

Choose to Bless the World – The Transformative Power of Giving*

~ A sermon reflection on stewardship and shared ministry ~

- by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM minister, delivered Sunday, March 15, 2015

**This transcript includes three additional narrative threads woven through the service in support of the worship theme on stewardship and giving. The sermon text presented here contains the “bones” of the sermon reflection – if you were present in service to hear this in real time, you’ll realize upon reading this that some of the text was used as cues for the more extemporaneous segments of the sermon, most of which is impossible for me to recreate in transcript form...because I neglected to record the audio. As my sermon-making style and skill continues to grow and take form, I realize that I naturally lean towards a “planned extemporaneous” style of sermon process that is more organic, story-driven, and connective, rather than reading exclusively from a full text/script. So the plan going forward is to create an MP3 audio recording of each sermon to post in our website sermon archive, along with any readings, stories, quotations and resources drawn upon in the sermon-making process. I appreciate deeply all the feedback, support, encouragement, and kind patience that has been expressed to me throughout my message-giving evolution process. This learning together is another beautiful example of the joy to be found in shared ministry. “From you I receive, to you I give. Together we share, and by this we live...we live.” ~ Dawn*

Story for All Ages

“The Gift of the Gemstone”

~ a wisdom tale from many cultures

A wise woman, a teacher, was passing through a forest. There, among the leaves, was something shiny. She wiped away the leaves and dirt and beheld a beautiful, large gem. "My, this is pretty," the wise woman said. She put the jewel in her pouch and continued on her way.

When the sun was high in the sky, she sat down under a tree to eat her simple lunch. She was barely settled, when she saw a figure approaching. It was a man and, to judge from his dress, a poor man. "Kind and gentle lady, do you have any food to share with a poor beggar?"

"I have plenty," she replied with a smile, digging into her small sack. She pulled out the gem that was on top, a loaf of bread and a piece of cheese. She offered the bread and cheese to the beggar. But the beggar's eyes had grown big at the sight of the lovely gem.

"Sweet lady, that is a magnificent jewel!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, do you like it? Here, take it, too." And she gave the man the gem, the bread, and the cheese. The beggar could not believe his luck! He wrapped the gem in his cloak and quickly scampered off. The wise woman arose and started off on her way again.

She was surprised a few minutes later to hear footsteps behind her. She turned and saw the beggar before her again.

The beggar held out the jewel. "Wise woman, may I give this back to you. I don't want it!"

"What do you want?" she asked.

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

Meditation Reading

"Choose to Bless the World"

- by Rebecca Parker

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind's power, the strength of the hands, **the reaches of the heart**, the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting—any of these can serve to feed the hungry, bind up wounds, welcome the stranger, praise what is sacred, do the work of justice, or offer love.

And any of these can draw down the prison door, hoard bread, abandon the poor, obscure what is holy, comply with injustice or withhold love.

You must answer this question: what will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude to search for the sources of power and grace, native wisdom, healing and liberation. More, **the choice will draw you into community**, the endeavor shared, the heritage passed on, the companionship of struggle, the importance of keeping faith, the life of ritual and praise, the comfort of human friendship, the company of earth, its chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world. **Together**—that is another possibility, waiting.

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will, a moving forward into the world with the intention to do good. It is an act of recognition, **a confession of surprise**, a grateful acknowledgment that, in the midst of a broken world, unspeakable beauty, grace, and mystery abide.

There is an embrace of kindness that encompasses all life, even yours.

And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil, there moves a holy disturbance, a benevolent rage, a revolutionary love, protesting, urging, insisting that **that which is sacred will not be defiled**.

Those who bless the world live their life as a gesture of thanks for this beauty and this rage.

Reading

“The Caterpillar and the Butterfly”

- excerpted from *The Soul of Money* by Lynne Twist

Our struggle around money, and all the tension, fears, and excesses that go with it, has a parallel in nature. Evolutionary biologist Elisabet Sahtouris says that the caterpillar, at a certain point in its life cycle, becomes a voracious, overconsumptive glutton consuming everything in sight and within reach. At this point in its evolution it can eat hundreds of times its own weight, and the more it consumes the more fat and sluggish it gets. At that same moment of developmental excess, inside the caterpillar the **imaginal cells** begin to stir. Imaginal cells are specialized cells, and in the minority, but when they connect with each other they become the genetic directors of the metamorphosis of the caterpillar. At some point in the caterpillar’s feeding-frenzy stage, the imaginal cells usher in the process in which the overconsumptive caterpillar becomes the “**nutritive soup**” out of which the imaginal cells create the miracle of the butterfly.

When I first heard this caterpillar-butterfly metaphor, I loved it because it gave me a way to see the world the way it is, even its state of voracious greed, as a kind of evolutionary phase. **It is such a fitting metaphor for our time.** When I look at the inspired, devoted, and brilliant people at work in so many ways to repair and nourish the world, in families, communities, and sustainable enterprises everywhere on Earth, I see the imaginal cells of our own transformation. That's us, people like me and people like you...people creating new ways, seeing new possibilities.

Sermon Reflection

I wonder what the process of devolving into that “nutritive soup” feels like for the caterpillar...

It seems that the sharing of soup, making soup...even “being in the soup” together has come to be a guiding metaphor for our efforts and focus on stewardship this month...our children and youth led us off March 1 with the beautiful service of a soup luncheon to raise money for the Guest at Your Table program - monies that go to support the efforts of the UUSC – I believe their efforts resulted in more than double the contributions of previous years. We've got soup in the mix today...and we'll have it again next week for Celebration Sunday. It's a useful metaphor as we consider the process we share of building beloved community – both in the aspect of the myriad gifts we each bring...as well as the process involved in melding those ingredients together.

