

No Laughing Matter: Committed, Loving, Generous

UU Society of Sacramento
Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching
Stewardship Sunday, April 7, 2024

Hymns: The Tide Is Rising (and So Are We), Blessed Spirit of My Life, Blue Boat Home.

Choral Gift: Connected, by Brian Tate.

Reading: Yard Sale, by Sharon Ammens, *The Sun*, April 2024 (printed after sermon)

Sermon

When I returned from sabbatical in early February, our Stewardship volunteers were already hard at work, and they had come up with a theme for this year's pledge drive. It is Committed, Loving, Generous. Well darn, I thought! As the preacher, what the heck am I supposed to do with that? I suggested some alternatives. How about this: *Nobody Can Stop Us Now/ Unless We Don't Raise Our Pledging*. Or maybe this: *I Upped **My** Pledge/ Up Yours*. Maybe **not**, they replied. Actually, that second one has been making the rounds on the internet since before there was an internet.

As with all things that can make us anxious, humor can loosen us up and lighten our spirits. Nobody needs this more than the volunteers and ministers who work on a pledge drive. Yet while humor is helpful, it is also true that supporting our mission is no laughing matter.

I know that some of you today are here for the first time, just checking out our church. And here you are, just in time for the pledge drive kickoff! I am tempted to apologize, but I'll just say that what you see today is one example of how a free congregation pursues its mission—by talking openly about our needs and goals and about the values that matter to us. Thank you for being here as we do that.

Or perhaps you are watching this online, from far away. You may conclude that making a pledge to this congregation is not relevant for you. That's understandable. But please don't log out *or* tune out. I think that the words of our campaign's theme have relevance to everyone...beyond these walls, beyond state lines, and even beyond the pledge season.

I took some time to think about our theme, Committed, Loving, Generous. I realized that all three of these values reflect a practice—a spiritual and ethical practice.

For example, consider commitment as a practice. Twenty-six years ago, when I was ordained to the ministry, I made vows to my UU colleagues and the congregation I served. The ministry has been fulfilling and joyful for me, but there have been tough times over the years. When they've happened, I would try to pause, breathe deeply, and remember my commitment. I remember what a privilege it is to do this work alongside people like you. Commitment is practice.

Another example: When parents welcome children into their lives, they make a commitment of love and care. It feels right, but it's not always easy to keep that commitment. (Or so some of you have told me!) I am inspired by the fortitude of those who live out such a commitment. Keeping a commitment is not like flipping a switch labeled Yes/No; it is a practice to which we return. We become better at it by doing it.

We often think of Love as a feeling, which it is, but it's also a practice. Reacting with kindness is a form of love, and it is a practice. So is being patient. Showing respect is a form of love. Respect for another's beliefs, their choice of pronouns, their humanity. Another way to love is by giving someone the benefit of the doubt. Loving is not automatic. We become better at it by doing it.

Generosity is a practice too. Making monetary contributions is just one example of that. Devoting some time to be of service is a practice. So is helping out, offering food, and showing warmth and hospitality. We learn to be generous when we practice generosity.

Neither you nor I can make another person be committed. We can't make them be generous or loving. All of these virtues depend on each person's heart and conscience. You can't force it. To think that you or I can control another person's heart or conscience is the way to frustration. We can only ask and encourage one another to do so. And we can choose how *we* wish to live ... committed, loving, generous.

In the reading today from Sharon Ammens, she bought a teapot for \$10 at a yard sale in her new neighborhood. She later found out it was worth a lot more and sold it. Then she felt uneasy about the windfall. She had the impression that the lady who'd sold her the pot wasn't in good financial shape. She concluded that she should share half the \$250 with her neighbor and went looking for her. Sharon gave her half, then had tea in the lady's home. Then she decided to give the rest of the money to the neighbor, who burst into tears. Soon after, the neighbor gave Sharon back \$10 as a refund in an envelope. "Remember the good you did today," said her note.

I wonder how Sharon learned to be so generous. I wonder how she learned to reflect on the situation, look into her heart, and reconsider her actions. Perhaps it had been the formative influence of a parent, or a grandparent, or a teacher she had known. Perhaps it had been a spiritual community, like this one. Maybe her community had given her a sense of abundance and goodwill. I like to imagine it was like that, and I like to imagine we are doing that here: teaching abundance and generosity to one another—adults and children alike.

