

What Gifts Can We Bring?

A sermon by the Rev. Jackie Clement
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What gifts can we bring, what present, what token to express the joy we find in this community, to reflect our gratefulness that here there exists a home where all are welcome, that says that the values we live are important? Today, as we look toward the beginning of our annual pledge season, we consider the gifts we bring to this community and the gifts we receive here. Although we know it flows both ways, this is not a barter system so why is it that we have a canvass anyway? Why are people trying to give me pledge cards? How has this come about?

It is the only method of church support that I have known in my lifetime and possibly the only you have known – voluntary contribution by the congregation of the church. But it was not always so, and the fact that it *is* so is closely tied to the history of our denomination and the separate histories of the denominations from which we spring, histories that were much in tension around this issue of financial support.

Let's start with the Unitarian side, actually a few years, oh say 200 years give or take, before there was anything like a Unitarian in North America. Our New England churches began with that brand of Puritanism unique to early 17th century America. As each new town, parish or plantation was legislated, a new church was needed. In order to found a church seven or more “founding stones” were required. The “founding stones” were living saints who could publicly testify to their religious conversion. They entered into covenant to become the church and to walk in the way of Jesus, and were thus entitled to conduct and vote on the affairs of the church. This notion of covenant based on a way of being in relationship rather than on belief is key to who we are as a religious body even today. Yet all inhabitants of the town or the parish or the plantation, even those who professed no personal experience of grace, were required to attend services. Having made no public profession they were not fully members and held no vote in church affairs. Thus the congregation was split between church and parish with all in attendance but few in power. The church, not the larger parish, called the minister, yet it was the parish that supported both institution and minister through taxes. Our very own local version of taxation without representation. The minister was both a religious leader and a secular one. With the title of Pastor and Teacher of Public Morals, he (and it was most assuredly *he*) was considered the “spiritual magistrate” of the town. And everyone paid taxes, which went to support the church and its minister.

Enter our Universalist forbearers. Although heresy laws existed until the Revolutionary War forbidding worship outside of the Standing Order Puritan churches, as in all things, change came to New England and Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist and Quaker forms of worship began to appear. As did Universalism. John Murray, often considered to be the father of Universalism in America, was prohibited from preaching in Gloucester,

Massachusetts and those who would insist on listening to his message of universal salvation were expelled from the town church. So Murray and his followers founded their own church in 1779. Ripe with the concepts of separation of church and state central to the newly founded nation, the Universalists challenged the laws requiring them to financially support a church that they did not support theologically.

So here in the late 18th century we have the two wings of our religious heritage squared off against each other. The Standing Order churches, which over the next 50 years are to become Unitarian, are dependent on parish taxes for their survival. And the upstart Universalists are challenging their right to state support. Of course, the Universalists ultimately came out on the winning side but it would take decades for theory to be accomplished in fact. It was 1818 before Connecticut's churches became disestablished, 1819 in New Hampshire and Massachusetts continued state support of the Standing Order churches until 1833.

Without tax support, other methods were needed to support the churches and so the sale of pews became common practice. Each year a family would purchase the right to sit in a particular pew, with prime seating locations fetching a higher price not unlike theater tickets. But of course since church attendance was still a key social and political as well as religious requirement a place had to be made for those who could not afford to pay for a pew. Then in 1841, Unitarian James Freeman Clarke founded the Church of the Disciples on Beacon Hill in Boston. Clarke's church was revolutionary in its celebratory style of worship so different from the sparse liturgical style of its Puritan ancestors. But Clarke's church was as revolutionary for its founding principles as for its worship style, principles which did away with the sale of pews in favor of participation by all through contributions of both money and time.

Clarke's vision was a noble one, though in reality our churches, especially the Unitarian ones, were largely supported by one or a few very wealthy members well into the 20th century. The Universalists had a more centralized model where state conventions held a good deal of the money, which was used to help individual churches.

But today we come to both an economic reality and a philosophical stance that says that support of our churches is the responsibility of us all. The church belongs to us all. We are all tasked with its support and its nurture. We have tried other ways and those ways proved imperfect. This one too has its strains. People have strong feelings about money and people have strong feelings about religion. Mix the two and it can be volatile. I have seen people resign from churches because the canvass brochure provided a chart that indicated what your yearly pledge would break out into on a weekly or daily basis. I have seen people storm from the sanctuary in a huff because the minister talked about money from the pulpit. I have known perfectly wonderful, generous people to stop coming when the church started taking a collection during the Sunday service. We don't like feeling like something is being demanded of us, not from a place that is supposed to accept us fully and nurture us. We have a tendency to want to make it a competitive sport, to know how much others are giving and give more or give less or feel grumpy either way. Our culture so strongly ties our sense of self worth, our ideas of success, to money that we

carry many and sometimes very deep feelings about money. But money is not only a reality of our culture, it can be a means to spiritual growth, not money itself, but generosity which can be expressed through money as well as through other means. But we are awfully awkward, I find, when it comes to talking about money and generosity.

