



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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THE FIRE OF COMMITMENT

I appreciate the paradox found in the fact that this sermon on commitment was very hard to sit down and write! Oh, I surfed and flirted around with a lot of web sites looking at the issue from various angles. Found lots of interesting stuff. Picked up a little here, a little there. I didn't realize that when you do a Google search on a very broad topic, Google makes suggestions to you about what you might more specifically be seeking. Did I mean, among others, "quotes about commitment", "commitment in the workplace" or "Christian commitment?" It was like Google wanted me to *commit* myself to searching on one thing! Google as life coach! "Come on, man, make a decision!"

Good old topical Google anticipated I might be interested in "relationship commitment", but when it suggested I might mean "commitment phobic *men*," I thought, "My God, Google has *gaydar*?" My home computer doesn't even have a webcam. How could it know? The keyboard figures I'm a little light in the fingers? In any case, I clicked on a link and was offered a "commitment readiness test." The absence of any decorative leather or denim edges on the page, which was vaguely pink and red everywhere, made me suspect I'd been projecting again, but when I saw the domain name, "Queendom: the Land of Tests," I figured this Google creature is pretty savvy. Almost psychic! Still, this part of my search did teach me one thing: Google didn't try to direct me towards "commitment phobic women", so it must be true that only men fear committing and women never do. It's great when Google settles such questions so quickly.

I discovered there's no hard evidence to confirm that members of Generations X and Y are less committed to their work than we Boomers were; you X'ers and Y'ers just value more highly a range of important life commitments. It's not that you aren't committed to anything; you're committed to almost everything and, well, you get a bit tired now and then.

But, after checking out entries on "ontological commitment," "brand commitment," and President Bush's "climate commitment," I realized that if I were ever to hanker down and commit myself to writing, I needed to focus on a single Google search page. Commitment is a huge theme that we as a congregation will return to again and again. Today we'll look at the commitment to membership and participation in our church.

To do that, we have to take awhile to think about what is worth committing to here. I began to address this during the membership ceremony when I said that membership is a commitment to oneself, this church, the community in which we live here on the North Shore, and the wider world.

What is worthy in us that the commitment to membership highlights? In the world we experience today, there's a crazy confusion about making a commitment to oneself. On one side there's what might be thought of as the commitment to rewarding oneself, which can be taken to the level of self-indulgence, especially through consumerism. There's an ordinary kind of consumerism in which it is now normal to live above one's means, carry a huge personal debt, save only small amounts and give away even less; then there's the exorbitant kind.

I heard this week of a couple who went to a restaurant and ordered a \$10,000 bottle of wine! How a bottle of wine gets to be \$10,000 is just one thing about this story. Yes, spending money in a restaurant is putting cash back into the economic system; presumably, the tips on that bottle of wine were around two grand, no doubt a very welcome boon to the restaurant staff. And it's possible that this couple is very philanthropic with what must be a large fortune. But to feel *worthy* of the pleasure of a \$2500 glass of wine is inconceivable to me.

Now I'm no less guilty of unnecessary consumption than anyone else; on a relative scale, it's likely no less self-indulgent of me to spend \$15 on a pound of the most incredible aged cheddar I've ever tasted, a cheese I can't seem to find again – maybe they only open the cave it's in once a decade or something. But at least it took me several days to savour that cheese; it wasn't gone in one evening, let alone a few swallows. The point is that many of us today have the sense that we are worthy of being indulged, usually by ourselves.

In our age it is also easy to find a self-indulgent kind of religiosity. There are so-called Christian 'prosperity gospel' preachers who teach that Jesus was not poor, and that God rewards the righteous with material success and worldly goods. There are fundamentalists who pay lip service to pitying the sinful while sitting smugly safe in the knowledge that they at least are going to heaven; some of them relish the day that the world will be destroyed and they'll get to watch the whole thing.

