

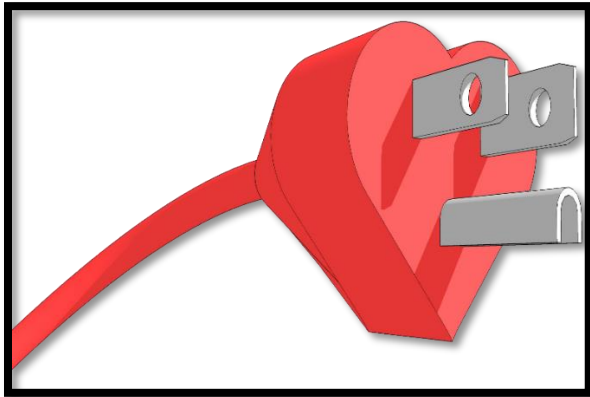
Powering Our Commitments

Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones
Stewardship Sunday, February 25, 2018
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #361, Enter, Rejoice, and Come In,” #108, “Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire” (4th verse added), and #1028, “The Fire of Commitment.”

Reading: “The Low Road,” by Marge Piercy.

Personal Reflection by Marilyn Reynolds;
Stewardship Messages by co-chair Janet Lopes and by Dante, age 9 (printed at end).



Sermon

I must admit I'm self-conscious preaching about stewardship or pledging in the church when I know there will be brand new people visiting a service. So, if you are a new person here, I encourage you to imagine that you are the guest in a home, and you are invited to come into the kitchen. Imagine you are at the kitchen table, and you can hear the family describing how things get accomplished around here. And, after they talk about that, somebody offers you a piece of cake. That's what's going on when we talk about making a pledge to support our staff, our programs, our mission. Thank you for being our guest at the kitchen table.

In this congregation, pledging and giving are voluntary decisions. Of course, everything that happens here is voluntary--from choosing to make that first visit on a Sunday morning, to deciding to come back, to making a commitment to serve on the

Board or to serve coffee after service. With regard to pledging, it's everyone's choice to give, and how much--and whether it's possible to stretch in our giving.

Here is my *own* choice, and how I think about it. I set a goal of giving away 10 percent of my gross income every year. I support causes and communities that embody my values. I give to organizations that serve needs larger than my own. Guess what--UUSS is at the top of my list. For the coming year, I will pledge \$440 a month for the people, programs and mission of this congregation. It feels like a stretch, but it also feels right. A few factors are important to this decision.

First, I am able to make it. I have realized that this pledge level will not hurt my style of living or my financial security.

Next, I care about how the money is used, and I know it's used wisely. I know the people who work for this congregation, and I want them to be compensated well. I love the children and youth of our church, and care about how we serve them. I remember the people beyond our walls, people who need our support and our voice. So, for me as well as for you, the Stewardship Campaign is an invitation to reflect on what we care about, consider our circumstances, and make our own commitments.

Have you heard about our stewardship theme? This year it's *Powering Our Commitment to Love, Justice and Healing*. In other words, our generosity powers our commitment to those goals and those values.

Yet when I think about our congregation, I realize it works the other way around also. It is our *commitment to those values* which powers our generosity. Love, Justice and Healing are the goals and the values that inspire us to be here, work together, and give generously toward our mission.

May I give you a few examples?

Two years ago, thanks to the urging of teenagers in this congregation, we considered putting up a Black Lives Matter sign on our property. To do this, we took a few months to talk, learn, listen and then vote. The result is the banner which reads: *Black Lives Matter Here*. In those conversations we heard from youth, elders, young adults, and middle-aged folks. We heard questions, concerns, insights, and hopes. We heard stories and statistics about the dangers facing Black folks and other people of color in this country. And we learned about the real experiences of our church's friends and family members of color. We also heard of the painful experiences of church members of color living in the dominant culture of this country.

All that listening led to a majority vote of *yes*. Then we designed the banner and installed it. As a congregation, we are now learning how to stand behind our banner's message--continuing to listen, study, and show up, and finding ways to support local leaders of color as they lift their voices for Black lives. Things are in progress toward this aim. Let Rev. Lucy or me know if you are interested, or if you have ideas or questions.