Last year, a member of our Stewardship Team found a pledge brochure while visiting a liberal Christian church in town. She wasn't looking for another spiritual community; she was attending a funeral. Our team studied the brochure, which is where we learned the concept of the stairstep graphic which is now on our Stewardship web page. Also, what jumped out at us was, when using that congregation's brochure to calculate their average pledge, it appeared to be \$330 a month, which is twice the size of *our* average monthly pledge. I contacted their minister to inquire. *Is that accurate? If so, how did you do it?* He referred me to the chair of their stewardship committee to answer my questions. She and I met a few weeks ago for a conversation over coffee.

Their congregation is about the size of ours, and involved in many of the same local partnerships as we are, especially serving people who are unhoused. Their church has a similar mix of backgrounds, singles, couples, and families with children. It has retired people and younger generations. Yet they have a bigger staff and a bigger budget.

How? I asked. She described how they run their pledge campaign. I said, "Oh, we do that." Things like member testimonials on Sundays, website videos, emails, and a letter

from the ministers. “Oh, we do all that. *Plus*, we give out cookies and a sticker after you pledge!” Actually, I didn’t say this part.

She said, “Really, I don’t know why it’s successful, but it just seems to me like this is a generous congregation. “*Oh, my congregation is generous too!*” I didn’t blurt this out, but I wanted to. I was there to learn from her and not be defensive on your behalf. She said, “We make it clear that nobody is going to do this *for* us. No outside organization funds our staff and programs. It’s up to all of us.” We say that here as well—because it’s true.

Then she said something, almost as an afterthought, which moved me and stuck with me. She said, “Some people think that they will pledge more generously *later*, when they feel more like part of their church. But I think it’s the other way around. Giving *ensures* our sense of belonging. The more we commit ourselves toward its mission, the more we feel we are a part of the congregation.”

I have been thinking about that idea. As we give more generously, we can deepen our sense of belonging.

Today, as we launch the campaign for the next budget year, let me say this: Pledges in every amount are valued and appreciated. I hope you hear this. Your pledge is your decision to make, and we want it to be the right pledge *for you*. Your pledge makes a difference. It makes a difference to our staff, our ministers, our members, and our mission. I hope it makes a difference for you too, and I thank you for it.

I know there is capacity for deep generosity in this congregation/ because I’ve seen it. Already a few households have increased their pledges by 10%, 20%, 25% and more. A year ago in the pledge drive, some people whom I know (who don’t have large incomes) raised their pledges by 50%. Thank you! Back during the pandemic, when most people received stimulus checks from the federal government, some of you gave away that money. Some contributed to local organizations doing emergency support in the community. Reverend Lucy and I didn’t even ask for it, but a few of you made monthly donations to the Ministerial Discretionary Fund here at UUSS.

For the coming budget year, I am raising my pledge toward the mission of this congregation. It will be more than 6% of my gross income. This was not an easy decision/ before I made it. But after making the pledge, it felt right. I realized that I could stretch myself in giving and still enjoy the same standard of living. And I will enjoy a deeper connection to our mission.

There are so many organizations, campaigns and causes that need our support. I try to give about 5% of my income to a bunch of them. It takes discipline to make priorities for our donations and stick to them. Sometimes, however, I can’t resist a new appeal, because I want to feel a part of it, so I give something. But a few things are different about supporting a congregation. Nearly all of our donors are members and friends of the congregation. We don’t have thousands of contributors the way most not-for-profit organizations do. What this means is that your gifts here can make a big impact. And by increasing your pledge, you can make a greater impact. And you can see the *results* of your giving up close. On Sunday mornings you can even *hear* the results, as we have today with Anthony, Irina, and the choir.

Giving to this community is not merely a response to what you receive here, though that’s important. Through your generosity, you make so many things possible for other

people who participate, and for people who will be looking for a place like this in the near future. Let me mention a few things that your generosity makes possible.

In the programs of religious education, our staff provides a safe place for toddlers to connect and play together. We help the older children to have a good time, learn our community's values, and gain a sense of belonging. Our youth groups offer a safe space for young people to talk about what's deep and important in their lives. In the next budget year, we are committed to offer the sexuality education program called Our Whole Lives (OWL). Based on the values of honesty, personal responsibility, informed consent, and self-respect, OWL promotes health and wellbeing. For decades, OWL has been a ministry that saves lives.

