

Grounded in Love, Growing Our Mission

Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones, preaching
Stewardship Sunday, March 3, 2019

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #347, Gather the Spirit; #95, There Is More Love; Answering the Call of Love.

Reflection by Frances Myers; Testimonial by Tracy Jones and Cynthia Davis

Sermon

Whenever I'm preaching about stewardship or pledging in our congregation, I am aware and mindful that there will be brand new people visiting a service and checking us out. So, if you are a new person here, I encourage you to imagine on this day that you are the guest in a family's home for the first time. And you are invited to come into the kitchen of that home. Imagine you are at the kitchen table, and you can hear the family describing how things get accomplished around here, which includes talking about money. And, after they talk about that, somebody offers you a cup of coffee and a piece of cake. That's what's going on when we talk about making a financial pledge to support our staff members, our programs, and our mission. Thank you for being our guest at the kitchen table.



And since you're here, I'll tell you that stewardship season is tough on my nerves, every single year. It's stressful because behind the numbers in the budget are real people with real jobs. I want us to compensate our staff members fairly and competitively and with appreciation for their talent and hard work. So here I am doing what I'd rather avoid, working on Stewardship.

A mitigating factor for this work is to be able to serve with our wonderful Stewardship Committee, and its chair, Bobbie. Nevertheless, I wanted to know: "Isn't there an easier way?"

So much tension and uncertainty, waiting for at least 350 pledges to be turned in to know what kind of budget we can fund for the coming year. "Bobbie!" I said. "Soup Sunday has been so successful this winter. Your team of coordinators has it down pat, and our volunteers at UUSS are good soup-makers. Why don't have a Soup Sunday every week of the year, and cancel the pledge drive? Let's raise our budget with soup!"

She took me seriously. Bobbie always takes me seriously. She did the numbers. "Well, Roger, by my calculations, this means every bowl of soup will cost \$500," she said. "How do you think that would work out? Which kind of heartburn would you prefer?" So here we are on pledge Sunday. (Not everything I just told you about that conversation is true.)

But it makes me think of a story about Horace Greeley. Born in 1811 and died in 1871, Greeley was a famous writer *and* a Universalist. He's remembered for his journalism, especially as the editor of the *New York Tribune* before the American Civil War. He hired the first woman foreign war correspondent, Margaret Fuller, who was a Unitarian. He's known for quotes like, "Go West, young man," and "Common sense is very uncommon."

Apparently, he had all kinds of expertise. One day he received a letter from a lady stating that her church was struggling in a difficult financial condition. My source didn't say if it was a Universalist congregation or some other kind. The lady said they had "tried every device they could think of [to raise funds]—holding fairs, strawberry festivals, oyster suppers, a donkey party, turkey banquets..., mock marriages, grab bags, a box sociable, and a neck-tie sociable. Would Mr. Greeley be so kind as to suggest some device as to keep the struggling church from disbanding? Greeley replied: "Try religion."

That's what we do in a stewardship campaign. We look to one another as the people who make this religious community what it is. We fund our budget and our mission/ because of our shared principles and commitments as Unitarian Universalists. Unlike the person who wrote to Horace Greeley, ours is not a struggling church. Yet we strive to be engaged in the *struggle* for compassion and justice.

For the coming budget year, I am raising my pledge toward the mission of this congregation. It will be more than 6 percent 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. However, let me say this: Pledges in every amount are valued and appreciated. Every pledge makes a difference. Your pledge makes a difference. It makes a difference to our staff, our members and our mission. Thank you.

Stewardship means caring for what has been entrusted to you, sustaining it, and passing it forward. Centuries ago in England, the word *stewardship* meant the care of a meeting hall or a piece of land. It still includes that meaning, as reflected in the cleanup work done along the river by our monthly group of USS American River Parkway Stewards. But less physical things also need stewardship, like the mission and purpose of an institution or a community.

We recite our mission statement to remind ourselves that we are caring for it, sustaining it, and passing it forward. Not only that, but we are growing in our sense of mission. In December dozens of you sat down and wrote holiday cards to immigrants detained by ICE in the Yuba County jail in Marysville, letting them know that they are not forgotten. They are remembered; they are loved. Some of you visit the detainees every month. Thank you.

