

The SERMON on the AMOUNT\$

Pledge Sunday 2019

I have used this title before and may well use it again. For years, I kept finding different titles for talking about how important it is that we support our congregations, until a friend, parishioner, and UU Fundraising Consultant who bought me lunch a number of times told me that the sermon for pledge Sunday is always the Sermon on the Amount. Not that I entirely agreed with him on any number of matters, but I was sad to see him die a year or so before I left Little Rock. Dave Rickard was a good man, who literally gave at least a big share of his life to Unitarian Universalism. He lived a good long life and died mowing the lawn, but his commitment to this movement and to his local congregation were beyond question. So I dedicate this Sermon on the Amount to Dave!

This year we have been using trains to talk about Stockton and this congregation. We could also have talked about steam powered paddle wheel river boats, many of whom brought loads of Gold seekers to Stockton as the place to embark for the Mother Lode, but railroads arguably have had a far more lasting impact. Stockton was long served by predecessor railroads to the remaining two main western railroads, Union Pacific and BNSF. The Southern Pacific, now part of Union Pacific, ran regular passenger service into the Bay Area long before the Ace Trains. And Amtrak still runs the San Joaquin Service trains. I was hoping that the high speed rail project would make it this far, but that may now be delayed far into the future. I was hoping to have such trains around when I retire in case I don't have the energy to drive! Well, before I go any further down those tracks, I suppose I should talk about the church.

Much of the railroad development and the corresponding growth in Stockton, has come during the more than a century since 1st Unitarian was founded and during the almost 6 decades since it became 1st Unitarian Universalist, with most of that time in this church on this corner. There wasn't much here when the American Unitarian Association helped the church obtain this land and put up this building. (They didn't have to worry much about parking back then.) We can legitimately claim Unitarian Universalist activity as early as July 4, 1862, when Thomas Starr-King spoke in Stockton in his effort to keep California on the Union side in the Civil War. Starr-King happened to have been ordained as both a Universalist and a Unitarian back in Boston before coming out to become the Minister of the Unitarian Church in San Francisco.

This congregation has long been known in the community for its Justice work, especially from the long tenure of Rev. Bob Green. We also have become known as a Welcoming Congregation to LGBTQ persons and as a religious community that supports Music and the Arts. Lately we have been working on Homelessness, Immigration, Education, and Ecological concerns. For a small congregation, we keep pretty busy, and we are involved in a lot of issues! There are times we struggle with our limited numbers and limited energy, but then we get back to doing all that we can to make Stockton, San Joaquin County, California, the United States, and the Earth better, healthier, more loving and more just! As a small congregation, we realize that we need to leverage our power through coalitions, and our members are involved in various religious, political, and civic organizations in Stockton and the surrounding area. We often collaborate with other congregations and are currently involved in the Family Promise program, an Eco-Interfaith collaborative, and the Faith in the Valley organizing effort, just to name a few!

Why should we each support 1st UU, you might ask. First and most important, is that 1st UU offers us each a community, a family to belong to, and a place where we can each share our stories.

In this crazy 21st Century world, there aren't a lot of places where people will take the time to listen to each other's stories. We share here our joys and concerns on Sunday mornings, and then people ask us about the things going on in our lives. We take time to get to know each other here. We spend our time with each other in Covenant Groups and Classes and Meditation Groups and even Committees. We spend enough time together that we really get to know each other and to connect with each other more than at the superficial level that we find in most of our dealings in our workplaces and out in public. That opportunity for community is the most important thing for most of us.

Beyond that there is the matter of the things that we believe, religiously, politically, and ecologically. For many of us who came to Unitarian Universalism as adults, it was a huge relief to find a community with like-minded, rational people. I know that I spent far too many years dealing with people who had expectations that I would believe in God and Jesus in ways that just didn't make sense to me. That also affected the way they thought I should treat people in any number of categories, and that just didn't work for me. I have always believed in treating women and men equally and I have tried never to discriminate against persons of color or LGBTQ persons. Though I do think Jesus treated people equally, somehow too much of Christianity has conflated sex roles and blatant discrimination with religion. It was a relief, and like coming home, for me to discover Unitarian Universalism, and so it has been described by many others over the years. As Emerson and so many others have written, what we believe matters. To find acceptance in a place where we are free to believe what we believe really makes a difference.

Many people come to church or come back to church to find some kind of Religious Education for their children. Even though we are a small church, we have always tried to offer a significant educational experience to our children, as well as adults. We are hoping to expand our Religious Education program in coming days.

We live in challenging times and we have seen a resurgence of bigotry, racism, sexism, and heterosexism under the current national administration. It has become more important again for many people to have a safe place where they can be real, such as we can offer to whoever comes, but especially to LGBTQ persons. Many of the protections for such persons have been and are being removed under the current administration. Hopefully we will see a return to civility and respect for all sooner rather than later, but in the interim, we stand uniquely forward in accepting and welcoming all persons of good will who wish to join us.

In terms of religious demographics, the fastest growing segment of the US population is the un-churched, the religiously disenfranchised. That is the group to which we have always had the strongest appeal, those who cannot find a home in more traditional religious communities. But not enough of them know about Unitarian Universalism and we have never been good at promoting ourselves or evangelizing. There are lots of people out there who could benefit from the kind of community that we offer, but they drive right past, thinking we are an ordinary church. One of the best ways that we can each serve this church and this movement is by inviting our friends and neighbors to come and visit and give us a try. Many of you have done that, but there are still lots of people out there who could really do well here.

We also do well to serve the church by taking on responsibility to serve on the board or on any of the committees, or to attend groups or join the choir and more fully engage in the life of the congregation. There is always more that we can do, more that we can offer as a progressive congregation. We are already doing great things, but there will always be new ideas, new programs, new opportunities to consider. And yes, I know only too well that those of us who are getting older have limited energy, but many possibilities capitalize on what we already know or do. It helps to have new suggestions so that we consider doing things in new ways!

And of course, another way that we serve the church is through our financial support. It's strange, but as many years as I have served as a Minister, it never gets cheaper to run a church! Some years we may only need a cost of living increase, but all too often things break or new staff members are needed and we need a bigger increase just to keep things going. Over the years I have served as your minister, I have watched the proportion of my compensation going to health insurance rise far more than the increases to my compensation. Under the Affordable Care Gold Plan which I need due to heart issues, my insurance is now over \$16,000 per year. It will be a big relief when I can sign up for Medicare! I totally support single payer health coverage! But other church costs also continue to increase.

We will not ask you for a tithe or any specific amount or percentage, but we are asking that you give generously to support this congregation, increasing your gifts when you can. The work of this church provides community, family, opportunity, safety, education, encouragement, caring, and so much more. If you cannot give more financially, then give what you can in service to this community. 1st UU is worth our generous gift of time, talents, and fortune.

First Unitarian Universalist Church has been around Stockton since the days when railroads were running Steam Engines. 1st UU has been around through all of the era of Diesel Electric Engines and the era of early Electric powered trolleys and trains. With your support we will still be around when high speed electric trains make it to Stockton.

We say it often, but this congregation is almost entirely dependent on the financial support of its members and friends. We get a little bit from rentals and from past bequests, but mostly we depend upon each other to support and sustain this congregation. If we each give our share and add a little more each year, this church will be around far into the future,

continuing to make a difference in Stockton and in the lives of members and friends.

I thank you for your presence today and for your commitment to the values and principles of Unitarian Universalism. I thank you for your support of the work of this congregation and my ministry. I thank you for your generosity of spirit and pocketbook. May we continue to be blessed by our life together here at 1st Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton!

So May it Be!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!