Stewardship: The act of caring for or improving with time. (wordnik.com)

One of the more complicated conundrums of professional ministry is the aspect of giving voice and inspiration to the annual stewardship drive when it's more often than not the minister's salary that takes up a big chunk of the pie...you add to that our culturally induced tendency to flinch and resist talking about the gift of money as part of the stewardship process, and you have what often amounts to as a minister's worst nightmare. I'm learning how to get over that particular stumbling block quite nicely, I think. **One of the things that helps me in this is my own spiritual practice of tithing...**

I was raised with the concept of tithing...it was expected, but not something I ever fully understood. And as I've lived most of my life with an income level hovering close to the poverty line, the concept of tithing or pledging any amount of my small income to a faith community or social cause I believed in was difficult for me to manage.

It wasn't until I became a UU that I began to understand what stewardship and the spiritual practice of tithing could mean in my life. Before there was a **disconnect** – I didn't see how my gifts of money went beyond funding an institution rather than a mission...

When I started to pledge regularly to this congregation in 2007, I started to learn what it meant to commit a portion of my monetary resource to something I believed in, values I supported.

I have chosen to remain a pledging member of this congregation as I serve as your minister...

(Extemporaneous sharing of spiritual practice of tithing)...

Of course stewardship is about more than the sharing of our monetary resources. It is the sharing of our time and talents as well. I see stewardship as very much a “shared ministry”...

Hasidic tale:

There was once a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Only five monks were left: the Abbot and four others, all over 70 years old.

In the deep woods near the monastery there lived a rabbi. It occurred to the abbot to ask the rabbi if he could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The abbot and rabbi spoke at length, but when asked for advice, the rabbi simply responded by saying, “I have no advice to give. **The only thing I can tell you is the Messiah is one of you.”**

The abbot returned to the monastery and told his fellow monks what the rabbi had said. In the months that followed, the old monks pondered the words of the rabbi. “The Messiah is one of us?” they each asked themselves. As they contemplated this possibility, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they also began to treat themselves with extraordinary care.

As time went by, people visiting the monastery noticed the aura of respect and gentle kindness that surrounded the five old monks. Hardly knowing why, more people began to come back to the monastery. They began to bring their friends, and their friends brought more friends. Within a few years, the monastery had once again become a thriving order – thanks to the rabbi’s gift.

This story reminds me of a definition of “ministry” crafted by Gordon McKeeman in his piece titled “Anyone’s Ministry”:

*Ministry is
a quality of relationship between and among
human beings
that beckons forth hidden possibilities;
inviting people into deeper, more constant
more reverent relationship with the world
and with one another . . .*

At this point the following Shared Ministry quotes were shared by in the congregation:

“We must knit together in this work as one . . . We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of other’s necessities . . . We must delight in each other, make each other’s conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body.”

~ John Winthrop, 1630

“We are each of us angels with only one wing, and we can only fly embracing each other.”
~ Luciano De Crescenzo

“What then is sanctuary? The sanctuary is often something very small. Not a grandiose gesture, but a small gesture toward alleviating human suffering and preventing humiliation. The sanctuary is a human being. Sanctuary is a dream. And that is why you are here and that is why I am here. We are here because of one another. We are in truth each other’s shelter.”
~ Elie Wiesel

“Unitarian Universalism, as a democratic faith, affirms the “priesthood of all believers;” we are all lay ministers, whether or not we choose to be professional religious leaders. This belief in

the “priesthood of all believers” is central to who we are as a religious movement.” ~ UUA report on ministry

“Ministry is no longer an act provided by those who are ordained or called to serve. Ministry happens wherever individuals embrace the belief that their good works, their volunteerism, their acts, can help serve the mission and vision of their congregation. . . Where formerly people may have thought of themselves as “just a volunteer” or one of a nameless group of people performing a task, now, more and more, members of Unitarian Universalist congregations understand that ministry is something shared by all who are part of a spiritual community; a way to put faith into action for the benefit of the church and the wider community.” - from UUA.org

So "ministry" in brief is, simply put, "the work of religious community." It is what all of us do as members and friends to sustain the life and outreach of the congregation. That means that each of us here at the UUFCM does "ministry" and is a "minister."

The word minister is etymologically rooted in a Latin word meaning "to serve," "to be a servant," or "to be near at hand to offer assistance." And, as metaphorical luck would have it, the words **“minister” and “minestrone”** are derived from the same root.

I believe that the work we choose to do, that **we give ourselves wholeheartedly to** within our faith community is as important to our growth and well-being as individual spiritual beings as it is crucial to the growth and well-being of our fellowship...

Georgette Wonders, a UU minister once said “We have dreams and plans about becoming a great church, a place to grow our souls, enlarge our minds and hearts, teach our children, and from which to do good and make a difference according to our religious principles and values in the community and the world. **But we have to be connected in order to do any of these things.** And that means when we are invited to the banquet, we need to show up. Not because you don’t have food at home, but because when you break bread – or animal crackers – with others, you make community and the community is the source and the foundation for all the rest.”

Where else in life do we find a community dedicated to this, what Emerson described as “the infinite enlargement of the heart?”

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed be and Amen.

**Because of time limitations, I edited out the following two questions that I had intended to include as a meditative process near the end of our sermon time. I include them here now for your reflection:*

Reflect for a few moments on all this community has created and accomplished in our few short years of existence...

Now, imagine for a few moments what it would mean, how it would feel, if this place wasn't here...