

**“The Fire of Commitment**  
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First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany  
March 2, 2025

**Reading:** The Church That Doesn't Matter by Kelly Weisman Asprooth-Jackson (adapted)

**Sermon**

One way you know you're in a church that matters – we talk about money. The finance committee has been talking about money lately, compiling all the ideas from all over the congregation about what we should spend money on. On Saturday, the Board has a special meeting to look at all those ideas and set some priorities because – being a church that matters – there is always more to do here than we can pay for. There will be a lot of talk about money at that meeting.

And already in this service, Chuck talked about money, and the annual stewardship campaign (which invites the individual pledges that provide the vast majority of the money we have to do what we do here.).

We talk about money. But, we don't like to talk about money. That's a generalization, but as a people, as a church, it's true. Talking about how much money we make, or have, or spend, or give, isn't usually socially acceptable - it's uncomfortable, we avoid it whenever possible. And some of us have had traumatic experiences involving money that can make it even harder.

Here in this congregation, people often speak of generosity with time or talent, but when it comes to treasure, we tread carefully. As you look around this room, or your zoom squares, unless you've had a role where you need to know, you probably have no idea how much money most of the people you see every week contribute to this church. And the very idea that you could know might inspire some squeamishness.

Part of this is our culture, which values financially well-off people more. In that context, a conversation about money feels like it's probing our inherent worth. And if we're not in a position to contribute large sums, it can feel as though we are being judged.

Part of this aversion to talking about money is systemic oppression. If we don't talk about our money, we don't notice the inequities in compensation and accumulated family wealth. Secrecy around money upholds unjust systems.

Part of this is consumerism. We often give time or talent without expecting something in return. But when we give money, it's easy to slip into the mindset that we are paying for something that we will receive. This is particularly muddy in a church – where we do receive something. It's not quite the same as donating to a charity whose work we appreciate but that doesn't touch us personally. Because we receive something, it can start to feel as though the amount we give should be determined by the amount we receive.

But church doesn't work that way. We give for many reasons, but not as payment for services rendered. This makes talking about financial giving to a church a little awkward. It doesn't fit neatly into the framework our society has constructed around money.

And yet, we give. Sometimes in joy, and sometimes not in joy. Because we choose to commit to a church that matters.

I pledge every year to my home congregation, where I became a Unitarian Universalist, 30 years ago. I haven't been there in years - it's more than 150 miles away, and I usually have other places to be on Sunday morning. But I give. Not because of what I receive, but because of what I am committed to.

That's a different way of thinking about money. And for me, it doesn't come naturally. When someone asks me for money, my first response is not to be generous. My first response is suspicion – what are you really going to do with my money? Are you taking advantage of me? Am I giving more than my share? My second response is possessiveness – I worked hard for this money. It's mine. Maybe I don't need it all right now, but the world is a scary place and I or someone I love might need it someday.

I'm not proud of those gut responses, but they seem to be hardwired.

And I'm not alone. Because these responses are rooted in a widespread ingrained cultural sense of scarcity – a deeply held belief that there isn't enough, that we might not have enough, and it's our first responsibility to be sure we can provide for ourselves and those we love. There's some truth in that worldview. As our society is set up, and especially with all that's going on in the world right now, not having enough to meet our basic needs is a real possibility; and a lived reality for far too many. There's also a lot of white supremacy culture in that sense of scarcity – individualism, defensiveness, hoarding ... behaviors that contribute to the inequity in the first place.

I'm not proud of my instinctual response to the prospect of giving money. And in spite of my efforts at spiritual growth, my initial reaction may never change. But that's OK, because I do have a choice about what comes next. We all do. We can – at least sometimes - refuse to act from that place of scarcity, in spite of all that drives us to do so. We can choose instead to give in ways that reflect – not our fear or insecurity - but who we seek to be, and what we are committed to.

There's an old story<sup>1</sup> from many cultures in which a wise teacher, passing through a forest, notices among the leaves a beautiful, unusually large gem. "This is pretty," she says, and she puts it in her pouch and continues on her way.

A little later, while she's sitting under a tree to eat her lunch, a poor man comes along, and asks if she has any food to share.

