

Covenanted Community- what's it worth?
First Parish in Needham
February 25, 2007
Rev. Dan King, preaching

Good morning. I am honored to have been invited to speak with you today. It is a mark of your continuing hospitality and welcoming to our extended family.

Some of you have gotten to know Nina and me and our family over these past few months since we joined this congregation in September, but this is my first time in your pulpit, unless you count the time I was standing right here on the edge while I was singing bass a couple of weeks ago in the music service. One of the great things about choir singing is that there's at least the possibility that you didn't notice when I missed all those notes. A sermon doesn't allow that doubt.

In our brief time together here, you may have learned a little about our history. You MAY know that I served a growing Unitarian Universalist congregation in Georgia as their minister for 9 years after a 15 year career as an attorney, manager, and executive in small business in Texas and South Carolina. You MAY know that I worked for several months as an administrator for our Unitarian Universalist Association on Beacon Street until I recently took consultant status to return to my calling in parish ministry.

But you probably DON'T know that I am a celebrity by association. There are at least a couple of reasons for that, ASIDE from my longtime acquaintance with the world-famous John Buehrens.

Nearly thirty years ago, I am sure I had a short chat with God when the two of us were alone in a hotel elevator in New York City. You may remember God, as I do, most clearly in his form as the actor George Burns, born Nathan Bernstein, in his greatest movie role.

I've been tempted to write a book about my conversation with God, but I would have to start with the observation that he was at least two feet shorter than I would have expected, and smelled of cigars.

I could also be considered a near-celebrity because I have personally been mistaken, not for God, but for a particular movie star several times. In auspicious locations like a grocery store in Georgia, a black barbershop in Oakland California, and an elevator at 25 Beacon Street, people have stopped me to ask "Are you Billy Bob Thornton?"

You may not see a resemblance unless I consciously imitate the handsome character he created in a film he wrote and produced, Sling Blade. Not particularly flattering, I must say.

But this illusory connection to celebrities helps me make a point. What you see depends on your background and experience, your emotional reaction to what you feel and what you think you perceive, and not strictly to the rational facts you're presented with.

In Nina's family of origin, this week is the beginning of the Christian Lent observance of sacrifice and renunciation of the flesh. For some of us, Mardi Gras, Carneval, and Lent are marvelous cultural traditions without rational connection to our daily lives, but for others, like Nina's mother, there are much deeper meanings, so she has always given up coffee or sweets for 40 days as a symbolic reminder of the sacrifice of Jesus.

Knowing the importance of both rational and nonrational factors as motivators of our behavior, I want to talk with you for the next 20 minutes, about why I think we often choose to be generous.

My colleague Dan Hotchkiss, who also used to look a lot like me, until I started losing my hair, is a congregational consultant for the Alban Institute. Recently, in a monograph about generosity in church life, Dan observed: "To succeed, a congregation needs a lot of people to show up regularly, give generously, and work hard." "Why do they do it?"

Each of us may have a different set of specific reasons we choose to be generous, or find ourselves unable to be generous. We could resort to the model provided by the Unitarian novelist, Charles Dickens, in his characterization of Ebenezer Scrooge, whose miserly habits could only be transformed into generosity by supernatural intervention.

We could refer the question to the scientists at the National Institutes of Health, whose brain studies and behavioral experiments showed biological evidence that there are two major areas of the brain which are stimulated by generous behavior: the part that connects us to 2 reward reinforcement, the part that is also activated by sex, drugs, and money. But the second part of the brain which is involved is the part which is influenced by social attachments and trust. The scientists believe the two areas work together, enabling humans to make what seem to be altruistic decisions of generosity, because it literally feels good. That's why it's true that we give to feel good.

But those literary and scientific explanations are more about HOW humans give, rather than WHY. The WHY question, it seems to me, calls for a spiritual answer, a theological explanation about what it means to be generous.

To get to that answer let's start by thinking just a moment about how we feel when we have to ASK someone for money, and compare that to the feeling we experience when we're selling something, offering something of value in exchange for money? The easiest example- when we trade in a car for a newer model. Or when we sell a condo or house, or in a more extreme case, when we're applying for a job, especially when we don't have a job. We may feel awkward and vulnerable, or we can try to approach the situation as a positive, an opportunity for an exchange, for mutual enrichment, a win-win.

But, from a different perspective, when we buy something with money we've earned, the moment we sign the papers for the new car, the new house, when we exchange our money for something we are totally sure that we want, we need, there is sometimes a perfect moment when the object of our desire becomes ours.

For that singular moment, many of us have an ecstatic high. It may not last long, but it's an affirmation of self-worth, a sense of YES!

For some of us, a more long-lasting, enduring thrill comes when a person or an institution we care for accomplishes a goal that we were involved with, or somehow required a sacrifice from US. When we, or our partner or child or grandchild gets that first job or graduates from a special program or school, and we participated in making that possible, there's a warm glow of satisfaction, of shared triumph. 3

Perhaps for some of us, there was a vicarious thrill when the Red Sox won the Series and the Patriots won the Super Bowl, especially the first time. But that actually had little to do with US, individually or collectively, except from some kind of attenuated tribal identity.

But for many of us in this room, the announcement that YOU had exceeded the goal for the recent capital campaign to make the improvements to this church building which we need so desperately- this was profoundly personal accomplishment that almost all of YOU truly participated in.

Let's turn that around: How do we feel when someone else is asking US for money? My lawyer answer: it all depends: What's the context? What's the money for? And who's asking me? In other words, what's our relationship?

It has been asserted that the most enduring relationships, like marriage, are covenantal. But what exactly is a covenant? The late Dr. Frank Schulman, who was a UU minister for over 50 years, defined "Covenant" as "an agreement binding people into a cause, often calling for divine guidance ... introducing the element of the sacred into the agreement."

