

Meeting the Moment: Tending to Community

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching
Stewardship Sunday, March 27, 2022
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Opening Words

We build on foundations we did not lay.
We warm ourselves by fires we did not light.
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.

We drink from wells we did not dig.
We profit from persons we did not know.
We are ever bound in community.
May it always be so.

This is as it should be.
Together we are more
 than any one person could be.

Together we can build across the generations.
Together we can renew our hope and faith in the life
that is yet to unfold.

(from Deuteronomy chap. 6, adapt. Rev. Peter Raible, Rev. Scott Tayler)

Music “Nella Fantasia,” by Ennio Morricone, by Anthony, tenor solo; Irina, piano; Cynthia, cello, Thomas, trumpet, Mary, violin.

Sermon

Thank you, Irina, Anthony, Cynthia, Tom, and Mary! Anthony, your solo just now during our pledge drive stewardship kickoff brings to mind the old saying: singing for your supper. And these days, singing for your rent and for your gasoline and car payments as well. Thank you.

In this congregation, the next 14 days are the *moment* when we make our pledges of support to fund the budget for the coming program year. Some preachers joke that the title of their sermon to kick off the stewardship campaign is, *wait for it*, The Sermon on the Amount. I would never make that joke. There is some truth to it, because we do need to talk about money in an open and honest way.

However, the joke hides the spiritual dimension of this campaign, the spiritual dimension of stewardship. The word *stewardship* means receiving what has been handed to you, and tending to it with care, and making sure it is available to hand on to future generations. As today’s opening words put it: *We drink from wells we did not dig; we sit in the shade of trees we did not plant*. So, at the heart of stewardship is the practice of tending. Our Stewardship theme is *Meeting the Moment: Tending to Community*.

There are so many ways we do that here. Every Sunday the coffee is ready. Every Sunday there are greeters in the Welcome Hall, and our online Zoom room is open. Twice a month adult volunteers lead youth group meetings here on campus.

Ever since the pandemic began, children from kindergarten to grade 5 have been meeting on Sunday mornings on Zoom, for a program called Soul Kids. Miranda Massa and volunteers have been tending that community for two years. Today we are happy to announce that next Sunday morning, the 3rd of April, Soul Kids will come here to campus! Miranda and I look forward to greeting all the kids over in Classroom 7 & 8. By the way, we are also looking forward to April 17, when we hope to have some adult volunteers to hide Easter Eggs around the playground. Let Miranda know. (However, the job of Easter Bunny has already been filled.) Our Kids Freedom Club has been planning to host a Pancake Breakfast fundraiser on the 1st of May, the first one in three years.

The Stewardship Committee is inviting each of us to name three ways that we enjoy tending to this community and write these on the website or Facebook page. One person answered: 1) Feeding people; 2) Growing things; 3) Keeping an open heart. Another person got carried away and wrote four things: I show up. I sing in the choir. I lead hikes. I make an annual pledge of financial support.

This week you will be asked to post three ways that you enjoy tending to community and read what others have written. The Stewardship Committee itself tends to our community by leading this campaign. This means they've been meeting once a week, preparing materials for the website, and writing Stewardship emails you will receive over the coming days. I'd like to thank them now: Co-chairs Tiki and Kathleen, Sally, Deirdre, Patti, Jim, and Celia. We have staff support from Michele Ebler, Krystal Gollaher, Dirk Tuell, and Elaine Cooper. I've been blessed to work with them. Their enthusiasm gives me hope and assurance. Hope and assurance that I'll have a job here as of July 1, when the next fiscal year begins.

There are so many ways we tend to community. On Thursday mornings here on the church grounds, our groundskeeping volunteers are busy mowing, trimming and raking. We call them the Grasshoppers, perhaps because they move so quickly. And on many days of the week, many other people are active on campus, tending to community. Thank you.

Another group that is tending to community is our [Service Auction Team](#). As the spring and summer approach, this team is inviting us to host events, lead an outing, serve meals, or provide a helpful service, all of which will be auctioned off as a benefit to the church. By their work, this team is helping us to make these gatherings possible, to build connections, and to have fun!

A few years ago I was having coffee with a clergy colleague who serves a church in another denomination. I knew it was a larger church with a lot of programs, but I didn't know how large. For comparison, at USS we have approximately 400 voting members, closer to 500 people when you consider all who participate here in some way or another. So I asked: "How many members do you have?" The answer was over a thousand members. "Holy smokes!" I said. "I had no idea." But the other minister was quick to add, "Oh, but there are only 50 families who are keeping the church afloat." This was astonishing. I guess it works for them. I admit that I was tempted to ask if I could be introduced to a few of those people. Surely they wouldn't miss one or two of them.