When my husband and I first joined the Unitarian Universalist church we had no idea what a reasonable pledge was either in terms of dollar amount or percentage of income. We wanted some sort of guideline, but we Unitarians often mistake guidelines for creeds and are wary of giving them. Everyone we asked was reluctant to make so much as a suggestion. As a result of our ignorance and our own ingrained issues about money we gave far too little for far too long. I'm glad to say we finally snapped out of it and gave an amount to our church commensurate with our ability to do so. And commensurate with our belief in Unitarian Universalism and the mission of our church.

As a denomination we UU's often sell membership short. Many of our churches do not require a financial contribution of any sort for membership and those that do often require simply a "contribution of record" so that one dollar will do. I love that we are open to all regardless of financial status. I think that should be true always. But those of us with the ability to contribute should hold ourselves to a somewhat higher standard of what it means to be part of this community.

In the time of the Temple, the people of Israel were required to tithe, to give 10% to support the Levitical priests. On top of that they were expected to give tzadaka, charity to the poor. The same is true in Islam where an expected donation of between 2.5% and 10% is assessed not only on income but on savings and voluntary contributions above that are common. In some Christian denominations tithing is the expectation.

But our tradition is different. Although our heritage lies in the Jewish and Christian traditions, our more immediate tradition is that of the New England Standing Order churches and those who challenged them. Voluntary association is a key value. But UU's, among the wealthiest of congregations in US, give the least to support our religious institutions. We say that what makes us unique is that we try to live our faith rather than simply require adherence to a body of beliefs. I believe we need to start taking membership more seriously.

There are five things I think we should expect of ourselves as members of this church:

1. To show up – to come and participate in worship services, the core time of gathering for our community where we seek together, laugh together and mourn together, where we are one in community.
2. To do your own spiritual work – we are here to accompany each other, to encourage and help one another along the way, but no one else can do your spiritual work for you. Membership means taking spiritual growth seriously.
3. To work to heal world – whether through our joint projects or through efforts outside this church, our faith calls us to engage in creating a just, peaceful and equitable world.
4. To support this church by offering your time and talents to further its mission.

5. To support this church by offering your financial support to whatever level is responsible for your situation.

That said, I think I should share with you the reasons why I cannot pledge this year. We are a household of doubles. We have two cars, but one is ten years old and the other fourteen. We might need new cars soon. We have two houses, having never sold the one in Massachusetts when we moved here, so we are paying maintenance and taxes on two houses, one of them in Taxachusetts. Although we seem to have two of everything we have now and for some years past had only one income. These are the reasons I cannot pledge. There is only one reason I should pledge – because I believe in Unitarian Universalism, in this church and in you.

In fact, as soon as my pledge card arrives I will be giving 10% of my salary back to this church that had the faith to call me as its minister and welcome both John and me as members. I give it gladly.

The first time I heard someone get up in church and say they were going to tithe and urged others to consider doing the same, I got a bit lightheaded. That's a honking lot of money, 10% of your income. But after I heard it enough times it got a little less scary. It is of course not the only option. Modern tithes urge 5% to your faith community and 5% to other charities. The UUA urges us to give between 1% and 3% based on level of income. Only you can determine what is right for you and for your family. Only you can determine the meaning to you and your family of having this community and having a liberal religious voice in Central Illinois. But I urge you to seriously consider whether 2% or 3% or even more is possible. While the reasons I stated for not pledging are all true they are not the fullness of my life. We have no children to put through college. For years, we did have two incomes and have always been savers. We might need new cars, but we are not what you would call high rollers and our needs are modest. Only you know the fullness of your life. Only you can determine what is responsible to your family and to your church. May you come to a place of comfort.

I feel good about our pledge. And I always feel scared about being able to live up to it. But I have finally, at long last, come to give with joy.

This church inspires joy. What we have here in enthusiasm and programs and care for each other is worthy of celebration, and worthy of our support. Ours is a covenant based on a way of being in relationship rather than on belief, a covenant we inherited from our Puritan forbearers, but a covenant we reaffirm today. May generosity of spirit be part of that covenant. May we bring our lives to this place with joy. May we care for it as we are able. May it care for us when we are not. May we all share in the spirit.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.