

## **WHY I SUPPORT 1<sup>ST</sup> UU**

### *Pledge Sunday--Sermon on the Amount*

I have given lots of sermons on the amount over the years but each year I struggle to know what to say, how to approach the topic, wondering what will encourage giving without offending anyone who has heard it all before, or too often, or who for whatever reason is a bit sensitive about requests for pledges and contributions. When I was new to ministry, and much younger, I thought of it as mostly a necessary evil. I have always been a little uncomfortable asking for your support when the largest single piece of the budget is my compensation. Having church members talk about how good it feels to support the work of the church has helped. As I have been able to increase my pledging over the years, it has felt good to me as well. This year I have been giving \$300/month to the church and I have decided to increase my pledge by about 11% so that I am committing to give \$4000 back to 1<sup>st</sup> UU in the coming budget year. It is a bit of a stretch, but this church and Unitarian Universalism are important to me and I want to show that in my giving. It isn't a full tithe of 10% but it is more than half a tithe depending on what you include! You can check the numbers when we get to the budget! I sometimes also give money to other organizations that are doing good work, but the church is my first priority.

Why is the church my first priority and why do I give as much as I do? There are many reasons. I like working with you all and want to help the church stay solvent! I believe in what we stand for and what we are trying to do as a religious community. I want to see this congregation grow in spirit and commitment so that it can make an even larger impact on Stockton and San Joaquin county. I want to help First UU be able to respond to all the people that need what only we can offer. I want to see us continue to provide a safe place for LGBTQQIA persons and their allies. I want to help us offer a place to the religiously disaffected and abused, and all those struggling to find different spiritual and religious answers than those available through mainstream religious congregations.

We aren't just any church and we don't just offer what those mainstream churches do. For one thing, we are not a Christian Church, though we include Christians, as well as Jews, Buddhists, Pagans, Humanists, Atheists, Agnostics, and those who prefer not to specify! We are Unitarian Universalist with all the variety of thoughts, beliefs, backgrounds, hopes, dreams and desires that Unitarian Universalism embraces.

We are not alone but are a relative rarity in being a UU church west of the Mississippi which is more than a hundred years old. Those Unitarians of generations now gone built this building around 1930, just about 4 score and seven years ago! And the history of Unitarians in Stockton actually goes back to around 1860 when the Rev. Thomas Starr King, the new Minister of the San Francisco Unitarian Church, and who was also credentialed as a Universalist Minister, was preaching around the State to keep California on the Union side going into the Civil War. It was a few decades and a few starts and stops before the church was formally organized, but it has been meeting consistently since 1913. I am proud to be the first settled minister of this congregation's second century and I would like to stick around long enough to retire here! (Don't worry, that isn't forever, only 7-10 more years if my health holds!)

I really think that we have something important to offer to this community, nation, and world; but we are not perfect. We have some issues of race, class, and ability to deal with as a movement and as a congregation as we have been reminded occasionally. The UUA is particularly dealing with some of these issues at the moment and the ripples may be felt for years to come. How we deal with these issues as a congregation may impact who we will attract in coming years. Will we make the effort to be more anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and multicultural? Will we get to the point where we attract and keep more persons of color? Will we be able to help Stockton and San Joaquin County be more inclusive and accepting of all persons? Will we learn a more inclusive variety of music and stop focusing on music by old dead white guys and musicians of the Caucasian persuasion generally? Will we work to learn Spanish and other languages to welcome in persons with different national origins? These are not simple questions and to make changes will take a significant amount of effort and commitment.

It isn't like there aren't already enough social justice issues for us to deal with, especially under the current administration. This week's missile strike on the sleeping airport and equipment, from whence the Syrian plane with the deadly nerve gas was launched, with 60 Tomahawk missiles (one of which was a real failure) strikes a new and equally incoherent message. Fortunately, I've heard that the President has a stake in the company that builds those things so it should be no big deal replacing the missiles. Good practice for the weapons officers on the USS Porter and USS Ross. Too bad that a few missiles striking an empty airport aren't likely to deter Assad. I wonder if there will be any other follow-up?

