

## The Least Among Us

Alison Wohler, March 1, 2009

Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

Who, among us, sometimes thinks of ourselves as “the least among us?” Who among us does not wish we could do more, volunteer more, care more, inspire more, give more? I am here today not to shame anyone into greater service or increased financial commitment, but rather to remind us all, in the most serious and sincere way I can that there is no least among us.

There is no least among us because we are family.

There are those of us more fortunate, less fortunate; those of lesser means, those with jobs of so-called lesser prestige. There are those whose singing or story-telling or accounting or carpentry skills are more or less admired. There are those who serve as Board Presidents, and those who sit on committees working on hugely important decisions to be made by the congregation, and those who move chairs around or make coffee and slice bagels. There are those who volunteer tirelessly of their time and energy to keep this place working smoothly. There are those who put their energy into social outreach and those who take care of us, here, as well. There are those who volunteer more than they probably should. There are those whose jobs and families keep them from volunteering as much as they might like to. There are those who quietly attend, not calling attention to themselves, not ready to commit to membership or even “friend” status, but I would remind us that even the presence of our visitors attests to the great number and variety of needs that are being met, here, week in and week out.

There are those who pledge in larger amounts to our budget, and there are those who are not able to contribute in like measure. There are those who give generously according to their means, and those who do not.

But there is no one who is better, there is no one who is lesser – there is no one who is least among us. Sometimes we are the ones who carry others. Sometimes we are the ones who are carried. I’ve said that before in other contexts, but the premise is the same. We are family.

It is only our own egos that may cause us to think in those kinds of negative and judgmental terms about someone else. In religious community we accept that each of us brings many and varied gifts and all are valuable. “Love is the spirit of this church...”

The phrase “the least among us” comes from the Gospel of Matthew in the Christian Testament, Chapter 25, Verse 40. There are many translations of this one passage. (<http://bible.cc/matthew/25-40.htm>)

The King James Bible writes: “And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

The International Standard Version puts it this way: “I tell you with certainty, since you did it for one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did it for me.”

“I can guarantee this truth;” it is written in The God’s Word Translation, “Whatever you did for one of my brothers or sisters, no matter how unimportant [they seemed], you did it for me.”

Notice that this last translation added the words “they seemed.” “No matter how unimportant they seemed, you did it for me.” I like that.

Whether it is a King speaking these words in Matthew, or whether you interpret them to be the words of God spoken through a King’s mouth, or whether you translate the idea of “you did it for me” into “you did it for the congregation” or “the church” or “the larger society” or for “the oneness of all humanity,” it has the same meaning. What we do for the so-called least of us, we do for ourselves in the end. How we think about the so-called least of us defines how we think about ourselves.

What is our duty to each other when “there but for some stroke of good fortune” go any one of us? How do we share the responsibility for this Society, to which we all have committed our names and our time and our support, when not everyone is able at all times to contribute at the same level? I believe that if we truly believe in ourselves, in this Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst, in this “us of no least members,” then we must act as a family would act and hold each other up as the need arises.

Unitarian Universalists believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and believing thus, there can be no least among us. Just as we should not look upon others as less worthy; neither (I say gently) should we think of ourselves as less worthy. I know that there have been those of you who are ashamed or embarrassed that you cannot make as large a pledge to our canvass as you would like to do. I know that there are those of you who agonize over needing to tell me, or Judy, that you are falling behind and won’t be able to make your committed pledge for the previous year. Remember this sentence: There is no least among us.

What befalls any of us, happens to all of us. Just as in a family, members contribute to the extent of their means, their ability, their age, their appropriateness to the circumstance. Only in one particularly disagreeable recent television ad do parents force their children to sell lemonade in order to pay the phone bill. In a family there is no value hierarchy of mother, father, sister, brother, infant, grandmother, uncle. What matters is our mutual commitment to the family unit, the congregation, the liberal religious tradition. We will all do what we can, when we can. That is all any of us can do.

I, for one, promise you that I will do whatever I am able to do to ensure the health and stability of this UU Society and its many ministries. And that includes making a generous pledge during our annual canvass drive. I give at other times when I am able as well. I like to give to things that I love and that I believe in with all my heart.

Think about what it is you receive from this place. Is it new ideas? Support in times of suffering? A place to laugh? Programs for your children and their spiritual upbringing? A spring board for social outreach? A soap box for social outrage? A place to make and nurture and keep deep relationships?

Think about the relatively new idea of religious freedom that this place represents. I think of Unitarian Universalism as the institutionalization of religious freedom. How many people, other than those sitting here and in other UU sanctuaries this morning, are suffering in their spiritual lives for lack of what we have to offer? What was your life like before you found us?

This is a sermon about sharing. It's about giving of your time, your interests and your skills – for the benefit of your extended UUSA family. And it's also, of course, about money. There's a little aphorism, loosely accredited to Sir Francis Bacon, that goes "Money is like manure – not much good till it's spread around." I am encouraging you today, as your minister but also as a member of this congregation, to consider our shared ministry. I am called to share my gifts, my talents and treasures as they are sometimes called, with all of you. I want to enable this congregation and this ministry to prosper and grow so that our larger gifts can be shared with those waiting to find us. I want us all to remember that it is possible to exist and indeed to thrive, by sharing with each other as a family does, without regard for who might be the least among us.

I suggest that not only is there no such thing as the least among us, but that a more positive corollary is even more appropriate: everyone here is pretty darn important.

Let's give up pessimism for Lent.

As we enter into our Annual Canvass, I want you to know how much you mean to me and to this UUSA family. Your part, in return, is to remember how much we and this place mean to you. Even if we aren't always perfect, even if we aren't just exactly what you would like us to be at every worship service and every meeting, even if you worry that you might not be carrying your weight around this place, you've got to admit: We are all doing the best we can. Our hearts are in the right place. Love is the spirit of this Church.

When you are filling out your pledge card sometime in the next few weeks, give not till it hurts, but till it feels good.

That's what I'll be doing.

This is a good place, full of good people. There is no least among us.