You may never have called our office to ask a question but let me tell you, it seems that everyone else *does* call. Members call to ask where something is happening or when, or to make a donation. Some call just to hear a friendly human voice. A few neighbors call to complain about something. People from the larger community inquire about all kinds of things. They ask for help, referrals, and the time of our services. They ask: *what is Unitarian Universalism?* Oh my goodness. I was working here last Monday, which was a holiday. I made the mistake of answering the phone every time it rang. On Tuesday morning I said to Elaine, our receptionist, thank you for what you do.

As you may know, more than 75% of our budget supports the compensation of our ministers and staff members. Our staff have rent and mortgage payments. They have mouths to feed. Some of those mouths belong to furry, four-legged creatures with tails, but other family members are the two-legged variety. Our staff relies on the jobs we provide.

The pledge drive materials on our website refer to our employees as dedicated. We use that word, *dedicated*, because we mean it.

For example, last month our facilities manager, Krystal, came down with a bad cold on a Friday. She went home sick but took her laptop to keep up with what she could. There was going to be a rental event on Saturday night here in this room and a circle service the next morning, on Sunday. She came in after the renters had left and rearranged the chairs. (A circle service is not an easy thing to set up for, and nobody else can get the chairs in a circle just right.)

Most of the time, people aren't aware of the work of our audio-visual team unless there is a glitch in the transmission, or a gremlin has messed with our expected smooth flow of the service. Yet what seems to be smooth to us can be challenging in the AV room. Two months ago, while working on the service, back in the AV room, one member of the team got a message on their smart watch. It indicated they were having an abnormal heart rhythm. Scary! Our staff member stayed through the service, and then left quickly to have it looked at. That is more dedication than we ask for! However, this person didn't want to leave coworkers in a bind or leave *us* without the technology we need for a service. Fortunately, they are doing very well and feeling fine. Thank you so much!

Our goal is to end the pledge drive in two weeks to enable the Board of Trustees to propose a budget for the coming year. And after it's all over, the volunteers on our Stewardship team will be relieved and grateful. So will I.

And after it's over, I will give thanks again for what I call a miracle of community. This is what I mean by that. Every one of us decides on a financial commitment. Every one of us trusts *everyone else* to be as generous as possible. And when we do this, we make wonderful things happen. What we do *together*—I call that a miracle.

The more we commit ourselves toward the mission of the congregation, the more we become a part of it. Giving *ensures* our sense of belonging.

Let's not wait for that sense of belonging mysteriously to show up somehow—let's bring it into being.

Let us not wait for the chance to live a life as deeply as we can. Every single day is an opportunity to practice our values.

Every day gives us a choice to be committed, loving, and generous. Let our choices reflect our sense of abundance and gratitude. Let our choices reflect our love and our hope. So may it be, blessed be, and amen.

Reading

This reading is a contribution to the April issue of *The Sun*, a literary magazine, on the topic or prompt of "Yard Sale." The writer is Sharon Ammen from Westchester, Illinois.

My husband and I had recently moved back to the US after living in Germany for five years. At a yard sale in our new neighborhood, I noticed a beautiful teapot with a pattern of blue flowers peeking out of an abundance of greenery. It resembled some of the cups and saucers I had brought home from Germany. Checking the price tag, I asked the elderly woman slumped in a lawn chair, "Does this say ten dollars?"

Mistaking my question for an attempt to negotiate, she offered, "How about eight?" I assured her that ten was fine. She wrapped the teapot carefully in newspaper before putting it in a bag.

At home I found that the pattern did not match anything I owned. I also saw an unfamiliar maker's mark on the bottom of the pot and decided to have it appraised. My husband and I were on a strict budget in the 1980s, so when an antique dealer offered me \$250, I thought I had hit the jackpot. We had dinner out to celebrate our good fortune. That night I dreamt of miniature blue flowers surrounding a woman in a faded housedress. She seemed to need the ten-dollar bill I'd handed her.

The next day I walked back to the house where I had bought the teapot. Before I could have second thoughts, I explained to the woman that I had made money selling her teapot and wanted to share the profit with her: \$125. She burst into tears and told me that it would help with her husband's medical expenses. We ended up having tea and a long conversation. As I was about to leave, a wave of guilt washed over me—did I *really* need that money?—and I insisted she take the remaining \$125.

I was halfway down the block when the woman ran after me to give me an envelope. "This is for you," she said. When I opened it at home, I found two five-dollar bills and a note that read, "Sharon: You forgot your refund. Remember the good you did today."