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START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:05] Speaker1

Thank you, Harry and Andy and Chris. Make this a little lower. So when I was in high school, I was in the marching band. Was anybody else in the room here today in the marching band, in high school? Oh, Chris, Chris, our drummer. That's it. Chris, you and I are the only cool people in this room. I'm sorry. I know. And Carl, from the other room, the drummers are high fiving. For those of you who are for all of you who are watching us online, joining us online. So in marching band, we were so cool that we had these pants. You remember the pants, Chris? 100 percent polyester up to here suspenders, right? They were ridiculous. I have no idea why these pants were necessary, but they had hemmed cuffs at the bottom of the pant leg, which was really important because in marching band, you're moving around a lot, right? Obviously, your hands are busy with your drums or your clarinet, so you need those god awful pants to stay up and fall reliably at your ankles so as not to trip all over yourself. Well, you march all over the field. Well, one day I don't remember which year some year in high school. My friend Brendan showed up one night for a football game and the hem had fallen out of his left pant leg and Brendan played the tuba in marching band. So like, if he fell over, he wasn't going to make it right. It was not going to be OK.

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And these pants were just pooling around his left shoe, and we had no idea how to help him. We were a bunch of high schoolers sitting around a public school band room, right? Nobody had a sewing kit. Nobody had safety pins. But what we did have in the band teacher's office was a stapler. So while Brendan stood very still, I can still remember my friend Kate, and I got down on the floor and we passed the stapler back and forth, circling around the bottom of his pant leg, stapling the fabric back together to create something approaching a hem in his pants. Let us know all of you joining us from home in the chat, actually. Maybe you have something like this in your house, right? Something that is held together with staples and chewing gum and duct tape and spit. Do you have anything like that at home? Yeah. Maybe it's a pair of sunglasses taped together. Maybe it's an old pair of work boots that's falling apart and you've hit the staple gun on the soul a couple of times. Maybe it's that worn out phone charger with the exposed wires that you should probably throw away and replace. I asked a few of my clergy colleagues this week to send me pictures of things they have at home that are like this, that are falling apart and barely held together. This is my friend McKinley's 1996 suburban. He says it has bald tires, almost no brake pads at this point.

[00:03:18] Speaker1

He says the speedometer doesn't work, which I think is illegal, so we'll forget about that. And he says the driver's side door handle is broken, so you either have to check the weather and leave the window down to open it from the inside. Or, he said, we figured out a way that you can kind of wrench a coat hanger into the latch to get it to pop open or there is this one. This is my colleague, Meghan's baby blanket, or at least what's left of it. Meghan is about my age, and according to her, she said, it's ripped about a thousand times. It's been tied in knots over and over just to keep those threadbare pieces together. And she says, I will admit it smells really terrible to anyone else, but to this day, it's the most comforting thing that she owns. And she keeps it safe. Sometimes she even admits maybe every couple of years when something is happening in my life, that's really hard. She says she will actually get in bed and hold it close to her face. And she instantly feels calm. You know, even when the things that we need. Are falling apart. And it's all messy and tangled up in knots and not at all like what we hoped for. These items, these tangible stories of things. There can be reminders that there are still ways we can find to hold together. And that's what we've been doing.

[00:05:05] Speaker1

Right. All of us in different ways over this past year and a half, is it now 45 years who can tell right families worked out patchy at best solutions, merging their employment schedules with virtual school, finding a way to hold it together? Hospitals and businesses came up with very imperfect plans to triage care and hold it together or keep products moving and orders coming in and hold it together. Here, as you can see, we have worked out temporary solutions for online services. Then had to switch over to a new temporary solution for these live broadcasts, which hopefully will be swapping out again soon for yet another temporary solution for in-person worship with limited attendance. We have found ways to hold things together. The Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron, has a wonderful book called *When Things Fall Apart*, and I think there's a reason it's a number one bestseller. It's the number one bestseller in Tibetan Buddhism on Amazon, at least. The reason is right, because when we plan, God laughs. It's pretty annoying of God. To laugh at our plans. We get attached to them. And it's not just the little things that we planned for, right, we make important plans that are close to our hearts. And when they don't work out, we end up heartbroken and angry and deeply disappointed. And yes, of course, we know on some level up here that we are not in control. We cannot make sure that things will happen, but that does not make it easier in here.

