low-cost lunches or dinners for seniors and others living on fixed incomes, low-cost child-care for families with young children, and more opportunities for carpooling, or sharing rides to the grocery store. “I’m heading out to the store to buy a few things, is there anything you need – anything I can pick up to save you an extra trip?” As this colleague says:

“Instead of talking about cutting back: what opportunities are you and your congregation planning to expand to respond creatively and helpfully to the situation?”

I would suggest that we haven’t even begun to imagine all of the ways that we could be fulfilling our promise to help one another. And I would submit that there is no offer of help that is too small. And I would emphasize that it is not the job of the Caring Committee alone to care and to help – nor is it solely the job of the Minister or staff of this or any church. We – all of us – are the church. It is work that belongs to all of us. It is a promise, after all, that each of us makes each week, through which we acknowledge implicitly that we each have a role to play in helping in whatever ways – large or small – that we can.

But whatever you do when you leave here today, for goodness’ sake, please don’t start – or continue - to help one another out of a sense of guilt or obligation! Please don’t think, “Oy. I was tricked into *making* this promise and now I *must* fulfill it. What a burden! What an “ought!” I really wish I’d kept my mouth shut! When are the terms of this contract set to expire?”

Please, whatever you do, don’t try to help one another from that place. Especially during these challenging times when you’re already feeling stretched and burdened and perhaps even anxious and overwhelmed. That’s not going to help anyone at all. It’s only going to make you resent us – the church – and pull away at a time when you need us most and we most need you!

No, we all need to start from a very different place.

I wasn’t sure how to describe that place until earlier this week. I was sorting through some mail, and I came across a newsletter from the UU church in downtown Worcester, where Barbara Merritt has served as senior minister for 25 years. In her column she wrote about a new word she had learned from friends who’d been traveling recently in Cameroon. This word and her description of it were just what I needed to help me explain what I mean here.

The word is “ashia,” and about it Barbara writes:

“You can say it to a stranger, to an old man as he carries a heavy load of wood in a basket up a mountain. You can say it to a young mother trying to round up her children. It is an expression of deep respect. What it means is: “I see your struggle.” “I see the way you are meeting the challenge of the moment.” “I am witness to your stamina and the persistence of your effort.” “Ashia” is not a casual, “Hi, how you doin’?” nor an expression of congratulations or sympathy. It affirms the dignity of all human effort.

She goes on to say that in religious community, “we are witnesses to one another’s challenges and struggles. To the one who is caring for an aging parent, we say, “ashia.” To the teenager who is trying to find their own strength and identity, we say, “ashia.” To those of us struggling with grief or illness, or depression or addiction, we say, “ashia.” Sometimes it is with a smile. Sometimes in prayer. Sometimes in a conversation in coffee hour.”

The practice of “ashia” – and it is something that most of us may need to practice – offers us a whole new way of seeing. It can move us away from focusing on another person’s neediness. It can open our eyes instead to that same person’s strength and courage. It can inspire in us a much-welcomed sense of compassion and diminish our sense of burdensome obligation. And it can, I believe, move us to act out of sense of deep respect for our shared humanity. It can move us, in short, to *want* to help one another...to *become* and to *be* the people that we *want* to be.

May we be so moved. May our eyes be so opened. May we be so inspired.

Ashia.

Amen.

And Blessed be.