

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“The Price of Community”

Rev. Sam Trumbore February 28, 2021

Opening Words

The Buddha said, ‘When you see someone practicing the Way of giving, aid that person joyously, and you will obtain vast and great blessings.’ A monk asked: ‘Is there an end to those blessings?’ The Buddha said, ‘Consider the flame of a single lamp. Though a hundred thousand people come and light their own lamps from it so that they can cook their food and ward off the darkness, the first lamp remains the same as before. Blessings are like this, too.’

The light we offer is the flame of Unitarian Universalism. Everyone who encounters us and receives our flame, also receives our blessing. Yet, though the flame is not consumed, the lamp needs oil to continue to burn.

Frederick Bueckner wrote: Generosity begins at the crossroads where your deep joys and passions intersect with the world’s deep needs, blessing *you* with the opportunity to live life graciously and with integrity.

Our theme for this service is being gracious and generous to this congregation. Communities only thrive when they are generously supported. May this service inspire your confidence to support its work.

Geoff Abbas, our stewardship co-chair, is joining me this morning in presenting this service. He will be offering the readings and part of the sermon.

Readings

The Widow’s Offering (Mark 12: 41-44 New International Version)

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

Lauren Tyler Wright shares her story:

In grade school I had a box of sixty-four Crayola crayons. It drove me crazy when kids would borrow them because, inevitable, they would blunt the sharp point of the crayon, put them back in the wrong color order, or, heaven forbid, break one. Truth be told, it took me at least a month after I got the box to actually use one of the crayons because I wanted to keep them perfect for as long as

possible. That's how much I valued the little bit of control I had over those sixty-four uniquely colored objects, they were mine.

When I eventually came around to the idea that my crayon box was not really mine in the first place but was rather on loan to me for a while, I discovered a surprising sense of freedom—of relief, almost. I was freed from fretting over the inevitable demise of each perfectly sharpened crayon tip. I still had a momentary anxiety attack when I heard snap and saw a classmate with a piece of crayon in either hand. But I released the worry in my heart about messing them up and was freed simply to enjoy what had been loaned to me and to share it with others.

When you are able to see every component of your life ... in this way, you find that you worry less and that giving generously is no longer threatening or a chore. Instead it becomes a life-enriching experience that underscores the abundance of what you do have. The secret is learning to hold your possessions more loosely. It's a strange paradox, but it's true: when you loosen your grip of control on your stuff, you find that you actually appreciate it more than you did when you clutched it for dear life. You also discover a freedom with (and from) your possessions that leads to joy in the act of giving.

Sermon

The theme for this month has been Beloved Community. The idea of Beloved Community is still new for many of us. As I mentioned last week, our heritage is as a Unitarian mission church sent out from Boston in 1842 that fizzled around 1876. We experienced institutional revival by The Methodist minister, William Brundage, born again as a Unitarian, who brought our congregation back to life in 1894. This was the age of the Social Gospel, the call to realize the realm of the God Jesus proclaimed here and now, through social uplift. All through the 1950's and 1960's our congregation strongly supported civil rights, integration of schools and the end of Jim Crow. We were strongly on the side of women's reproductive rights and worked for the first bill in New York State to permit abortion. This congregation has a strong and proud history of working for freedom and justice.

Changing laws and supporting social programs, good and necessary as that work is, is not the same as the inner transformative work needed to change individual hearts and minds. Changing white supremacist patterns within institutional and individual behavior is quite different when done working from the inside of one's heart and mind. These 400-year-old and older cultural patterns of behavior in predominantly white spaces *are invisible* to those immersed in that system. Anyone of marginalized identity immediately knows they are not at home when in a white space.

The vision of transforming our congregation from white space into Beloved Community space where all feel welcome and included is difficult and challenging. The first step is for white folks to wake up to recognizing the culture and practices that signify white space. These qualities of white spaces, by themselves, may or may not be good qualities. The problem is the expectation and enforcement of those qualities as "normal" or the way we do things.