Black Lives Matter Here. That banner was out there in front for a full year before I got a call about it. Finally, one day I heard a phone message on voice mail. The telephone showed the name of a woman I didn't know. She said: "Hello, I saw your sign. I'm calling to object." (Actually, she said, "Shame on you!")

She did not like us highlighting the particular plight of Black folks in this country. She put it rather awkwardly: "You should not be favoring only culture, I mean only one ... nationality." She went on expressing her disagreements. Of course, she had not been here with us to see us do the careful work of discernment, the work of learning from one another. She's *never* been here, and I don't think she'll come. You know, our website is on the banner. She said: "I went on your website and I saw what kind of church you are. That's not right. You should be a church based on Jesus Christ and the Bible."

Well, we do have a Bible study class beginning here in two weeks, but I bet that caller

wouldn't like our approach to it. Both of her complaints about us were familiar to me, but I just hadn't heard them for a while. She concluded her message with respect, "Thank you for listening," and hung up. I had the sudden urge to call her back. If I had, I would have said: "Thank you for noticing!" Indeed, I was happy to hear that someone had been challenged by seeing our commitments. And I was happy that a look at our website revealed for her what is distinctive and notable about USS. If I had called her, I'd have thanked her for noticing *that*. But on this morning, I am thanking *you* for making this congregation so distinctive and so notable for our commitments and our values. Thank you.

It seems to me that love, justice and healing are not separate commitments, they are overlapping and united. Here's a good example: The USS Kids Freedom Club meets after the service today. For the past few years, this growing bunch of USS kids and youth has been learning about modern slavery in the world, about people caught in debt bondage, human trafficking, and more. The kids have been raising our awareness and raising money to get people out of slavery. They are powering our commitments to love, justice and healing.

Another example: Volunteers for the Refugee Support Team at USS are teaching English classes to refugee women while providing child care for their kids. Our team coordinates volunteers; it raises money; it holds kitchen supply drives and computer equipment drives to help new neighbors get settled in this area. Our team has learned that most of the new refugees coming to Sacramento are from Afghanistan. In most cases, a member of the family receiving a visa used to work for the US military over there, or for another part of the US government. Hence, they are now at risk in their home country. Our donors and volunteers are giving a warm and loving welcome to these neighbors.

I think you could name your own examples of our commitments to love, justice and healing. Some folks find healing and inspiration in our music. Some of us love Theater One here—acting in the cast, building the set, serving backstage, or sitting in the audience. Some love the visual arts on our walls here, and the lush landscape outside and a

walk in the Labyrinth. For me it's the coffee. And I know that the people who prepare our coffee, our Brew Crew, are not merely doing it for caffeine for themselves alone. They are doing it for love. They're too shy to tell you, so I'm doing it for them. They're doing it for love.

Yes, it is our commitment to love, justice and healing that powers our generosity.

I want you to know one more thing. By supporting the ministers and staff here, through your generosity you power many opportunities of love, justice, and healing that you may never see, or you may never know about. Here is one that I want you to know about.

I'm writing my sermon on the first Friday in January and I get a phone call. Will I participate in a memorial service... at a local Muslim congregation? The background story to it is tragic. On New Year's Eve, a father murdered his two young daughters while they were on a weekend custodial visit with him, and he killed himself. Apparently, killing his children was one last act of hostility and revenge by him against his ex-wife, their mother. It is a young Muslim family, and they have been active in the largest and most progressive Mosque in our area. A close UU colleague of mine in another city has put me in touch with a local woman who serves as president of the board of that Mosque. Actually, I've met her at several interfaith events. In fact, last fall she spoke here at a forum on climate change, sponsored by our Interfaith Earth Justice Committee.

On the phone, she tells me they've already had a funeral and burial for the girls, as is Islamic tradition. The request now is for an interfaith event for the whole community. The girls' mom wants a celebration of life. She wants to celebrate every dimension of her daughters' brief lives. Moreover, this grieving young mother grew up in a Unitarian Universalist family in another city. Her family members are here now, and my participation in the service could be healing for them. It would a way to honor that part of the girls' family heritage. Yes, I say: I'll do it, this coming Sunday evening.

