Readings:

“The Five Major Ingredients of Covenant”
James Luther Adams, UU Theologian and Social Ethicist (1901-1994)

1. Human beings, individually and collectively, become human by making commitment, by making promise. The human being as such, as Martin Buber says, is the promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creature. The human being is the promise maker, the commitment maker.

2. The covenant is a covenant of being. It is a covenant with the creative, sustaining, commanding judging transforming powers which may be interpreted theistically or non-theistically, humanistically. In a religious covenant the orientation is to something we cannot control but something upon which we depend – even for our freedom. Jonathan Edwards called it, “the covenant of being.”

3. The covenant is for the individual as well as the collective. The individual is brought out of separateness into covenant. We are responsible for individual behavior but also for the character of society.
4. The covenant responsibility is especially directed toward the deprived, whether these be people suffering from neglect and injustice or those who are caught in the system that suppresses them – that suppresses their own self-determination. It is the gap between covenant and system, between ideal and behavior, that creates deprivation and makes it difficult for a top flight executive, for example, to speak out in public regarding his or her dissident convictions.

5. The covenant includes a rule of law, but it is not fundamentally a legal covenant. It depends upon faithfulness, and faithfulness is nerved 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, eros, love. Ultimately the ground of faithfulness is the divine or human love that will not let us go. Here we see the theological basis for accountability, by persons and by the church. This may be the fundamental intellectual agenda for today: a doctrine of the covenant whether it be given that name or not.
“Mending Wall”

by Robert Frost

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."
Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.

From time to time, I have the opportunity to travel to other churches to preach or offer some brief leadership or ceremonial duty. Often, it is the tiniest churches among us--those without ministers--that are particularly eager to welcome a guest minister into their midst for a Sunday. One one such occasion, I preached to them about the value of being present to one’s life, of knowing what it means to have enough, of living more simply and more authentically than our culture urges us to do, ending the sermon with a challenge to take small steps toward that authentic life.

After the service, one woman came up and gushed. “Oh, thank you so much for being here, I really loved your...well, what do you call it? Your talk? Your presentation. I don’t use the word sermon, because, well, you know...and anyway, it doesn’t matter here, does it? It’s so nice to be in a place where I can just believe anything I want and I don’t have to be religious....”

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall--and whatever that something is, it resides happily within the souls of the many misguided
Unitarian Universalists who persist in the belief that this faith has no walls or boundaries, that we believe whatever we want, that we’re not a religion. We are a religious tradition, with both religion and tradition to call our own, and although we are, proudly, without any binding creeds or dogma, we certainly do have a common and shared doctrine.

Creeds and dogma are absolute standards of belief that must be met in order to belong to a particular group. Because they are fixed, they can potentially become calcified and rigid. At their worst, they can be used to exclude, rather than as a living, common center. Creeds are common in many Western religious traditions--even the Scientologists have one.

Doctrine, on the other hand, is not a test of belonging. Doctrine is the essential, core teachings that are not only passed on and taught, but are also lived in concrete ways. We grasp and articulate the doctrine of Unitarian Universalism when we understand and articulate not our shared beliefs, but our shared, mutual loyalties. Our Unitarian Universalist theology, our structures and processes, our faith is rooted here: in covenant. This is not something that I am making up. This is our inheritance--the heart of the tradition of free churches which stretches back into history for thousands of years. It is also our future.
A covenant can be traditionally understood as promises made between two parties in service to a shared, mutual loyalty. Biblically, this often meant that two people would make a covenant before God, or that God would make a covenant with humanity, with Creation as the witness and shared loyalty. Last week, we began the consideration of the pivotal question, whose are we? One approach to determining our shared and ultimate loyalties is by examining our covenants—the ways in which we return again and again to serve and live out those loyalties together.