"I have plenty," she says, opening her sack. She pulls out the gem, a loaf of bread and a piece of cheese. She offers the bread and cheese to the man, but he's staring at the gem.

"Do you like it? Here, take it, too." She says. And she gives the man the gem, the bread, and the cheese. He cannot believe his luck, wraps the gem in his cloak and quickly scampers off.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/virtueethics/workshop9/194339.shtml>

But a few minutes later, he returns, holding out the jewel. "Wise woman," he says, "may I give this back to you? I don't want it!"

"What do you want?" she asks.

"I want whatever it is you have that allowed you to give it away."

Money is practical, but our relationship with it is spiritual.

Our giving is a reflection of our own work, to become people who can choose how we will act, including how we will relate to money. And who push back on unjust systems through our own practice of giving it away. When you give to this church, the amount is entirely up to you. No one will judge you or shame you or applaud you. It's a personal practice of generosity. When you give to this church, you are committing to a vision of who you are, what is within you that allows you to give.

And you are committing to a vision of what this church is, and what it must be. This is a church that matters; there is something here that is worth committing to.

What is that, for you?

We all might answer that differently, but here are a few possibilities that come to mind for me:

- This is a community that notices and appreciates and reminds us of all that is good and right in this world. And, that looks squarely at all that is not as it should be, and reminds us – perhaps by its very existence - that it doesn't have to be that way.
- It's a community that values connection over self-reliance, joy over drudgery, courage over conformity, questions over answers, compassion over being right.
- It's a community that struggles, that makes mistakes, that fails to live up to its own standards over and over but never gives up, knowing that the struggle itself is true and right and needed in this world.
- A community that is learning to use the great gift of diversity to be ever more brave and kind and radically inclusive.
- A community that cares for each other and the most vulnerable, wherever they may be, acting on the truth that we are all in this together.
- A community that lovingly invests in its children.
- And it's a community that offers to the world and future generations Unitarian Universalism's profound message and warm embrace.

There are plenty of other things here that are worth committing to. What is it, for you? Why is this a church that matters, now and for future generations? What is here that must be fed, nurtured, protected and shared with the world? And if you're new here, what might be here that would be worth committing to?

We're going to make a little space - right now – to reflect and then (as you're willing) to share.

So first, as Olga plays a little background music, I invite you to reflect quietly on one thing to which you are committing when you give to this church, or that you could imagine yourself committing to. Just take a moment for yourself.

[break for reflection]

Now, if you're online, I invite you to share in the chat (if that works for you) – your one thing.

If you're here in person, I invite you to turn to someone near you, maybe even someone you don't know well, and share with each other one thing to which you are committing when you give to this church. You don't have to share – silence is always an option. But as you're willing, we'll take about 2 minutes, so you each have time to say a little about what you mean.

[break for sharing]

There's something here that is worthy of your commitment.

That calls you to practice generosity here, by showing up, serving ... and paying for it. We have to talk about the money.

And we really have to talk about money this year. This is not a business-as-usual stewardship campaign, with gentle overtones of NPR pledge drive. Because we are not in a business-as-usual world. In fact, it feels more like a pivotal moment in a very uncertain and dangerous time.

And who this congregation will be in the world as it is becoming depends on the sum total of the individual decisions you make about the money, as well as your ongoing commitments of time and energy. What will be possible for Albany Unitarian Universalist depends on today's dreamers, laborers, and pledgers.

Pivotal moments are scary. Especially on top of everything else, it's asking a lot to invite us all into deeper commitment to this place. But the pivotal moments are when the commitment is made real. You are the people who are loving this church into the next phase of its being. You will decide – with actions, not words – what that will be.

I can't promise that it will be what you imagine. I can't promise that your future includes all the things that you appreciate from the past – in fact, it almost certainly won't. And having seen the spreadsheet of all the suggestions for ways to spend money next year, I can promise you that they won't all happen. But there is something here that matters deeply to the world - in the connection and joy, in the caring and learning, in the courage and strength ... in the opportunities to make a difference, and the reminders that we are not alone and a better world is possible. There is so much here that is worthy of our commitment.

This is a church that matters. Long may it be so.

Amen