[00:07:12] Speaker1

How especially now. With all of these fallen apart plans and all of these unplanned circumstances, the question I am asking myself all the time and maybe you are too, is how do we find the energy? To keep going. The verve and the spirit that we need. To find a way to hem the pants or not, the baby blanket. Especially when staples and knots or all that we have. That is what we will be spending time myself. Reverend Ken and our new intern, Beth Monoline preaching about this month and next month, sure, by the end of next month, we'll have it all figured out, right? But that is what is closest to my heart right now. Because when God laughs at our plans, we need some way to find that energy and hope to make something new out of what's left behind. And it turns out at least the answer that we are going to be exploring this fall is that one of the most satisfying and meaningful ways to deal with that thing that happens when God laughs at our plans. It's not about trying to hold those perfect plans together at all costs. It's about holding each other. It's about holding our connections, even when the plan has gone to crap. We can hold together with each other. And the last message that I preached this summer from my apartment, I quoted a line from the Irish poet William Butler Yeats Yeats was writing in 1889 over a century ago, and he was just 24 years old when he wrote this line early in his career.

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It was the lead up in Ireland to the Irish revolution. It was difficult times the influenza pandemic was soon to come. World War One. And in those times, he said, with us now, nothing has time to gather meaning. Nothing has time to gather meaning, and too many things are occurring for even a big heart to hold. Hmm. I talked in that last message about how that feels like it could have been written yesterday, right? With us today. It can feel like nothing has time to gather meaning. Oh my gosh, how do you feel when you scroll through social media, right? And it's one story after another? No time to gather meaning. And certainly, I could say that too many things are occurring for even a big heart to hold. And in that message, I talked about how there is a larger sense of love. A bigger, divine heart. When our hearts do not feel that we can hold it, we can tap into that heart of God, that larger love that can hold all things. But it turns out I'm grateful for other voices because my colleague, the Reverend Molly Hall, scored and a friend of mine who I quote often in my sermons because she's good. She's a youth minister in Missouri. It turns out she used that same quote.

[00:11:07] Speaker1

In a recent sermon. And she actually took it in a different direction. She said when too much is occurring like it is now for even a big heart to hold. Well, maybe we should let it go. And maybe it's time to hold each other instead. You know, our promise to each other as members of this faith tradition as Unitarian Universalist, the promise we make is essentially to hold together. To not leave anyone out of our circle. We covenant I'm quoting the UU bylaws here, believe it or not, we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The inherent belovedness. Of each person. When things fall apart, we promise. To stick together and help each other up. And that word covenant is specific. We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Covenant is important to our tradition, and it's in there for a reason because it's not a simple promise that you and I make to each other, person to person. It goes beyond that, actually, when you throw that word covenant in there because a covenant has a third party. A covenant is a promise we make between us, but that is grounded or rooted in something greater than just the two people making it. I'll give you an example, right, you might have heard that word covenant in legal terms, right? A legal covenant, a secular kind of covenant might be grounded in this idea of the law.

[00:13:09] Speaker1

That's the third party in that agreement. So if two people make a legal covenant, the law is the holding container for that agreement, and the law also now has an interest in that promise, just as much as the two people making it. And importantly, for those two people, they know that they didn't just make a promise to each other, they made it before the law. Now I'm picturing like an old West sheriff. The law, right? You can see maybe how covenant then is different right than a simple promise and how it helps hold people together in a different way. I just gave you a secular example with the law, but the other place we tend to talk about covenants is in sacred places, spiritual communities. Many people understand their marriage relationships to be covenants. For many people, the third party in their marriage is God. Or maybe a higher power of a different name, or perhaps the third party is that larger community that gathers as witnesses to the marriage, the family and the friends who commit to being the container that holds the couple as they find their way and create family together. Another kind of sacred covenant is the practice of naming godparents. Many families invite godparents into their children's lives, forming a covenant for those godparents that says I will care for your children as if they were my own family. And the third party and those relationships, obviously for many people, is God, but for many people, I know I have friends these days who are not religious, who still name godparents or something like it.

[00:15:08] Speaker1

The third party in those relationships is often simply love. The kind of sacrificial deep love between friends that helps us agree to take on a responsibility as sacred and huge as caring for and nurturing another person's child. So you see a covenant runs deeper. It's stronger even than a promise or a vow because there is some deeply held shared value in covenant that calls us back to it. Even on the days, we wish we could tear up the agreement. Even on the days when the marriage doesn't feel so hot anymore, even on the days when the agreement feels challenging or messy a covenant, add something else into the mix that can hold us together, whether that is God or the law or love. It just has to be something that we trust is so deeply and eternally true that it will draw us back together when humans fall apart, when humans fail or make mistakes or simply encounter or circumstances we didn't plan for. Those covenants help us not at all, to ignore the problems. A covenant is not an excuse to look past something that is harmful at all, but rather it might be the thing that helps you look for a way to fix it or heal it. That helps you search for the stapler in the teacher's band room office or find a way to not the threads of the blanket back together or work out that cockamamie door handle solution that can keep this truck were on writing for a little longer.