But I realized that even if it works for their church, that is not how most of our Unitarian Universalist congregations operate. Here, we ask everyone to share, to pitch in to support our mission, our programs, our people. We ask every one of you to do your part, but how you

respond is a voluntary decision. We put our *faith* in your decision. We put our faith in one another.

If you have not pledged before, here is a little background. Most members and pledging friends make a monthly pledge and pay it monthly. Some people give out of current income, others out of accumulated assets. In terms of setting the amount, we suggest making a pledge of between 3% to 10% of annual household income.

Of course, we are an economically diverse community. Every pledge is valued and appreciated. Some of us pledge more because we know that others cannot. I pledge just over 6% of my yearly income to this congregation and I give another 5% to other organizations, causes, and campaigns. I do this because I can. I do it because I believe it can make a difference. *But please hear this:* If the ordinary needs of life are a hardship for you, this community wants to be here for you. Please know that your presence with us is your first and most important gift. Showing up is the primary way of tending to community.

Pledging serves a practical purpose--planning the budget. And it serves a spiritual purpose—renewing our faith in this congregation’s mission and the power of what we can do together.

The Stewardship Committee and our staff have made the technical part of pledging pretty efficient, through our [website](#). Of course, you can pledge on paper or by phone if you prefer. That’s available too. But the spiritual part of pledging is up to you. The moment when you make your pledge is an important moment. So, take some time to reflect on what you can do. Consider what it will mean. Your decision is not a moment to rush through. You know, I find it amazing: by this totally voluntary mechanism, individually we pledge our support, and we trust that everybody else will do their part as well. We put our faith in one another.

If you have pledged before, today I’m inviting you to think about making a very large increase in your pledge. Even if you already turned in a pledge, you can always raise it, no questions asked! And I’d like you to consider if you can double your current pledge without any change in your financial security or your standard of living. I found that to be true for me, back when I did it.

Over nearly 25 years in the ministry, I have heard some other Unitarian Universalists testify that they did make such a large increase in pledging, and it didn’t hurt their standard of living. But it did raise their standard of commitment. It energized their sense of belonging and possibility. This is my invitation to you and my challenge to you, but of course the decision is yours. We put our *faith* in your decision. We put our faith in one another.

But you may be thinking something like this—War is raining down on Ukraine. Due to global warming, there is climate chaos on every continent. Species are dying, people are hungry. With this world in such a perilous moment, how can we talk about simple things like taking care of the church? Doesn’t it seem trivial, when people are trying to flee bombs and rockets, for us to celebrate our ordinary activities for fellowship? At a time like this, how can the church be talking about book discussions, theater performances, spiritual deepening programs, music, and Sunday services?

Maybe it seems trivial on the surface. But here is how I look at it: The people of Ukraine are pleading for nothing more than to enjoy such ordinary activities, in peace. *What they wouldn't give* to be able to go to church, enjoy music, and share a cup of coffee without fear of bombs? When they pray for peace and insist on freedom, aren't they only asking to be able to watch a play again, have a picnic in a meadow again, discuss a book again, or attend a funeral again, in peace? *How precious it is* that we can come together to deepen our lives in such ordinary ways. May everyone be so blessed.

Or you may be thinking—Why we are giving money to a congregation in Sacramento when we could be sending all our money and all our donations to help the people in Ukraine, or Afghanistan, or many other hurting places. That is always an option, of course.

Yet I am convinced that vital spiritual communities provide a sense of connection and hope which help us to meet the moment together. We are stronger together than we are alone. By tending to community, we not only build strength and effectiveness, we can restore our spirits. We can cry or sing or sit and breathe, together. We can share sustenance—both food and inspiration. We can share laughs and hugs and friendly chat messages and smiling faces. Our impact here cannot be measured by money alone, though financial support makes a difference.

Through the strife and stress of the past few years, newcomers of all ages have continued to check us out as a community of inspiration, mutual care, connection, and ways to make a difference. They seem to be looking for a place to bring their hurting hearts, curious minds, and willing hands. When we tend to community, we are making a place for every new person, just as generations past have prepared the way for us.

In our nation and our world, this is a pivotal moment. It is a moment of turmoil. The possibilities for transformation are both promising and threatening. Tending to community now/ prepares us face our common challenges, whatever any future moment might bring. Shared commitment to shared values can help us to meet the moment.

However your mind and heart respond to this invitation to meet the moment at UUSS, thank you. Whatever you decide is a generous and meaningful pledge of support, thank you. It renews our faith in one another. And that is anything but ordinary or trivial. I hope you can appreciate that. It is precious. It is powerful. For all the ways you are tending to community, thank you. For showing up, for showing kindness, for showing faith in one another, thank you. Blessed be and amen.



Read about the UUSS budget and visit the Stewardship Campaign at uuss.org/pledge