

## **THE SERMON ON THE AMOUNT!**

*The Commitment to Keep the Church Going!*

This is pledge Sunday, but we are conducting the pledge campaign a little differently this year. We are doing a Pony Express style campaign, to encourage personal contacts and opportunities for people to talk about why they support 1<sup>st</sup> Unitarian Universalist Church. You should have received a brochure about the campaign and you will soon be contacted by a rider to meet and pass along the mail (pledge) pouch, if you have not already been contacted. We hope that this will actually be an enjoyable experience for everyone without any hard selling but with a big opportunity for everyone to think about why we want to support 1<sup>st</sup> UU. Ride well my friends and keep safe the mail (pledges)!

Many years ago now, Dave Rickard, my friend, parishioner, pledge chairman, and UUA Fundraiser, mentioned that the pledge Sunday sermon for UUs was really always, The Sermon on the Amount, and so I have titled my sermon ever since, with some variation in subtitles depending on the year and my mood. Just as the Pony Express route was hard on horses and riders, taking a huge commitment to get the mail across the West until railroads were built, so it takes a huge commitment to keep supporting our churches in order to make liberal and progressive religion available to people all over the country. We like to be able to describe new programs and new efforts to keep the church healthy and relevant to justify increases in the budget, but even to keep up with increasing costs for utilities, upkeep, and providing minimal cost of living increases for staff requires a 3-5% increase most years. To not get an increase each year does not keep things the same, it means we will fall behind. Last year we had some temporary decreases in spending that allowed us to get by on a little less, but this year we are asking for an increase of 7.5% to catch up. I will leave it up to Mary and Dick and Dwane and Sara to provide details if you have questions!

What I really want to talk about is commitment and the things that we offer as a Unitarian Universalist congregation that people won't find elsewhere. We of course have more that we can and hopefully will do in the future, but even at this moment in time, we are offering a safe space for Religious Liberals and Progressives and LGBTQ persons to be themselves, to share what they really believe, and to be with who they want to be with. In this era of renewed racism, sexism, ableism, and heterosexism, those are no small things.

Many UU Sermons over the years have suggested that our commitment to accept and welcome people of many different faiths, with different beliefs and experiences and different gender expressions paired with our commitment to justice makes us the best religion for the world now and in the future. The fact that we are not constrained to all believe any particular religious story, helps us to open our doors to people with many different beliefs, hopes, and dreams. The fact that we are all such nice people with interesting ideas of course also helps us to welcome in newcomers! Now if we just had a few more extroverts to actually invite and welcome people! We really do have a lot to offer, but we aren't very good at letting others know about us!

We also appeal theologically and philosophically more readily to mature youth and older adults than to young children or even young families. We are a better answer for those who have progressed further on their faith, life, and spiritual journeys. We offer a message that is not simplistic nor easily encapsulated in an elevator speech. We also expect that our members and friends will continue to progress along the pathways of their own faith, life, and spiritual journeys, not as we would direct them, but as they feel drawn. This is what it means to be non-creedal, non-doctrinal, and non-dogmatic. The only guidelines are our UU Principles and the history, beliefs, and tradition that we share. Even so, those matters sufficiently insure that we have some boundaries to answer critics who say that UUs can believe anything. There are actually quite a few things people might believe and ways people might act that I would find incompatible with Unitarian Universalism!

There are even some things worse than failing to recycle that come to mind! It is not a deadly sin for a UU to drive a car other than a Prius, today there are a number of other hybrids, plug-ins, and Electric cars that match or exceed the fuel efficiency of a regular Prius, and carpooling and work responsibilities can justify the use of less efficient vehicles. We also may have different priorities in our work and support for justice. Some of us may support education, others fairness in immigration, still others single-payer healthcare or ecological concerns. To not support equal civil and human rights for women and minorities, and acceptance of GLBTQ persons might be sufficiently un-UU to get somebody kicked out, but we would have to discuss it, at length! Our biggest differences may be in the kind of meditation we prefer, or whether we can sustain a vegan diet, but so long as we accept other beliefs we generally will not disturb the harmony of our UU community.

In any other kind of religious community, the matter of believing in the deity or precepts of the religion take priority over anything else, no matter how much good that community may accomplish. For those of us more focused on this world than on possible futures or transcendent deities, that would be a problem. Whether we believe in transcendent deities and future lives or not does not take priority over the good work that we UUs may accomplish in the world today. Our congregation provides the staging area for all the good that we can accomplish together. We can of course do much by ourselves, but the teamwork and shared effort that we can offer together will often allow us to accomplish far more than we could alone. We also benefit from the flexibility of being able to address needs as they arise, which single focus social service groups often could not do.

There also is the matter of spirituality, an issue which has become more significant for UUs in recent decades. The most important thing that we can and do offer in regard to spirituality is a safe space for people to explore and discover what may be meaningful to each individual. We do not put forth any one kind of spirituality as preferred over another. We may offer classes on meditation or various spiritual practices from time to time, but not with any expectation that everyone will come to the same place in their spiritual journeys. We believe that this too is a matter of individual choice.

Unitarian Universalism has always believed in the freedom of the individual, but with freedom also comes responsibility. We will never tell you how much you must do or how much you must give to be a member in good standing of this congregation. We will try to give you a sense of what fair share giving might look like. We are not a big organization or congregation, so our commitment to share the work of the congregation and the cost of being and doing the work of Unitarian Universalist ministry here in Stockton must be shared. We have about 105 members plus a number of active and pledging friends. Not everyone has the same resources to support the church financially or in terms of time for service on committees, teams, or projects. If we each do the best that we can, we will not have a problem, but we often run short on volunteers and have just enough to get by financially. What would be really wonderful would be to have extra volunteers and enough money to staff and fund new efforts, programs and projects.

You have probably heard some version of the story of the minister trying to raise support for a project. It might have been funding an education program for needy children. The preacher described the need and asked for support to help the children run, and the people said, Let them Run Preacher, Let them Run. And then the preacher said, to make this happen, 20 of you need to volunteer 2 hours a week, and the people said, Let them Walk Preacher, Let them Walk! And then the preacher said, and to make this program work, 20 of you need to donate an extra \$1000, and the people said, Let them Crawl Preacher, Let them Crawl. Well, we aren't asking for that much, but to keep the church walking, we do need an increase from everyone of 7.5%.

As we look to the coming year, there is more work that needs doing, there are higher costs to do what we have been doing, and both time and money seem to disappear more quickly each year. We have better answers to many of the problems of today than most other religious groups, but we are only one small voice against some of the most destructive religious and political organizations that the world has ever seen. It will take an extra effort for all of us to make our voices heard. It will take an extra effort from all of us to keep this congregation strong and safe as a place where any well-meaning individual can come to explore life and faith. It will take an extra effort from each of us to do all that must be done to strengthen the church and our voice.

I challenge each of us to do all that we can to support our congregation and this faith, to live out our UU Principles in all we do, and to continue to explore life and faith as well as we are able, today, tomorrow, and for all our days!

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