A good example is perfectionism as an expectation in white spaces. Now, I like perfectionism. I aspire to get everything right and have things flow smoothly. I like a Sunday Service that has everything working perfectly. Yet I also appreciate the humanizing, leveling qualities that come with *imperfections*. I know I have reading and speech defects partly due to blindness in my right eye that interfere with my ability to read flawlessly. I practice and work to overcome those eyesight limitations. Yet I also strive not to project white space expectations of perfection on others. In Beloved Community, there is room for many different speaking styles and communication methods that can be effective, moving, transformative and meaningful. Beloved Community isn't about *rejecting* any loved components of any culture. It is about *expanding* our appreciation and inclusion of diverse cultures and ways of being in the world.

What can feel unpleasant is if one culture or ability or identity is getting featured ... and mine isn't. I see a lot of reactivity right now among white folks who feel the shift as, *more* of the time, they are *no longer* in the center of the circle. It is critical for white folks to know that they are *still in the circle* and *still valued*, just not *always* the center of attention anymore. The goal of Beloved Community is to draw the circle *wide enough* so *everyone* has a sense of inclusion and there can also be multiple centers.

I want to be clear that becoming a Beloved Community is aspirational for Albany UU at this point. It is a direction, though, that our congregation can commit to grow towards. That's what the 8th Principle is all about. When visitors to our congregation who have marginalized identities praise us for our growth and development toward Beloved Community, *then* we might feel some satisfaction – satisfaction that I hope will further energize that growth and development rather than cause us to rest on our laurels.

Even if we haven't realized being a Beloved Community yet, there is still a great deal of value here for everyone. With Anne Marie Haber's leadership, we've been across from the Troy Farmer's Market with Black Lives Matter signs on Saturday mornings. Many of us risked our health to be part of Black Lives Matter protests after the murder of George Floyd. We've had now three classes on Robin DiAngelo's White Fragility book. Right now we have 28 of us in the Racial Healing Class. Our congregation massively supported the UU the Vote campaign. Our Green Sanctuary Committee keeps our focus on Climate Change. We had a Great Forum on Beyond Plastics with Judith Enck. We just had a forum on alternatives to fossil fuel heating. Our Caring Network and our Pastoral Care Associates support a relational network of love and care for our members and friends. Leah's family ministry work supports families. Social events like the Wine and Cheese event last night, Circle Dinners, Meaning Matters, the Choir, Albany UU Sings, the Philosophy Group, the Walker Book Club, all connect people at deeper levels than can happen on Sunday morning. And finally our Sunday morning Buddhist meditation, service and RE for All round out weekly opportunities for lifting hearts, broadening minds and motivating the work of justice.

All the ways people find value and connect can't be listed here. The yearly **Annual Report** is a great record of all we do. Today, we're encouraging you to make a commitment to support that work.

Good morning! My name is Geoff Abbas and I am here this morning as co-chair of your annual Stewardship Campaign!

Thank you Sam for those highlights of many of the wonderful programs that are active here at Albany UU. And as Sam suggested, there are even more programs than could be mentioned this morning!

I am not here to ask you to purchase season tickets for these programs and Sunday services or sign up for a subscription. I'm not even here to ask you to buy a membership...

That is not how community works.

When we light the chalice at the beginning of our service we say "Welcoming ALL FREE seekers of truth and meaning...", not "Welcoming all those who paid the price of admission."

We do not buy our way into being part of this community, it is not a commercial transaction between a buyer and seller.

At its core, community is a relationship built on shared vision and trust.

Our vision is to be an inclusive, welcoming congregation. Our sacred work is to lift hearts, broaden minds and do justice in the world, in service of building Beloved Community.

Many different things will be needed to keep us moving forward in this vision.

First of all, we need you to be here participating in this community. Without all of you, there is no community... so to each of you here this morning, to each of you who watch this recording later on and to each of you who miss this service and participate in our community in other ways, thank you! We would be less without each and every one of you, no matter how frequently or how long we are together, you are appreciated!

