

Beyond the Plate

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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A few different bills were gathered together and they were talking. The \$50 dollar bill said. "I go to the best restaurants, plays and concerts." The \$20 replied, "I often go to outdoor cafés and book stores." The \$10 admitted that she still managed to visit coffee shops, bakeries, and the early bird movies. They turned to the \$1 dollar bill. "Where on earth are you keeping yourself?" they asked. This is what they heard. "Oh it is always the same for me every week. Church, church, church!"

Welcome to the Sermon on the Amount.

Let's start with our UUSA mission statement: *As a caring Unitarian Universalist Society, we are dedicated to nurturing personal and spiritual growth, becoming a more diverse congregation, developing a visible presence in our community, and seeking to bring about positive change in the world.*

There is a slightly different approach I would like to suggest we take this year as we begin our annual Canvass Campaign: Instead of basing what we can do in the next fiscal year on the collected amount of our pledges to the Society, let's look at what we as a congregation should and could be doing as an agent of change, and raise enough money to begin making those changes. And by "an agent of change" I am referring both to the changes we might be able to effect in our own lives and those of our children, AND the changes we would like to see in the larger community, our country and the world outside these walls.

Here is an idea I've been talking about since I arrived here in Amherst. What if our weekly Sunday morning offering was not designated to the general operating fund, but rather for a specific service or charitable donation that had been picked in advance and publicized, with educational and other material to help us in our decisions? These weekly offerings bring in just over \$5000 per year in non-pledge income, which right now is allocated for our own expenses operating and maintaining this meetinghouse and its staff and operations. But I can honestly report to you that other congregations have overwhelmingly found that the anticipated loss to the budget by designating plate contributions to social action causes is more than made up in increased pledged contributions. Why does this happen? Because the members, you and me, are pleased that their Society is moving to more completely fulfill its mission and because it feels good to be making a difference in some specific and chosen directions.

What kinds of projects can be funded with these new initiatives? For our Society some would continue to be the charitable organizations in our community to whom we already give 10% of our plate collections through the Social Justice committee: the Amherst Survival Center, Jessie's House, Cot Shelter, and others. But possibilities might include breast cancer or multiple sclerosis research (diseases that we know about personally in our congregational family), environmental causes, offering public forums on important issues of our time, supporting election reform, supporting our local CSAs, even supporting low income students with money for books or other classroom supplies. One UU congregation created a separate non-profit

organization to provide small loans to start-up businesses. We could team up with other congregations, other faiths, to multiply our efforts. Many of the ideas I have just mentioned fall under the umbrella of our Sustainable Community Initiative, particularly if they support or would further the cause of keeping our government and business and food supply local. I can get very excited when I start to brain storm about the possibilities.

How would we choose what to support? I envision a group (I haven't honed in on a good name for this group yet – I don't think Mission Control is quite right...but maybe Mission Central) anyway a group consisting of people from the Social Justice Committee, the Board of Trustees, the Minister, Religious Education, and others who would come up with possible causes for the congregation's consideration. We could vote our preferences at congregational meetings. Each month our collected plate contributions might be for a different organization about which we would be learning at the same time.

Or maybe we would start smaller by designating only one offering a month to a purpose outside of ourselves. I can feel the Finance Committee members shaking in their seats.

Here is what church consultant Michael Durall has to say about this idea of mission-based giving in his book Beyond the Collection Plate. Durall believes that the central question we should be asking is "Who is served by this church?" (p. 73) He believes that we need to "look up from the ledger and the committee reports to see if the world is really changing because of the presence of [our Society]." (p. 77) Quoting William Easum from The Church Growth Handbook, he adds "Churches, like people, are healthiest when they reach out to others rather than worry about themselves. Churches grow because they intentionally reach out; churches die because they dwell on their own internal problems." (p. 86)

In promoting what he terms a "permission-giving church," Durall compares the traditional church in which people are "initiated, enrolled, informed, supervised and kept" to the thriving church in which people are "changed, gifted, called, equipped, and sent." (p. 100) I would say, from this description, that we at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst are something of a thriving Society! But we know that we have further to go to be the UU presence we would really like to be.

Because my parents are members of the First Unitarian Church in Cleveland, I happen to know that Michael Durall came to their church for a weekend of conversation and consultation with the ministers and the congregation. He had a number of suggestions for them, which I have right here in his final report. I imagine they are similar to the suggestions he makes for many of the churches he works for.

Chief among them were to "begin giving away the Sunday offering every Sunday, rather than once per month, and not worry about the loss of income to the budget" and that the church "end its dependence on interest income from the endowment." He actually suggested that the current year's endowment interest, some \$78,000, be used to help fund a walk-in clinic in a marginal Cleveland neighborhood. I believe there is something akin to that afoot at the Amherst Survival Center as we speak, although I am not suggesting that UUSA should deplete its own much smaller endowment for this purpose. The Cleveland congregation has an endowment of almost two million dollars and their membership is nearly three times ours.

Durall's other suggestions ranged from taking the offering while the children are present during worship ("Where else will our children and grandchildren learn to become generous and not miserly souls?"), to encouraging members and friends to observe some greater sense of Sabbath, as "this practice helps us reclaim some sense of the sacred in our lives." He also suggested that the Cleveland congregation take it upon themselves to more outwardly and sincerely share their faith with others ("not the dreaded evangelism that many UUs fear") and that the special ministry of their membership programs become the work of those who believe their lives have been changed for the better by their church. That sounds like it could become a membership committee of the entire membership to me! What a thought!

Michael Durall's ideas can be controversial, and sometimes difficult to imagine implementing without a great deal of trepidation. But Rabbi Karyn Kedar writes in God Whispers that the risk may seem less risky if we somehow expand our vision of what is *possible* and what is *right*. (p. 59) The answers are not always as clear-cut as we think. To me, however, it is really quite enlightening and also heartening to think that there may be new ways of accomplishing what we have been trying to do all along. There may, after all, be something new under the sun.

I have talked this morning about only one aspect of our upcoming budget that I would like to see changed – and it alone would require some thousands of dollars more pledge income to implement. There are other increased expenses that you will be hearing about in the coming weeks and months. I would rather tell you in positive terms what some of these items are, not in terms of what they will "cost" us. For example, look what our religious education program is doing this year! More kids, more programs, more staff... Look at the consulting benefits we have received from our district RE representative in the past two years. It would be nice to be paying what is considered our "fair share" to both the Clara Barton District office and the national Association of UU congregations. These are just a couple of the line items that could or will require our attention in the form of financial contributions.

These examples, and my focus this morning on our commitment to make the world a better place for our having been here, are about the question "As what kind of Society do we desire to be known – by the outside world, and in our own hearts?" It's not "What will the neighbors think?" but "How do we feel about ourselves?" A very great Unitarian Universalist scholar, James Luther Adams, once wrote "A faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring [us] to grief." (The Epic of Unitarianism, David B. Parke, editor, p. 152)

I know that this sermon reflects my idealism and positive outlook, and I will not apologize for that. On the other hand, I would never encourage us, as a congregation, to attempt the impossible or the entirely impractical either. Yes, there is a balance that must be maintained between the responsible and the risky when it comes to our financial practices. But I would suggest that sometimes what appears to be a risky move might be shown in the end to have been the responsible move.

Blessings on you and on our canvass.