

“Live Like There’s No Tomorrow, Give Like Tomorrow Just Might Happen”

A Sermon on Stewardship

March 21, 2010

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A member of this congregation emailed me a wonderful cartoon the other week. It was titled “A Brief History of Theology”, and had two panels. In the left panel, labeled “modern theology”, a man in a suit stood at a pulpit, and he was saying, “What is the divine? Is he an external force, or a force within us? Is he even a he, or is God beyond definition, or even beyond comprehension?” In the right panel, labeled “ancient theology”, a bearded man in a toga was standing behind a rock. And he said, “God wants a bigger goat!”

As a modern pastor I find it hard to put into words just what it is in the world that we might call divine: whatever that spirit and love and justice is that brings us outside of ourselves and connects us with the larger whole. But at the same time I know, with absolute certainty, that whoever or whatever God is, she wants a bigger goat.

Today I have the privilege of giving this sermon on the occasion of our annual pledge drive. Ministers sometimes dread the “sermon on the amount,” as it is sometimes called, since many ministers, like many people, don’t like talking about money. But I’ve been excited about this sermon for a long time. In fact, this is just about the easiest sermon I’ll ever have to write, because this is the sermon where I tell this congregation to be generous. And that’s kind of like telling the sun to rise or set, or telling a river to run downhill. Generosity is deeply interwoven into this congregation’s DNA. It’s a part of who we are.

Everywhere I turn in this congregation, I see generous acts that remind me of the meaning of the phrase “sacred offering”. Every day of my ministry I get to watch people give gifts of the self, gifts of the spirit, gifts we make out of an inner generosity that makes its presence felt in abundance and determined commitment and joy. I’d like to give a few examples of what I mean by this, but of course, I can’t mention any names here or anything, that would be rude, so I’ll just say in a general sort of way that I think about **Shane and Sandy Weber**, who are here just about every week, taking care of Fellowship hour – which about a year ago was short on Fellowship and lacking in food and even sometimes, horror upon horrors, out of coffee, until

Shane and Sandy took over and did their quiet, dedicated thing week after week, bread basket after bread basket, sign-up sheet after sign-up sheet, and they *refused* to let Fellowship Hour go until it was a sharing of food and friendship that everybody was proud we were offering to each other and the world. Or another example – and again, I can't mention any names, that would be too forward of me, but I think about how **Dave Jenkins and Rebecca Goff** show up at that piano Sunday after Sunday, or **Andy von Aulock**, or **George Knoedl** on guitar – playing whatever darn fool hymns the minister wants them to play, never asking for anything but the opportunity to bring a little bit of beauty into our lives. But it doesn't stop here, this living generously. It's not just about Sunday. When I think about generosity, when I talk about a "sacred offering", I wish I could mention names because I'd tell you about **Timothy Brown and Candice Knight** and how they bring their professional counseling services to Interfaith Hospitality Network, to clients in the toughest moments in very tough lives, or how **Jane Jacobus and Becky Engborg and the Natalos and the Denlingers and the Gordeuks and so many more** are there each month at the food pantry and with the homeless, giving food and time and giving of themselves, to try and make sure a few less people go hungry or homeless in this world. Or all our members who gave their Saturday to be at the peace march yesterday and speak up for what they believe, including many kids and youth. And it doesn't stop there, but it goes into our homes, our own lives. People are generous not just in what they're willing to give, but what they're willing to give up. I was eating lunch one day opposite a young man – and if I had enough *chutzpah* and gall to name names, I would tell you his name was **Graham Scher** – I was sitting across from Graham, and he was eating just a bagel for lunch, and I confess, I may have thought to myself, "OK, just a bagel guess he's a fussy eater." Only to learn later that Graham, and his whole family, had learned about ethical eating here at the Fellowship and they thought about it, and they talked about it, and they decided that they weren't going to eat meat unless they knew it was raised responsibly. If they couldn't give the animals a fair life they were just going to give up eating them. And I looked across at the grinning face of this adorable, boisterous kid, and I thought, "wow – I've just been taught a moral lesson today by a 10-year-old."