But let's get back to the Pledge Drive. This congregation offers many things to many people. One of the most important things that we offer is a shelter or safe home in the midst of the storm. The recent news of the world is hard to hear and see; the nice human interest stories, too few. Many of us need to take breaks from the news of the day, even as well filtered as it is on corporate media stations for entertainment value. We live in an era of complex interrelationships between nations and corporations. If we watch the commercials on TV we are bombarded by consumerism. In this nation of extroverts it is hard to get a break, and yet the vast majority of Unitarian Universalists are thinking introverts who need time to process the news of the day and our own lives. We also feel deeply the struggles of others, the pain of war, the crisis of refugees. We are not satisfied by simple and inadequate answers to problems—most of us need time to chew on problems, ponder, discuss, and debate until we discover our own solutions.

We need a safe space where we are accepted as we are, with all our foibles and strange beliefs. Even those of us who are introverts need a community, a place where we can sing our songs, tell our stories and find love and acceptance. We need each other when we are sad and when we are happy. We need each other when we are struggling with the world's insanity. We need a community with whom to share our celebrations and to support us when times are hard and diagnoses not good. This congregation is a safe and sheltering home for all our experiences. It was here before any of us arrived and with our support it will continue to offer a safe space for all those who will come long after us.

This congregation has seen good times of health and expansion as well as difficult times when problems and challenges have diminished its energy and size. Currently we face a number of challenges but also embrace a number of opportunities. These are neither the best nor the worst of times, but more of a middle age in which we can decide to go a number of different ways. In every crisis is opportunity; in every challenge, choices; in every UU congregation, ways to do things differently.

Much depends upon your response to the Pledge Drive and I hope that you will give generously because this congregation has given much to you. We will not meet every need for every person who walks in our doors, but we give much to those who fully engage, who seek to learn and grow, who challenge and share ideas and listen to others. We are better than any self-help course or group because when you finish one area of learning you can choose another and still remain part of this same community! Each person's experience of this congregation and Unitarian Universalism generally is different, and therein lies great strength and plenty of topics of discussion! Some fall in love with Covenant Groups, others with Meditation Groups, others with study groups, many with Social Justice work, and yet others with social activities, while many just come to share worship or sing. Even as a small congregation we offer a wide variety of experiences!

There are some who give a little and some who give a lot in terms of money, time, energy and commitment. We each have different amounts of money that we can pledge based on differing levels of income and differing needs. We do not expect everyone to give at the same level, because each of us has different circumstances. We hope that everyone will pledge something whether it is a small amount or a lot. We hope that everyone will take into consideration what the church means and what it has offered. We don't want anyone to pledge or to give more than they can afford. We do hope that everyone will be responsibly generous with their commitment as well as with their time, energy, and willingness to serve in long or short term commitments and to engage with groups and programs of this congregation.

What this congregation can offer depends on not just the money, but also the time and energy we each can give. The range of programs we offer and the

level of involvement that we can commit in outreach and social justice programs depends entirely on those who can give their time and energy to such programs. We like being known as a congregation committed to justice work, but that means that we need to have people, as we do currently, that engage in the work, show up for the demonstrations and meetings and work to make that part of our society better. E-mails and letters and phone calls all help, but showing up at City Hall or at the Capitol or in a march can often make a bigger impact. Remember the pictures comparing Obama and Trump's inaugurations? I think everyone does!

There are so many issues, so many concerns, so many ways our society and city and church need to grow and improve and be healthier and more inclusive and more loving. We aren't going to run out of challenges any time soon, and we aren't going to fix everything in our lifetimes! The commitments we make, the work we do, the time we give, the pledges we make all do make a difference. The church is able to do more when there is adequate funding for staffing and programs.

Imagine what it might be like if we didn't have to have some of our strongest leaders working on fundraisers, but instead could use their talents for outreach programs! Imagine what a difference we could make if we didn't have to worry about fixing the building because everything was well-maintained! Imagine what it would be like to have enough pledge support that we could actually expand programs and increase staffing! I know, this is the point when someone shouts out not to get crazy, but think what it would be like if we actually had more than enough! Too many churches run on the fear of scarcity, believing in what may be a self-fulfilling prophecy, that there is never enough.

My friends, I challenge us to do more than the bare minimum this year. I challenge us to give enough that we can expand programs. I challenge us to give back to this congregation as it has given to each of us! I challenge us to make the strongest commitment we can so that this congregation can make the biggest impact possible on Stockton and in San Joaquin county and in the lives of all those who come in our doors! I thank you for your support financially and for your time, energy, commitment and love!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!