We become Unitarian Universalists when we join a faith community. Because our tradition is rooted in covenant, it is not possible to truly be a Unitarian Universalist apart from covenant and interdependence. When we choose to join that faith community, we are entering into that covenant. Parts of that covenant may be explicit—they may be written or spoken by the community as open reminders of our shared loyalties. Parts of that covenant may be implicit—not written down anywhere, but understood as part of the community’s culture.

Here at Northwoods, our most explicit covenant is the one that we speak together each week during worship. Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its gift. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to
speak the truth in love and to help one another. This language is also repeated in the letter of agreement between you, the congregation, and me, your minister. The agreement “is to set forth the responsibilities and obligations of the Minister to the Congregation and of the Congregation to the Minister as we seek to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to serve one another and the larger community...The relationship between the Congregation and the minister must be grounded in open communication, mutual trust, good faith, and open and fair process on both sides.”

This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another. These are more than just pretty words, these are promises we make, sometimes break, and call one another back into over and over again. Nestled in these sweeping statements are the implicit covenants of our community--common sense kinds of things that we may not set down in writing, but which we live in spirit to help keep us in right relationship with one another. Dwell together in peace--practice apologies and forgiveness and trust, ask for help with conflict, respect the diversity among us. Speak the truth in love--speak honestly and directly, refrain from gossip and triangulation and judgment, speak harder truths with compassion. Help one another--be open and generous of spirit, begin by assuming good
intentions, and should one of us be out of covenant, lovingly help us to recognize our mistakes and begin again in love.

While we are in covenant with one another here at Northwoods, Northwoods is also in covenant with the other churches of the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations. There, too, we have obligations to support and enrich one another, to assist when we can, even to speak difficult truths from time to time and call one another back into relationship. This part of our tradition is weak. We tend to treat our churches as little islands unto themselves. This does not strengthen our faith. It merely isolates us. Being a free church does not mean being an obstinately autonomous and self-sufficient church. Our free church tradition instructs us over and over again that we must be in relationship with one another. Interdependent. Willing to change and be changed by one another. Walking together.

Covenants are the mending walls--the boundaries by which we know direction and purpose, and which help us to know when we have strayed from that. They are not high and impenetrable, to keep people out. They are markers that help bring the landscape--our mutual loyalties and shared ultimate concerns--into clearer, sharper relief.
For many people around the world, the season of Lent has just begun. Lent is a time of reflection and self-assessment, a time to recognize the ways in which we have wilfully turned away from the ways we are called, from our covenants, from our ultimate accountabilities and loyalties. It’s not a popular observance among religious liberals—all those sackcloth and ashes are just so negative. But Lent is not about inducing guilt, except as a momentary awareness of where change can or must occur. It’s an invitation, instead, to commit ourselves again to the covenants that help us live out our loyalty to profound, unconditional love. It’s a practice that might be difficult—but profoundly beneficial for religious liberals, who do not easily admit error, and who are reluctant to express deep commitment.

James Luther Adams, one of the great religiously liberal theologians of the 20th century, offered this sharp critique in 1940:

"The element of commitment, of change of heart, of decision, so much emphasized in the Gospels, has been neglected by religious liberalism, and that is the prime source of its enfeeblement. We liberals are largely an uncommitted and therefore a self-frustrating people. Our first task, then, is to restore to liberalism its own dynamic and its prophetic genius. We need conversion in ourselves. Only by some such revolution can we be seized by a
prophetic power that will enable us to proclaim both the judgment and the love of God. Only by some such conversion can we be possessed by a love that will not let us go."

We are a promise-making, promise-breaking creature. Our covenants assure us that we need not stop where they are broken; we can renew our promises, and once again set our faces toward purpose and meaning, toward love and truth. By our covenants, we return again and again to what is whole and holy, and walk together toward that vision. May we call each other, and allow ourselves to be called, into these covenants we choose by joining this faith; into interdependence upheld by that love that will not let us go.

**Benediction:**

“Choose” by Carl Sandburg

THE single clenched fist lifted and ready,
Or the open asking hand held out and waiting.

Choose:

For we meet by one or the other.