It'll get to ya, the generosity of this congregation. It can't help but get to you. Sooner or later a little rubs off on you. And it's all over the place: you may be thinking "oh, well I'm not that generous," but really. I could point to most everyone in this room, if we had the time, and say one way that this person gave from deep within themselves, simply because they wanted to

help. I can't teach you how to be generous, not really. That would be like teaching a fish to swim. But I can remind you of it – and I can even, perhaps, help you bring more generosity out of yourself than you even thought you had.

Because we do need to dig deep for generosity. God really does need a bigger goat. What you've given so far – it's a start. In many cases, it's a good start. But I'm here to tell you we could do more. We all could do more.

Studies show that financially, Unitarian Universalists give the lowest amount of any religious denomination. The average UU gives between 1 and 1.5 percent of income. We may do better than this, I don't know. We could hardly do worse. I don't have the percentages, I do know that here at this Fellowship we've scraped by for two years in a row now. Scraped by. Had just enough to cover staff salaries and turning the lights on, and basically that's it. We've just got to do better this year, and I really believe we can. I know times are hard. I know just this week many people's livelihoods have been severely affected by the state budget cuts. I know some of us, many of us – let's face it, most of us – have to make tough decisions about where our money is going nowadays. Some of us can give more next year, and some can't. Some are forced to give less. I know that. But I still believe that collectively, we can do more.

Let me tell you why I want your money. First of all, it's not to increase my salary. You guys pay me fair compensation, and that's enough for me. I'm grateful, very, very grateful, you pay for me to live my life. I could care less about making the big bucks, which is good, 'cos I don't. But you do allow me to be comfortable: to have a home, food, raise a family, all the rest. And I will always be grateful for that.

But comfort is only half of happiness. Did you know that? Comfort is only half of happiness. There's a professor by the name of Tal Ben-Shahar who does a course on happiness at Harvard University, the most popular course at the whole school. Ben-Shahar has studied happiness for decades, and he came up with a very simple formula for happiness. See, there are two halves to happiness: comfort and purpose. Comfort is how we enjoy our present, making the most of *this* moment right this second. Purpose is enjoying our future, having goals, working toward those goals, and having a sense of hope in ourselves and hope in our world. We need both to be truly happy. We need to have the basic amenities of life taken care of – enjoy our food, enjoy good conversation, and we need to have a sense that our lives are meaningful. The poor and hungry, shivering through the winter – it's very hard to be happy when you don't have basic human

needs met. On the other hand, the rich playboy with a yacht and a mansion and tons of things to do – if he doesn't have a true sense of purpose to go along with these things, then he's not happy either.

And my friends, I don't know about you, but I am greedy enough for happiness that I want both comfort and purpose. I want the basic comforts of life, yes. I want three meals a day and good friends and good music on the radio. And I want to *know* that I am engaged in the work of making this world a little bit better for the next generation. And we can do this. We can be the hope of Hunterdon County. We can do it here. We can do it now. We can do it together. But we all need to step up.

What does all this have to do with money? You may ask, why can't we just all pitch in and give our time to a good cause? Because God needs the whole goat, that's why. Studies show that congregations that give the least of their money almost always give the least in most other ways. And congregations that have no outward focus – that are turned in on themselves and their own needs – almost always tend to be the least healthy. They survive a few years, maybe, while they pat themselves on the back, but generation after generation? Not a chance. Imagine if your parents – imagine if the people who cared for you growing up – never gave you anything. How do you think you'd do? Well, we are the parents of the next generation here at this congregation. We have a responsibility to keep this place going, not just for ourselves, but for whoever walks through that door, today, tomorrow, 30 years from now. If we want to be healthy, we want to be happy, if we want to be fully *human*, we gotta give. It's the only way, friends. If we hold back our money – if we say, “well, you know, I don't want to risk giving more than I'm comfortable giving, and I'm sure the Fellowship will be fine,” we will not have the same experience as a congregation that we would have if we took a risk together, if together we gave enough to put our collective trust in this organization's potential to be a meaningful part of our lives and the lives of others.

