

SERMON ON THE AMOUNTS

Pledge Sunday 2014

One of my members in the Little Rock church was a fundraising consultant for the Unitarian Universalist Association. Dave Rickard was semi-retired, in his 70's and very active in the congregation. Among other things, he ran the Stewardship Committee and frequently the Pledge Drive. Each year he would ask me to offer the Sermon on the Amount, a title I have never before actually used. Dave died last spring and I conducted his service before leaving Little Rock. I offer this sermon in memory and appreciation of Dave Rickard!

After working in churches for more years than I care to count, I know how hard it is to plan budgets. As self-sustaining non-profit organizations with few steady income streams outside of pledges, I know how very much we depend on pledges. We would not continue to exist without your pledges and contributions. In most small to mid-size churches with any professional staff, there are rarely more than a few dollars beyond salaries and facility expenses to distribute among committees, teams, and working groups. Rarely are there any frill expenses and too frequently there are few dollars to send staff or lay leaders to leadership or enrichment trainings.

Once or twice I have heard suggestions that a congregation should save up enough money so that it would be able to really plan a year ahead. I have never served a church that didn't depend on its cash flow to pay the bills and the salaries, nor do I know of any that can really budget even a year ahead. And with only the frequently erratic flow of pledges, church budgets are really little more than guesswork about the money that will be available to pay staff and keep the lights on. Historically, in most churches, there will be a big infusion at the end of the calendar year and payments will drop during the summer months as people go out of town or otherwise go on vacation from work, school, and sometimes life!

Different generations respond differently to pledge campaigns. Younger generations want to know what they are buying with their contributions while older generations will support the institution for what it has meant to them over the years. Newer members of a congregation often give at a lower level than long time members. Many people give on the basis of one aspect of church life: worship or music or religious education or social justice or pastoral care or because they like the current minister or not! Unitarian Universalists tend to be at the low end of the church support spectrum, with few giving more than half a tithe and many giving less than a tenth of a tithe. (A tithe is 10% for those of you not familiar with traditional church language!) Across the board UU giving to congregations averages 1-2% of income, though many individuals give much more. That generally puts us at the very bottom of giving to any religious community. Interestingly, we are usually at the highest educational level of any group and among the more wealthy!

Why should we give to support the work of our congregation? The reasons are many and I will mention a few!

Especially for you long-timers, I encourage you to give generously to support the congregation that has supported you, which has stood up for the values in which you believe, that has truly made a difference in your lives and in this community! Give because it is your duty and responsibility!

For any birth-rite Unitarians, Universalists, or Unitarian Universalists, I encourage you to give to support the congregation that expresses the principles of the tradition into which you were born: freedom, liberty, tolerance, acceptance, and community. Give because of the difference Unitarian Universalism has made in this state, this country, the world, and your life! Give because it is the right thing to do!

If you are new to Unitarian Universalism, give generously because you have found a home here, that you have come home to a place you may not have even known you needed until you found us. Give to make this congregation and Unitarian Universalism more widely known to all who seek a place of

refuge, a place of challenge, a place that welcomes newcomers into community with open arms and loving hearts!

If you are not sure why you are here or why you should give, add up the costs of coffee and entertainment that you are saving by hanging out with us! Support the musicians, the hospitality, the sermons when you like them! Give because you realize that running a church costs money and you are committed to fairness.

If you are doing well financially, give even more generously. We are a good tax deduction, but give to feel good about supporting an institution in which you believe. Be generous knowing that there will be others who cannot give as much!

If you are not doing so well financially, give what you can. If you have a better year later, you can always give more. Don't ever let the lack of money keep you away from the community. You are always welcome here if you share our values and live your belief in our UU Principles. Rarely if ever would a UU congregation ask someone to leave, but never will we turn someone away because they can only give a little.

Did you get the pledge brochure sent out recently? Did you like how the graphics described our connections and hopes? Did you take time to read the things that we are doing as a community? Would you like to Thank Mary Bullard and the Pledge committee and Nichole for their work on the brochure? (applause)

Sometimes we put in pie-charts or other charts and lists of all the things we are hoping or planning to do in the next year, and that can be interesting, something like campaign promises. The thing I would rather promise is that I will do my best to meet your needs as the Minister of First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton, and that I will encourage the staff and lay leaders to also do their best to keep our congregation healthy and welcoming and responsive to the needs of our community.

At the District Ministers' Retreat I attended this past week, at dinner one night, I talked with John Buehrens, former President of the Unitarian Universalist Association who has been serving the Monterrey Congregation as an Interim. John asked me what I was going to do to make the church better. Now, if you know anything about John, you know that he is passionate about Unitarian Universalism and committed to growing our churches and the movement. I first responded by saying that you had been through some tough times as a congregation and that first I was going to continue loving you! Then as John pressed further, I talked about the beauty of our building and some of the limitations of our site and our ages and energy levels. I suggested that I had intended to talk to the board and congregation about creating a strategic planning group sometime in the next year or so to look out into the future and begin thinking about what we might do to strengthen the congregation and Unitarian Universalism.

Somewhere in the conversation, I mentioned that we had just discovered that the historic Organ actually still could be played but that it needed work. I told him it actually belonged to the UUA, but he assured me that several years ago when he was President of the UUA, the UUA had renounced any and all claims on such things. So if any of you were worried that the UUA will seek to reclaim the organ, I have it on very good authority that it will not! The Organ is ours and has been for many years! Now if we could just get someone out to tell us how much it would take to fix, we could start doing an Organ fundraiser and perhaps think about hosting community Organ concerts!

Music and Social Justice have long been strong components of the life of First UU Church. How will we strengthen them for the future? We could use a few more choir members and we could use more people working in the area of social justice in the community. In regard to social justice, I talked to one of my colleagues who works part-time for the California UU Justice Ministry, formerly known as the Legislative Ministry. She could come and facilitate a workshop to help us look at what else we could do in Social Justice. I will be talking to Jeri Bigbee about that possibility soon and if we do it I hope you will all come!

There are lots of things we can do as a congregation, pretty much an endless list of possibilities of ways that we could work to live out our UU Principles. Many of us are getting up in years and may not feel we have much energy to share any more. With my own heart issues, I am much more conscious of my tendency to take on too much, to do too much myself. If we each did a few things, nobody would have to wear him or herself out, so we probably do need to take time to think about what we can take on as a community. We are already doing many things as a congregation, but I do think we could do more.

So that is my challenge for us all today, to think about the ways we could do more for our congregation, for the broader community, and for Unitarian Universalism. Oh yes, and to do any of it, even just to keep things going the way they have this year, it is going to take more money. We need to bring pledge income up by about \$15,000 just to stay even with the slight increases in utility costs and cost of living increases. We have been taking too much out of reserves and would really like to support our costs and hopefully have a little left over for leadership development and new programs! I will be increasing my giving and I hope you will too! We are asking for a 20% increase in pledges from all those who can just to get us up to where we won't be depleting reserves to fund the budget. Please be generous in supporting this community that gives us all so much!

A few closing thoughts. As a small church we are not going to solve all the problems in the world, or our city, or even our lives. We are going to keep doing our best to sustain a safe, loving, accepting, and supportive community. We are going to do more to figure out where we can really make a difference and we are going to use our energies wisely. We are going to sing, and laugh, and dance and study and think and worship together. We are going to do our best to live out our Unitarian Universalist Principles. We are going to do our best to support this congregation, for we are the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton!

So may it always be! Amen!