[00:17:20] Speaker1

Back about 15 years ago now, I was making two big changes in my life, at the same time I was applying to Divinity School. I was leaving my job in the non-profit world to start the process of becoming a minister. And at the time, I was also newly getting serious in a personal relationship, a romantic relationship. And a lot was happening for me and my minister at the time suggested that I work with someone called a spiritual director. Now you may have never heard that phrase before. Spiritual directors are certified. They're not quite therapists. They're not quite ministers. They're a little bit of a combo of the two in some ways. They work one on one with people who have deep spiritual questions, something they want to investigate over time. Person to person. So my minister recommended, as he does for most people who are planning to go to divinity school or seminary, that I spend some time with a spiritual director clarifying the big spiritual questions that were on my heart. And it turns out, as I was planning to make one big commitment to become a minister and thinking about the possibility that I would make another big commitment with this person, that that was kind of what was on my mind. And the way it showed up in our conversations was that I was really wrestling with the idea of the promises we make in a wedding ceremony.

[00:18:52] Speaker1

When people marry, you see my parents are divorced. Anybody else? And I got a couple of hands. My partner at the time, his parents were divorced. I knew the statistics, what is it now, at least half over half of marriages end in divorce? And I was really struggling with that from the other side because knowing that reality. How would I promise in public before God and the law and all the people I love to make a commitment that might not hold? To say that we would be together forever felt like promising something I couldn't honestly promise. I wrestled with that. And I remember asking my spiritual director who I knew was married had been married for decades. I said, How do all these people stand up there and solemnly swear to be together forever when we know that for at least half of them, it's not going to turn out that way? How did you do it? I put her on the spot, I'm sure. I said, How did you do it? Did you think about that on your wedding day? She said that she had thought about it, maybe not on her wedding day, but she said, I have thought about that a lot in the years since. My spiritual director said that she and her husband had faced as every couple or group or friendship, any two people will face difficult moments.

[00:20:33] Speaker1

That did threaten to sever those promises that they made to stay together. But somewhere along the way, if they made adjustments and duct taped all those inevitable broken pieces back together, she said she realized that at the end of the day, the most important vow they'd made was simply to love each other. And she did feel like she could hold that vow with integrity. No matter what happened. Love was the value that called them back in their covenant. And that meant she said that the core of their partnership was truly loving each other. Truly knowing keeping their communication, I remember this phrase specific, honest and vital, keeping their communication honest and vital so they could know and love one another, even if at some point that knowing and loving meant dissolving the marriage. And paradoxically, she said, I actually think it's not insisting on a specific kind of future, but rather knowing that that love was what our promise was grounded in that's kept us together. Reverend Ken said it in his message last week. Covenants are not about outcomes. Covenants are not about outcomes. Covenants are promises, but they're not promises of what is going to happen because we can't promise that. What they are is promises about presence. Promises about which value we will come back to. When things fall apart. We plan and God laughs. But there are promises that we can trust. When we make those deeply held covenants with one another, those growing evolving promises, we can ground them in something that will never change for us.

[00:23:04] Speaker1

Maybe that's love. Maybe it's trust in the basic goodness of each person. Or simply our belief here that everyone is worthy of a life where they can be beloved. And known and held and care. It's not the same as knowing what's going to happen. But I do think it's satisfying and it's meaningful. I have a little closing story about McKinley's truck. If you want to hear it, actually, I don't know, Jim, can you go back to slides and show us McKinley's truck again, this suburban? You see, after he told me all about how it was falling apart, right? Held together with chewing gum and faulty wiring and that broken speedometer that still makes me nervous hearing him talk about it. Then he told me that when he was in college, he would use that huge vehicle to drive around at night, picking up friends who'd gotten too drunk at parties so they wouldn't get in a car and try to drive so they'd have a safe ride home. He said I developed a bit of a reputation for it, actually, and well. McKinley is the sort of person to not leave anyone behind, so he told people to just start giving out his number to anybody on campus who needed a ride. And at the College of William and Mary in the early 2000s, he ended up spending nearly every weekend night out in that busted up suburban helping busted up people make their way home safe.

[00:24:48] Speaker1

It was such a good idea, in fact, that the student government decided to fund it and hire some drivers and thank God by some functioning vans. And from those barely held together, beginnings grounded in something good. The college created the Safe Ride program in 2009, which is still bringing students home from parties on the weekend, no questions asked. All in one piece today. We can choose to hold together. To hold to what is most true. And as my other wise colleague, Reverend Morley, said, remember when life is too much to hold? Remember that we were never asked to hold all of life. We were only ever asked to hold each other. Amen. And may you live in blessing. I invite you to join me now. WellSpringers, from wherever you are in the spirit of prayer. God of our hearts, own language. Holy presence with us in our lives, no matter how we are doing, no matter what is falling apart. May we remember this morning not only to look out for you, for the light that you bring on a Sunday morning? But also for each other. And for the ways that we might find what we are seeking in the open hands, ready to hold ours all around us. So these prayers, I've spoken out loud and for the prayers that all of us are carrying silently on our hearts this morning. We say amen.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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