The president of the Mosque will coordinate the service and lead it, but other community leaders will speak too, including their Imam, who is the clergy leader of their Mosque. Arabic verses from

the Holy Quran, the Islamic scriptures, will be recited by a young Muslim woman, who has a doctoral degree in environmental science. My job will be to offer some words near the beginning of the program and to say a closing prayer after the community sharing, open-mic time. Also, they want me to bring the Chalice—this Chalice, our Chalice, and light it for the service.

In a later phone conversation, I learn more about these children from a family member. They were Girl Scouts. Did you know that the second largest Girl Scout troop in this area is the troop of Muslim girls? The first largest Girl Scout troop...is Buddhist.

In addition, the two girls were active in their congregation, as is their mom, and everybody loves them. The girls cared about people, especially those enduring hardships, hunger and homelessness. In demonstration of their care for nature, and of their enjoyment of the beach and camping, the girls raised awareness about the plight of the natural environment and the need for action for the earth.

On Sunday afternoon after church and a meeting at USSU, I arrive at the Mosque as darkness approaches. This event is in their community room, with a crowd of people sitting on risers on one side, and podium and a table with flowers on the other. Over the PA system the President speaks: "Welcome and thank you for coming. Please come out to the courtyard first." We go outside to witness a Girl Scout friendship circle, a time of remembrance. Wearing their green vests covered with medals, girls of all types make a circle and we are behind them, all around. A few plastic pinwheels stand in the grass, spinning in the wind. Adults and children speak words of gratitude for their lost friends. The tradition for a Friendship Circle is to release balloons in the air at the end. But the president explains the girls would not have wanted that. Helium-filled balloons can travel and end up as trash in the sea, killing birds and sea life. So instead, the crowd of girls is blowing soap bubbles.

As the circle concludes, we hustle inside, away from the cold air. The formal program starts inside, and I am third to speak. I speak about this occasion, give condolences on behalf of my congregation, and say a few sentences about the

girls. I offer a prayer. Then I introduce our chalice/ and light it in silence.

For the next ninety minutes, leaders from the Mosque and other organizations offer their words. These two sisters had friends from all walks of life: in the Scouts, their school, neighborhood, and mobile home park. They used to help their mom when she managed the bookstore in the Mosque. They had lovely smiles. They were loving.

This open-mic sharing goes on for a while. Then we watch a slideshow—adorable images. The more I see and hear about the girls, I think how much they have in common with our kids here at UUSS. Then I realize they're gone. It's unbelievable. After my closing prayer, and shaking hands and saying farewell, I go home.

I don't know if my participation has been healing, but it was appreciated. A few days later, the president of the Mosque sends me a message, thanking me for my words, and my openness to the last-minute planning. *Of course*, I reply. I thank her for her warm and gracious leadership.

She offers for her Mosque to make a donation to our church. She writes: "I know the clergy service comes from the heart, but I also know that congregations need to support clergy financially for their services and this is very important. Please let me know what an appropriate amount is to donate and ... where to send the check."

I reply to say I didn't expect anything. I say: "No doubt I will be asking a favor of you in the future."

I hope it can be for a happier occasion.
"So, you should consider my participation to be/ a gesture of/ friendship," I say.

I wasn't speaking only about the connection that she and I have developed. I meant it was a friendship gesture from our congregation to theirs. I was there as *one person*, but I felt that you would have wanted me to be there. And, in addition to bringing our Chalice with me, I was bringing *you* with me. I was bringing the love, generosity, care and healing wishes that I know are so abundant in this congregation at UUSS. I want you to know this and to thank you.

Love, justice and healing are not separate commitments, they are overlapping and united. They are not separate, but I'm going to end with love. Because I love you. And because I know that your love, generosity, and commitment are bringing people together in community, into *this* community of depth, beauty, vitality and joy. It is your love that powers this community. And I know your love extends far beyond these walls. So may it always do.