On weekday mornings, I walk by a classroom here and see volunteers teaching English as a Second Language to women refugees from Afghanistan and other countries. In the nursery next door to it, more USS volunteers are caring for the children of those women during class.

Afterwards, the families tend their plots in our community garden. We are growing our mission.

You may have read about Mercy Pedalers, a new local organization. Its volunteers bike or drive to areas where homeless folks are sheltering or congregating. Volunteers provide hot coffee, conversation, and referrals to places that offer help. They offer items like water, energy bars, dry socks and clean underwear. And they offer dignity by getting to know homeless neighbors *just as people*. Mercy Pedalers started in Midtown and other areas within the central city. But since last year, Mercy Pedalers have been serving here in this Arden Arcade neighborhood. And it is members of this congregation who are making it happen. Grounded in love, we *are* growing our mission.

You may or may not know that a portion of our budget supports the Universalist Association and the Pacific Western Region in which we're located. This is a voluntary contribution we make to the larger denomination--the UUA for short. In one sense, it pays for the consultants on the UUA's field staff and for people at headquarters in Boston. It funds outreach, publicity, social action organizing, and lifting the UUA's voice for justice.

But really, in contributing to all this work, you and I are supporting other UU congregations, over a thousand of them. By our contributions, we are supporting the services that help other congregations pursue their missions in their communities, all around this country and beyond. By supporting the UUA, we nourish and help congregations we may never visit and never know. Grounded in love, we reach out beyond ourselves.

Last week at B'Nai Israel synagogue in Land Park I attended an event to launch Habitat for Humanity's next Build for Unity project. Through it, congregations of many faiths join in unity to build affordable homes for families who need them. If you are interested in the next Build for Unity project, give me a call or drop me an email.

At the reception, I spoke with the young woman who is the new CEO of Habitat for Humanity of Greater Sacramento. When I told her I was a UU minister, she told me that she and her spouse are members of another Sacramento

congregation that's active in the community. When they got together, she said, they chose a church of a different denomination than the two in which they had both grown up.

And she grew up as a Unitarian Universalist! She spoke of participating in her youth group in the UU church of her home town, and told me she valued the early mentorship of the volunteers. She said she had been active at many regional youth conferences for Young Religious Unitarian Universalists, or YRUU. Of course, it would be delightful to have her and her family attending here, but I'm grateful that her leadership and her values are making a difference in this community.

We can't always know how our support of this congregation and the growth of its mission will radiate out beyond the circles in which we gather at this location. But such examples remind me: our mission has an impact far beyond what we can see right now.

One way the mission has been growing is through our energetic Family Ministry Team. Not only have we had a good time making Valentine's cards and cookies, or singing carols, making decorations for a Christmas tree in the Welcome Hall, and meeting Santa Claus—in his best incarnation ever!

Not only have people of all ages and stages of life shared meals and played games together. Our team has provided space and time for parents and grandparents with kids to meet one another and visit at greater length than they can on a busy Sunday morning. Our all-ages activities give me—and all of us—a chance to get acquainted as people in shared community.

The Family Ministry events held here are times when kids come to know this *very big place* more deeply as their place, as their home, grounded in love. Whether the kids move on from here or stay here all their lives, we want younger people to be nurtured while they are here. When they visit over Christmas break from college, military service or another occupation, we want them to receive a warm welcome. Both by new faces and familiar old

faces, words of kindness and welcome can make a difference. Thank you.

What does it mean to be grounded in love? It doesn't mean we expect everyone to like us or that we'll like everyone else. It doesn't mean that all of us like the same things about UUSS, or that we'll agree. What it does mean is that there is a larger purpose than our own individual tastes, needs, likes and dislikes. You may not like every aspect of every service, but you can trust that it is meeting the need of another person. Love is bigger than any individual or individual personality.