Stewardship means we take care of this organization and (in the words Andrew shared with us), that this is “Our People, Our Place, Our Promise.” This year, I'm pledging 7% of my income to this congregation. This was not an easy decision for Abbey and I to make. We have a lot of new expenses this year now we have a little one, and more are certainly on the way. Abe may want to go to college someday. We may want to retire someday. I take these goals very seriously, but I also take seriously the fact that someone's going to need this community someday. In fact

people need it today, they'll need it tomorrow, they'll need it weeks and months and years from now. I'm proud to be able give my money to something that I believe is nurturing the spirit and expanding social justice.

Where is all this money going to go? I certainly have my hopes for it, as does the Board. We have an amazing Choir Director, Joanna Lovell, who is carrying on the incredible musical legacy of Vera Dodd in her own unique way and we currently pay Joanna for 3 hours a week, which doesn't seem to me befitting our generosity, because she's already working more than that. And I know she could do even more if given the tools to succeed, if she had a few more hours she could organize our music program so that every week, at 9:15 and 11:00 am, we had first-rate music each and every Sunday from our astoundingly talented cadre of musicians. And I also want to help our amazing leadership succeed, they take no salary for all their work, but I want them trained and ready to go, I want to us give this upcoming Board all the tools they need to make the next two years two of the most exciting years of our lives. I want us to be fighting poverty and living environmentally and spreading a message of hope and love and tolerance throughout this county and beyond. And also, while I'm naming my hopes, I want us collectively to be giving outside of ourselves. Almost none of our congregational budget goes outside of ourselves. Most of it goes to staff salaries, the rest to utilities. Now, as I said I'm glad you pay me – and I'm also aware that you pay me not just to serve you but to serve the world, and that's why I'm out there on the steps of Trenton lobbying for equal marriage, or the peace march in Washington, or teaching 8th grade classes about the value of diversity. I'm also aware, and very proud, that in special collections we gave \$1,700 dollars to help Haiti and hundreds more for Norwescap and for the Unitarian Universalist Association. But we can do even more. Because I'll tell you, friends, having a minister is not a good enough reason for us to exist. Learning a few principles and having a nice chat about the world isn't enough for us to exist. There's more to give. God wants the whole goat, friends. And if there is no God, well, then our job is that much harder, because then we have to be the voice of love in a love-starved world. Then we have to be the ones telling every gay and lesbian couple in New Jersey that we will not rest until every couple in this state has the right to marry, because we are the voice of love in a love-starved world. We have to be the ones building a global greater consciousness – built on reason and mysticism and understanding and love. This isn't anybody else's job, folks. The angels are busy, and the only Saints I've seen marching in our kids each Sunday. This is our job, folks. It's time we lived into it.

Ultimately, I don't know for sure exactly where the money I pledge is going to go, and I don't mind not knowing. It's an act of faith, a trust in our shared potential. I want us to be the conscience of Hunterdon County. I want us to ask David Bowie to lead a worship service. I want people to drive, bike, walk, or sleighride miles to come here, because they know this place will offer them a good meal and a more meaningful life. I want us to be willing to drive, bike, walk, or sleighride to wherever people need us the most, because we are the change agents in a world that needs help. . I want to know we live for today and give for tomorrow, that we seize every moment of our lives and in our fullest living we exist for others. And I want you to be a part of it.

Because this ain't no social club. This ain't no navel-gazing convention. This ain't no spirituality seminar. This is where we do the work of meaning-making and the work of justice. This is where we put our hearts when we want to believe, when we need to believe, that the beloved community is possible. And we're going to give it every ounce we have. Because there's something out there taking and blessing whatever we got to give. It might be God or the Goddess. It might be the spirit of love and justice. Or it might just be the homeless woman blowing into a bowl of soup. But whoever it is, whatever it is, if we don't give it our all, if we don't put the full potential of ourselves into the offering pot of our own lives, we may someday look back and wonder what might have been if we really lived this life to the full. May we have the courage to live into our deepest selves. I love you, friends,

AMEN

Benediction:

Sisters and brothers, take good care.

Take good care of yourself,

for you are a beautiful and worthy part of the cosmos,

and you deserve to live a good life.

Take good care of each other –

live so that your life is a comfort to another soul.

And take good care of this community –

for the world needs us to be the most

grounded, inspired, bold and generous people we are capable of being.

Go in peace, go with love,
AMEN

(note: Tal Ben-Shahar's book, referenced in the sermon, is Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment).