

How Much is it Worth?

The Rev. Paige Getty
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia
Sunday, February 12, 2006

Reading: from *Waking Up the Karma Fairy*, by Meg Barnhouse (pp. vii-x)

Sermon:

Our annual Stewardship Campaign is well underway, and you're being asked this morning to make a responsible and generous pledge of your financial resources as stewards of this congregation. It's the perfect time, I think, to be reminded of the Karma Fairy—that “force that causes what you send out to come back to you.”

But what I really want to talk about today is faith... not costs, not budgets, not you-get-what-you-pay-for. But faith... a faith that runs deep into one's heart and soul, giving meaning and purpose and vibrancy to life. A faith that says, Life expects you to return the favor. and “what you send out [*will*] come back to you.”

Unfortunately, though, we are products of our culture—a consumer culture in which the religious community is treated like every other retail or service operation, and we are its consumers.

“Do you remember the church-shopping couple in the *Doonesbury* comic strip? They had their list. When they met with cartoon character Rev. Scott Sloane... they asked, ‘Does the church serve cappuccino at coffee hour? Is there volleyball on Tuesday evenings? No? Well, the Episcopalians down the street offer a better deal.’” (Durall 32)

The religious community—whether Episcopalian, United Methodist, Jewish, Muslim or Unitarian Universalist—is not a retail outlet, nor a service agency. Ours is a membership organization, and a community of faith. And we must begin changing the way we think and talk about the benefits we receive from being here. Indeed, I think we must stop talking about benefits altogether. Instead, let's talk about faith and convictions and commitment and values.

Today I invite you to reflect on the faith of your heart—a faith that draws you here, and that asks something of you. A visionary faith that is honest about the realities of existence and in turn offers hope in face of despair, revelation in the face of mystery, a shared trust in the face of fear.

You'll notice that the Hegmanns and others involved in this year's canvass have begun referring to it differently—as a stewardship campaign, rather than a canvass or pledge drive. I'm pleased with this semantic shift, because I think it reminds us that we're talking about something far greater than check-writing. We're talking about being stewards of a congregation, of investing in our community, and of fulfilling a mission in our world.

When I hear the word ‘steward’ the first thing that comes to mind is a ship steward. I’ve never been on a cruise, but my imagination creates a picture of luxury, of the guest being served at a moment’s notice by a personal steward who is there to meet every need, desire or whim. It’s not a particularly good metaphor for church, I realize, but it works to some extent when you consider that we all are called to be stewards of one another, of our children, our Earth, and of others in need of transformation. That is, we’re not divided into the stewards and the customers. Rather, we’re *all* stewards. And the needs, desires and whims of this congregation and of our world will be met only by us. It is an interdependent web of existence, indeed.

The other reason I like the word steward is because it draws me away from the idea that this is just about dollars and cents. We’re talking about gifts and generosity. Gifts come in a variety of forms, and anyone who suggests or assumes that only money is valuable is dreadfully misinformed. As stewards—all of us—we’re called to care for one another, and to care for this faith that is nothing if not embodied as conviction and dedication in the souls of human beings.

Now let me be clear that financial resources are important. Unceasingly, our world reminds us what we can get with money, and it’s no different for a congregation—if we want to make a greater impact through outreach to our less privileged neighbors, or support a values-based preschool, or have better facilities and continued professional leadership... of course these things require money.

But money doesn’t do everything. Money doesn’t come in and count itself. Money doesn’t greet newcomers when they arrive at the door. Money doesn’t inspire deep thought and sharing in Intimacy & Ultimacy groups. Money doesn’t comfort a grieving spouse. Money doesn’t hug. Money alone doesn’t beautify the sanctuary with flowers and candles and hand-made table coverings. Money alone doesn’t craft meaningful worship. Money does, of course, allow some of these things to happen, but they are functions of blood, sweat, tears and love... which everyone of us has to offer one another.

Every one of us has gifts to offer. What we do with them is the challenge—and what we do with them *matters*. This is what the Rev. Rebecca Parker says about the choice:

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—
can be used to bless or curse the world.

*The mind’s power,
The strength of the hands,
The reaches of the heart,
The gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting*

Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
Bind up wounds,
Welcome the stranger,
Praise what is sacred,

Do the work of justice
Or offer love.

*Any of these can draw down the prison door,
Hoard bread,
Abandon the poor,
Obscure what is holy,
Comply with injustice
Or withhold love.*

You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude
To search for the sources of power and grace;
Native wisdom, healing, and liberation.

*More, the choice will draw you into community,
The endeavor shared,
The heritage passed on,
The companionship of struggle,
The importance of keeping faith,*

The life of ritual and praise,
The comfort of human friendship,
The company of earth
The chorus of life welcoming you.

*None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility waiting.*

The choice to bless the world is more than act of will,
A moving forward into the world
With the intention to do good.

*It is an act of recognition,
A confession of surprise,
A grateful acknowledgment
That in the midst of a broken world
Unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.*

There is an embrace of kindness,
That encompasses all life,
Even yours.

*And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil
There moves a holy disturbance,
A benevolent rage,*

*A revolutionary love
Protesting, urging insisting*

That which is sacred will not be defiled.

*Those who bless the world live their life
As a gesture of thanks
For this beauty
And this rage.*

That's what our faith is calling us to: humble recognition and gratitude, confessions of surprise at life's mystery, contributions of grace and beauty amidst a broken world. Blessing the world "as a gesture of thanks..." And that's the kind of congregation this can be—ever more and ever better than it already is.

I'm not interested in being part of a congregation that views it self only as a social outlet. I know you get those things in your neighborhoods and your bridge clubs and your square-dancing groups. And I'm not interested in being a part of a congregation that is *just* a place for your children to get some religious teaching—you can and must do much of that at home. I'm not interested in being part of a congregation that exists only to help us feel good about ourselves.

I'm interested in being part of a congregation that understands its own power to act in the world and transform lives—one person, one relationship, one community at a time. To be engaged with compassion and righteous outrage in the face of injustice, and to say that my faith demands that I do something about it. I'm interested in being part of a congregation that is generous in thanksgiving to the Universe for its blessings in our lives.

Arthur Simon is a Lutheran Minister and founder of the organization Bread for the World. He writes (in his book [How Much Is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture](#)), "The problem is not that we've tried faith and found it wanting, but that we've tried mammon and found it addictive. As a result, following the precepts of the church is inconvenient." (Durall 61)

I am the first to admit that the mammon is, indeed, addictive. I am as much a participant in our consumerist, materialist culture as the next person. As each of us considers how to be responsible stewards of this community of faith, we will be asked to give as generously as we can of our financial resources. We also are hearing more from our Shared Ministry Facilitator, who is helping to set up ways for us better to know one another's *other* gifts. As you answer these calls and these questions, "You must," as Rebecca Parker urges, "answer this question: What will you do with your gifts? *Choose to bless the world.*"

Ask not, "What does it cost to run the church?" but rather, "What is the value of this congregation's ministry to the world?"—a world of which we are a part, of course, but which also exists beyond these walls and is crying out desperately to be saved.

I invite you to be faithful stewards of vision in which you believe. If you profess truly to have faith in what the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia has to offer to you and the world, then don't look at the budget. Don't look at what it costs to maintain our residence in this building. Don't look at whether there is more money budgeted for office supplies than there is for religious education. (There's not.) Don't even look at how much is being considered for outreach beyond this congregation.

No, first look inside you. Ask yourself, what is the value of this congregation's ministry? How much faith do I have in the ability of this particular community to impact lives and transform the world? How much is this congregation worth? Is my life more meaningful and purposeful because this congregation is here? Do I have faith in its ability to grow even more meaningful and purposeful if we share our talents and gifts and resources? What could we do *together* that we can't possibly do separately?

What is the value of this congregation in my life? ½-percent of my resources? 2 percent? Ten? How much is the faith of my heart and soul worth? It's kind of like asking the value of a life, isn't it? Because a faith that saves souls by offering hope for the future, the promise of acceptance and compassion of a loving universe, encouragement in the face of doubt, comfort in a time of despair, justice in a time of greed and bigotry... A faith like that, well... It's priceless.

Amen.

Works Cited:

Barnhouse, Meg. Waking Up the Karma Fairy: Life Lessons and Other Holy Adventures (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

Durall, Michael. The Almost Church: Redefining Unitarian Universalism for a New Era (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Jenkin Lloyd Jones Press, 2004).

Parker, Rebecca, President, Starr King School for the Ministry. Cited by the Rev. Ellen Rowse Spero, First Parish Unitarian Universalist, Chelmsford, MA, "Choosing to Bless the World," May 16, 2004, 12 February 2005 <<http://www.uuchelmsford.org/Sermon040516.htm>>.