What I'm coming to is the point that membership in *this* church does help us see what is worthy in us. We Unitarian Universalists, at least if we follow our principles, see ourselves as worthy, dignified and respectable to the same degree as any human being is, but not more so. If you come to this church not in touch with yourself, you will find opportunities for self-examination; if you come to this church in the pain of self-judgment and shame, you will hear that you are as

worthy as any other person; if you come to the church with an air of superiority, you will hear the spiritual truth that no one is less worthy than you.

You are worthy to live an examined life; you are worthy of belonging and growth; you are worthy of love and forgiveness; you are worthy to serve and be heard; and you are worthy to make your own decisions about truth and goodness. Membership here is a commitment to your own worthiness in all its grandeur. The fire of commitment in this sense is that of the torch that is carried through the deep and dark passages of self-discovery.

What in this church is worthy of our commitment? The most obvious answer is the other people who are here. Each of us here is worthy, and that can only be made real by committing ourselves to one another. We create the sense of belonging for each other that we look for ourselves. We encourage for others the growth in wisdom and depth that we seek ourselves. Love and forgiveness are only real when they blossom between people. We show how we value each other by listening to and helping each other, and by respecting those whom we don't fully understand or with whom we disagree. Membership here is a commitment to the worthiness of others in all their grandeur.

When we put these together – our own worthiness in equal part with that of others – we begin to see ourselves in perspective. To put our relationships in balance we practice humility; we are different from each other in our talents, gifts and skills, but we all are imperfect, very *human* beings. Membership here is a commitment to honesty and humility. The fire of commitment in this sense is that of the crucible that burns away the ash and the dross of the self.

What I have just described – the recognition of our own grandeur with our frailty, and the practice of recognizing the worth and dignity of others along with forgiving them for *their* frailty – all of that is what is called 'spirituality'. I learned that from a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk many years ago. Spirituality has little to do with particular spiritual practices or devotion *except that* such actions help lead us to these simple perspectives, attitudes and behaviours. One part of my definition of religion is the literal practice of these simple perspectives, attitudes and behaviours in all aspects of our lives, in other words the *rehearsal* of spirituality. Spirituality doesn't happen while we sit in silent meditation any more than driving happens while we fill the gas tank. Spirituality happens and becomes religious when we put the gas cap back on and actually drive. Membership here is a commitment to this active spirituality, this religious dedication to living our values. The fire of commitment in this sense is that of the engine that empowers motion.

I needn't ask what is worthy in our local community and the wider world of our commitment because I've already answered that. This active spirituality and religious dedication doesn't stop with the people we know; it doesn't stop with the people we recognize as familiar; it doesn't stop with the various communities we are used to living beside and among here on the North Shore; it doesn't stop at the border, nor any of the other borders after that one. In fact, it doesn't even stop at the boundary of humanity.

Our active spirituality and religious dedication doesn't stop until it includes, to borrow a First Nations concept, "all our relations." And with the deepest wisdom of consciousness on one side and the vast knowledge of science on the other, we realize that it doesn't stop at all. No matter our concept of existence; no matter our belief in what can be known; no matter our sense of God or No-God, we are a part of All That Is, and All That Is can be found in every part of us. Membership here is a commitment to the recognition of this fact, and more than that, to governing our whole lives by this fact. The fire of commitment in this sense is that of the sun, of the universal spark and of the furnace that from which all energy, light and growth bursts forth.

The governance of our lives by this impossible standard doesn't come about by signing the book, but that is a decision to start on the path towards this standard. It doesn't come about by coming to worship, but that is a decision to pay attention to the path. It doesn't come about by making a pledge, but that is a decision to sacrifice for the path. It doesn't come about by serving the church, but that is a decision to undertake the path. The governance of our lives by the acceptance of the fact that we are a part of All That Is, and All That Is can be found in every part of us doesn't come about by serving the world, but serving the world *is* the path towards living by this impossible standard.

As Justin, our church President, said during the membership ceremony, becoming a member of this church is quite simple. Being a member is rather harder. Living your life as each member of this church is called to do is a commitment to an impossible standard. Thank goodness we're all in this together stoking the fire.

May this ever be so.