"...When we covenant together, we obligate ourselves to support the community which is the church, and to undertake what is implied in loyalty: to share in the work, to support the institution financially, to respect the traditions of the church, and to become ambassadors before the larger community. We have obligations to care for each other, to build the beloved community. We are to worship, each according to conscience, and to recognize the obligation of service to each other, [even] including those not of our covenant."

Frank was, of course, restating something that has been discussed in congregational, Unitarian, and Universalist theology for a long time. Harvard professor Conrad Wright has analyzed the historical tapestry of congregational covenanting "to walk together," noting that Unitarians are the inheritors of a long tradition which values deeds and sacred

promises of mutual support much more than creeds. This form of covenant was made explicit in the Mayflower Compact 4 signed by our religious and cultural Pilgrim ancestors nearly 400 years ago in the waters off Cape Cod only 50 miles or so from this pulpit.

I recently followed an email dialogue between my colleagues Ron Robinson and Brent Smith. They made some interesting observations about how this theology of covenants connects with gratitude:

The central quality of liberal religion [leads an individual toward gratitude... but] ... the central quality of the ... community points to the next step beyond]-that is generosity, or the sharing of gratitude... [the implicit covenant to be] witnesses of this generosity to others.

“... Giving without the expectation of reciprocation or appreciation does not come automatically... We have to engage consciously in the practices of giving and receiving. We have to trust at deep levels of our being that we will receive and have enough to give. To be an appreciative recipient of another’s generosity we must be able to receive without feeling unworthy, or guilty about not being able to reciprocate, or fearful of what expectations might be attached.”

The great 20th century Christian theologian Henri Nouwen is quoted as saying: “Every time I take a step in the direction of generosity, I know I am moving from fear to love.” The affirmation of empowering our generous spirit is an affirmation that we are one with the universe.

“Authentic community provides us an environment where we can belong. In community we demonstrate our care and concern for one another and form the bonds of friendship and love. Our relationships add greater depth, meaning, and sense of purpose to our lives and those whose lives we touch. Life in community enables us to transcend our individual needs and limitations so that we may experience greater abundance. [AND] When we experience abundance in our lives, we feel better able and equipped to give. [SO] We learn generosity in relationship and in community.”

The current issue of The UU World mailed this week includes selections from a sermon given by Galen Guengrich, who succeeded John Buehrens as minister to the All Souls congregation in New York. Let me paraphrase the core of his powerful assertions:

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“...religion is constituted by two distinct but related impulses: a sense of awe and a sense of obligation.....the defining element of our faith must be a daily practice of some kind. What kind of practice?

...To be a faithful Jew is to obey the commands of God.... To be a faithful Christian is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. ... To be a faithful Muslim is to submit to the will of Allah. And what of us? What should be our defining religious discipline?

... [perhaps] our defining discipline [as Unitarian Universalists] should be gratitude. In the same way that Judaism is defined by obedience, Christianity by love, and Islam by submission,...Unitarian Universalism should be defined by gratitude...

Finally, I would remind us of the words of the late Peter Raible, one of my seminary professors, who served our ministry for nearly 60 years:

"We build on foundations, we did not lay.
We warm ourselves at fires, we did not light.
We sit in the shade of trees, we did not plant.
We drink from wells, we did not dig.
We profit from persons, we did not know.
We are ever bound in community."

Because of Unitarian Universalists like Peter Raible and others, who have sustained and supported our traditions in this nation over the past two hundred years, when Nina and I moved here from Georgia to be with our son, our daughter in law, and our beautiful grandson, we were confident that there would be a community which would embrace us all and share our values.

I am profoundly grateful for this heritage which we did not earn, and I think my awareness and my gratitude toward those who are here right now, and those have gone before us, who have built and maintained an institution which preserves and promotes values I share, is a large part of what motivates my generosity. But there's at least one additional element: I know that the children who are here now, and those who will be born, will be relying on my contributions, and will learn from the model and example of my behavior. If I don't do my part, they will suffer.

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What's this covenanted community worth to you? It is, of course, and must be, actually priceless. But there is also the fact that there are always costs that must be borne. And the next church year will be one of special challenges and costs, even as our community will benefit from an implicit covenant of support which is being honored through the gratitude and generosity of the Jewish congregation up the hill on Highland Avenue as we will need to vacate our building.

We will also be relying on the covenanted commitments of generosity which we have made to support the renovation and expansion project through our capital fund contributions, so that we can meet our collective covenant to provide appropriate building space for the needs of our youth, our children, and other activities into the future.

But while we're temporarily dislocated, we'll also need to make up for the loss of \$50,000 in income from our tenant nursery school. So there's a need for our continued and even increased generosity and commitment, perhaps an average additional dollar a day from each of our families. A dollar a day increase, on average, as a goal, not a threshold, which is not so much more from those of us who have the ability to share of

prosperity, and not something that is asked of those who cannot. But the common wisdom is that we don't give to needs, but to vision, and to commitment.

So, when each of us are contacted, at one of the special potluck dinners tonight or next week, or otherwise these next few weeks, I hope and believe that you will join me in embracing another of the virtues which we can rightfully claim with rational, spiritual, and emotional integrity, by modeling gratitude through generosity, by making a commitment to give what we can to this institution which supports us in our community here and represents us in the world.

A commitment to give, not until it hurts, but just enough, until it feels good, because we know how much we have been given and we choose to acknowledge the scope of our dependence to a covenanted community which is truly priceless. It's an important way "of overcoming our fears, saying "thank you" to the people we love, to the world we enjoy, to the universe we inhabit, and affirming our connection to the [Ultimate Oneness] which embraces us all..." So may it be. Amen. 7