To be sure, you won't feel drawn to everyone here. Now and then you may feel hurt, offended or misunderstood by another. Now and then you may cause hurt or offence. You or I may not be as understanding as we would aspire to be. We are not always as kind as we wish we had been.

This is what it means to be imperfect and human. This is what it means to be part of a community. But in a healthy community, grounded in love, there is a chance to try again. All the time we have new opportunities to grow and learn.

Perhaps you can think about moments in this congregation where you were treated with kindness. It might have been something subtle and ordinary. Most kindness is ordinary, but it makes a difference. This is what it means to be grounded in love—to aspire to kindness and to appreciate it when we receive it.

People tell me they want to hear something personal in every sermon. Well, I can tell you in person, that I love you. In addition to that, I want to recount a personal example showing that congregations provide places for love to take place and for kindness to flourish.

I was a young seminary student serving my ministerial internship at a small congregation in a depressed New England city. A woman from the church and I were co-facilitators of an Adult Religious Education course on spiritual topics, with 9 participants. At our third meeting, we were going around the circle, each person responding to a question. A quiet middle-aged man surprised me by speaking about a long-held grief. He said, "My father died when I was a little boy, unexpectedly. I

still feel bad that I never told him that I loved him.” While crying, the man said: “He died and he hadn’t heard me say I love you.” As he cried, we paused in silent witness. Then my co-facilitator thanked him for his openness about such a sad thing. As a minister in training, I didn’t know what to say.

I wasn’t a child when my father died, but I was 14. He’d been ailing at home for a while, but a heart attack wasn’t anticipated. My parents and I had a practice of saying “I love you” and giving a kiss on going to bed at night. On a Tuesday night, I was leaving the house for the night to stay with an elderly relative. When my dad asked for a goodbye kiss, I said “no.” “I might get whatever you have,” I said. In truth, I was feeling resentful and surly, and I was unkind. The next day, he died, at age 60. So you might understand why I was not in a position to say much to this man about his own regrets.

Eventually the next person in the circle spoke. About 40 years old, this man and his wife and son recently had started attending the church. He looked at the man across the circle who had just spoken. “Before I answer these questions, may I share something with you?” he said.

Yes, the other said.

“I’m a dad. And even though my little boy hasn’t said it yet, I know he loves me. I can see it in his eyes when he looks at me. I know. Your dad knew. He knew that you loved him.” We got quiet again. Through tears, the other man responded, “Thank you,” and soon we continued our class. This moment of kindness was a gift, intentionally to the other man and also to me. I remember this, now 23 years later. That act of ministry happened within that particular church community and it happened because of it. My co-leader and I had organized this class, put the chairs in a circle and the chalice on the table in the center. We led the UUA curriculum, yet we could not have engineered that show of kindness and that moment of love. This memory is one thing that keeps me inspired and willing to do the work to sustain this community.

The story reminds me that being “grounded in love” is not merely for pledge drive themes, it is why we are here together—to be grounded in love,

and to grow as people, and to stretch as a congregation living its mission.

People tell me they want a sermon to give them something to do—a spiritual practice to take away, a helpful instruction. Well, on Stewardship Kickoff Sunday, I have three things. One is to stretch to make a generous pledge to the operating budget. Two is to do it sooner rather than later, so our Stewardship volunteers and Board of Trustees and I can sleep a little better.

The third thing is to express thanks—thanks to yourself for stretching, and thanks to all those around us whose generosity and love make it possible for us to come together and grow our mission. Express thanks for the gifts of kindness you experience and observe and receive. Express thanks for the ways that you see yourself making room for others in this community. Thanks for the ways you see yourself choosing to show kindness, sometimes by your words and sometimes by your quiet listening—by your actions and your presence.

This is what it means to grow. This is what it means to come together in community. It is a precious gift. It is an opportunity. Let us be grateful and give thanks. Now in this moment, and in all the days to come, let us give thanks. Amen.

Benediction:

Before we depart for celebration, cake, and conversation, let us have the benediction.

For this community and its growing mission, let us give thanks. For everyone here and everyone yet to seek and find this community, let us give thanks. And now, may you depart in peace and return in joy. Amen.