Amen and blessed be.

Testimonial by Dante, age 9

Hello, my name is Dante, and I am going to talk about religious education. Here at UUSS we have a great religious education program to help kids learn religious things and learn more about what we talk about and helps them learn church language and learn about gods, feelings, and ways of life. So sign your kids up for religious education.

My feelings about it is, it is great and I love to learn new things and play fun activities. I think it's very good and talk to Miranda for questions.

I think the people who help in it are great and I love going to religious education so thank you for this wonderful education.

Personal Reflection by Marilyn Reynolds

It is Tuesday evening. Laptop open on the table, to the left a teacup full of Costco's whole fancy premium quality cashews. On the right—scratch pad, pencil, cell phone in calculator mode.

Wanting to avoid hypocrisy, I'm determined to complete the online pledge form before facing you on this Sunday morning, talking about stewardship. It should be simple enough, fill in the blanks. Email the form to the church office. But the pledge instructions include considering "what UUSS means to us and to our community . . ."

Before I even get the first figure on the scratch pad, I'm weaving my way through past

and present, pondering what this place, this organization means to me.

Though I left UUSS in 2007, I didn't leave UU values or principles behind. The small community of family and friends with whom I still share my life, embrace similar ideals. None of them, current and former teachers, social workers, health care professionals, business people, identify their values as UU, but they are. So although I'd left this particular fold, I remained part of a smaller flock of good people doing good work in the world.

In 2014, on my first visit back to UUSS, I reconnected with longtime members and was welcomed by those who were new to *me*. I don't remember what the sermon was on that first Sunday back, or even who preached it. What I remember is the sense that a long dormant part of me was waking up. The mostly unstated shared values of my small flock were real and sustaining, *but I'd unknowingly missed the power of shared values brought to the forefront of consciousness through the spoken word. I'd missed the window on the broader world that sermons often provide. I'd missed the increased self-awareness that comes from guided reflection, from shared meditative silence. I'd missed the music.*

I renewed my membership. Through a spiritually deepening circle, I strengthened connections with others and found a safe place in which to grapple not only with the big unanswerable questions, but also with the challenges of everyday life.

Participation in annual auctions, both as a donor and as one on the receiving end of UU auction offerings lightens my spirit. The marking of milestones and the sharing of joys and sorrows serve as reminders of our commonality.

I like being able to support the likes of Loaves and Fishes, the Food Bank, and Black Lives Matter, through our Sunday offerings. I might not do that without the ease of the passed basket. Being part of a congregation that reaches out to the broader community is important to me.

Back in 2014, when my income was far less than my monthly expenses, I generally managed to drop a dollar or two in the collection basket on a Sunday morning, but I *didn't pledge*. In 2015 things

got slightly better, and I pledged an amount that put me in the lowest category of giving units. Because there was almost nothing left after taking care of the barest of necessities, I pledged almost nothing. Still, it was a pledge.

Gradually, with fewer expenses and added work, I regained a modicum of financial stability. In 2016 and again in 2017, I managed small increases in my pledge amount.

It is impossible put a dollar value on all I've received here. But I know that the ongoing success of UUSS rests on all of us, as it has rested on so many who came before us.

So here I am, Tuesday evening, having added another round of cashews to the teacup, listing expenses in one column, expected income in the other, wanting to be realistic about maintaining a cushion, about allowing for some indulgence, such as these Costco cashews, while not allowing *for too much indulgence, such as Costco's 82" ultra HD LED LCD TV* would be.

Finally, after playing around with numbers, and percentages, and vowing not to refill the cashew cup one more time, I push the *percentage amount of my pledge from the "getting started" column on the chart to the "deepening commitment" column and send off the email.*

And now that I've avoided the taint of hypocrisy, I urge you, also, to consider what UUSS means to you and to the community, to contemplate the value of supporting love, and justice, and healing and to, if you've not already done so, make your pledge. If you want to indulge yourself in some really good cashews while you do the job, I can tell you where to get them.

[Stewardship Campaign for UUSS in 2018-19](#)