We also rely on the varied experiences, perspectives and expertise of our community to volunteer for child care and education, to work for social justice, to offer compassionate listening, to care for our building and grounds, to name just a few opportunities.

And finally, it takes money. Money to keep the lights on, pay the Zoom subscription, compensate our staff, keep our various programs running and accessible and fund the pursuit of our vision.

So, during this season of your stewardship campaign, how do we find the balance, how do we ensure that, as we aspire toward Beloved Community, we will continue to move away from the transactional roles of buyer and seller, consumer and supplier? I suggest we focus on our community relationships and our trust in one another.

We are this community.

Our community has good financial health and it works because we give. It is up to us to fund the budget and fill the volunteer roles.

No one else will move us toward our vision or pay our bills, in the words of the poet June Jordan, "we are the ones we have been waiting for".

We count on annual pledges so we can more accurately plan activities and projects and create a realistic budget. During pledge drives, we are often asked to consider how much we value what we receive from an organization and to then give accordingly.

This year, I'd like to invite you to consider a more relational question, "What can I do to further support and connect with my community?"

We trust everyone will thoughtfully consider how they can best participate in, volunteer with and give to our community. We acknowledge not all of us have a steady or reliable income, or the income we have may be just enough or not enough to meet our household needs.

By showing up we get connected to our community, when we can volunteer we get connected to our community and when we make a financial contribution we get connected to our community.

As you consider how you would like to participate this year, please know that no pledge is too small. If you haven't pledged before, please consider doing so. We understand that some of you may need to decrease your pledge from last year or stay at the same pledge level. However, as we look at the next year, a 3% increase in our budget has been forecasted as what we will need to meet our community goals. We are hopeful that many will be able to consider a 3% increase or more for this year's pledge. Whatever anyone decides, we trust you are making a deliberate choice for what is right for your house-hold.

Every person's contribution to our community is valued and appreciated, and every pledge helps us move toward reaching our financial goal of an overall 3% increase. If everyone makes a pledge of any amount, we will reach our relational goal of full participation in this community endeavor.

Thank you, I am most grateful that we are working toward all our community goals...together

Thanks Geoff!

This fall is looking very exciting as we are planning to be back in our building in the fall, depending on how vaccination goes and the infection rate drops. Know that as much as possible we'll be continuing with Zoom as we start using our building. There will be many challenges with the transition into the building again but we want to keep our online presence going as much as we can. This will mean we'll be able to be together on snow days in the winter instead of canceling services! We're in a new world of synthesis between in person and on line. Our hope is that will allow us to stay connected no matter where we are and no matter our health status.

This pandemic has accelerated transitions that were already in process. Who we are and what we do will continue to reach beyond our geographic limitations. May we seize this opportunity to extend our beacon beyond our physical location and shine the light of Unitarian Universalism, of Unitarian Universalist interpretation of Beloved Community, to all those seeking a way to live our principles in a diverse and welcoming congregation. May we bring that to life with your support.

Prayer of Affirmation

Like the tide,
Life in our congregation ebbs and flows.
Some Sundays we grieve the loss of a beloved member
we hear of another having a health crisis or surgery
or of the gratitude for a recovery from illness or injury.

Other Sundays we hear news of a new life conceived,
the birth of a child or a grandchild celebrated,
or a significant birthday marked and remembered.

The cycle of life washes through us in waves
and we respond with smiles and laughter and sighs and tears.

As we grow older,
each one becomes more and more familiar,
even when the passages are not our own families.

May that growing familiarity open our hearts. Open our hearts
that our compassion may also grow and deepen
as we feel more and more connected to our shared humanity.

May that growing compassion deepen our sense connection
eroding and washing away
the distances between us with each swell.

May gratitude grow in our hearts
for the possibility and the opportunity
that congregational life offers,
as the waters of life rise and fall around us,
to love and be loved in a way
that realizes Beloved Community.

- Rev. Sam Trumbore

So be it.