

Keeping the Flame Burning

Rev. Mark Hayes

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As you should know by now, we are indeed in the midst of our annual Stewardship Campaign. Those of you who have been around for a while know that that means asking you for money. The concept is actually a little bit broader than that. Stewardship, in its general sense, is the responsibility for taking good care of resources. So for the leadership of this Fellowship, stewardship means making the best use of your gifts of time, talent, and treasure in living out our collective mission.

For each of us as individual members or friends, stewardship means taking responsibility for the care of our personal resources, and sharing as we can of our personal time, talent, and treasure with this collective body so that the leadership has adequate resources over which to exercise *their* stewardship responsibilities. Financial resources, of course, are not the only form of gifts we share with one another. I've already mentioned time and talents, which are also indispensable. But money *is* important as well.

I want to frame my remarks this morning within the symbolism of the flame – as represented by the literal flame of our chalice that we light every Sunday morning. I've said before that one thing that makes the flame such a rich symbol is the many different levels of symbolism that it encompasses. I'll address at least three of those levels this morning. First, when I think about this Fellowship, I think of it not so much as a burning candle, but rather as a raging furnace. The people, the programs, the activities, the enthusiasm – these all contribute to the light of illumination, the warmth of community, and the energy of action. And one essential component, among many others, needed to keep that furnace stoked is money.

Now I want to talk about more than just money this morning, and so I'm going to get the direct pitch out of the way first so I can move on to things like celebrating what we've already done, and thinking about sharing our dreams for the future.

Let me begin with a couple of stories illustrating some aspects of generosity to keep in mind as we consider our financial commitments to the Fellowship. A pig and a chicken were walking along a country road and they came upon a billboard for a restaurant that was a few miles ahead. The billboard had a huge picture of a plate of ham and eggs with the name of the restaurant underneath it.

The chicken looks at the picture and says, "Gee, isn't that a great sign?"

The pig replies, "I don't see anything great about it at all."

The chicken says, "Why not?"

The pig answers, "For you that just represents a donation; for me it's a total commitment."

The breakfast required relatively little of the chicken and everything of the pig. Think about whether your pledge leans more towards that of the chicken or that of the pig.

The second story is actually a true one, recounted by Rochelle Melander in a publication of the Alban Institute. She writes:

My daughter has become my role model in generosity. Each fall the local schools have a food drive. When my daughter and I went through our cupboards to find food to donate, I grabbed the food that seemed the easiest to give away (the stuff I don't like): canned asparagus, peas, and lima

beans. My daughter chose the food she loved the best – the alphabet-shaped spaghetti with meatballs and her favorite boxes of macaroni and cheese. My generosity was a cheap sort – giving away what I perceived I would never need. My daughter was generous – she gave from her treasures.

Before I go on I feel the need to make a sort of disclaimer. Yes, I'm asking you to be generous. I'm even asking you to think about the possibility of being even more generous than you had previously considered. However, I want to acknowledge that many of you are already extremely generous, giving as much or more than could reasonably be expected. These remarks are not directed at you; I'm talking to those others who are still on the way to that level of generosity. I humbly offer my deep appreciation for the gifts you have shared, and I'd love it if everybody would follow your fine example.

Another point I'd like to make is that generosity does not have a specific number attached to it. Some of the most generous pledges are not necessarily the largest, because circumstances – the ability to contribute – vary widely from person to person. Sometimes people ask directly how much they should be giving, and that's always a difficult question to answer. The answer ultimately has to come from your own conscience, based on your knowledge about your own particular circumstances.

However, I have come across a tool that you might find helpful in assessing the appropriateness of your pledge level. This is a "Suggested Fair Share Giving Guide" available on the Unitarian Universalist Association's website. One thing I like about this particular guide is that it takes into account various levels of income, various types of extra expenses, and various levels of commitment.

There's the basic "Supporter" level, which says that the church is a significant part of my life and promotes my spiritual growth. Then there's the "Sustainer" level, which says that the church is central to my identity and I am committed to sustaining our programs. And then there's the "Visionary" level, which says I am committed to both the present and future growth of my church.

Giving levels for those categories range from 2% to 9% of Adjusted Gross Income, depending on income and commitment level. And there's a worksheet at the bottom of the page, where income can be adjusted downward by deducting costs of child care, costs of higher education, costs associated with care of parents, and non-reimbursed major medical expenses. For those of you who would like to see how you compare with these suggested fair shares, there are several copies available in the foyer.

I must say that I would find even more difficult than it already is to make this kind of pitch if I didn't feel like I was walking the walk. Over the years, Cathy and I have aimed to contribute ten percent of our income to charitable causes, with at least half of that going to our church. Our pledge to the Fellowship for this coming year comes to about six-and-a-half percent, which I'm happy to say places us in the "Visionary" category. I'm glad because I do feel committed to the present and future growth of this Fellowship. I hope many of you will join me.

I know that some of you have already turned in your pledge cards, and I thank you for that. The sooner we know what kind of contributions we can expect over the next year, the sooner we can develop a budget and plan appropriately. So I ask you, please send in or drop off your pledge card within the next few days. If you feel you can't pledge at this time, just indicate

that on your card and that's fine. Incidentally, if those of you who have already pledged find yourself moved to increase your pledge, please let us know.

Well, enough about money! Let's talk about more inspirational things. According to Albert Schweitzer:

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.

One of the places I know I can count on my flame being re-lighted is right here in this religious community. At any given moment, there are those among us whose flames are flickering or even doused. And so it's a great privilege to be able to come to a place where we know there will be those with fire to spare, who can re-ignite the fire in our hearts, inspiring us to courage and freeing us once again to say YES to life.

It may be a moving Sunday service. It may be a Small Group Ministry gathering. It may be a visit or call from a friend or from the Caring Committee. It may be as simple as a friendly conversation over coffee during Social Hour. You may not even know when you have made someone's day. When you have lifted them up at least a ways out of the depths of their despair. But such things do happen here, because we choose to be together in a community which calls us to find and express the best parts of ourselves. It's a great blessing to be a part of this community, and I hope you all appreciate and celebrate that.

I'd like to get a little more specific, and shine the light of our collective flames on some of what has been going on here lately. On what we have done together, and continue to do. This church year has been an exciting and inspiring time, at least for me. I hope it has been for many of you as well. Director of Lifespan Religious Education Jean Wiant continues to grow into her position, making wonderful contributions to congregational life. Just a couple of examples are a group of mothers of infants and toddlers that gather regularly for mutual companionship and support, and the Long Distance Travelers – who periodically make a whole Sunday of it to make their long trip here even more worthwhile.

The newest member of our staff, Music Director Matt Travis is off to a great start and promises to bring many gifts to bear as he guides the choir and the music program. And how about the UUFCC Band, under the leadership of Fred Smith?

We've started two new worship services this year. The first Sunday evening of every month is Soulful Sundown, an exploration of spirituality and the arts. The third Sunday evening of every month features the Family service, a truly intergenerational worship opportunity for all ages. Special music by our youngsters has been particularly inspiring.

Our leadership, with the guidance of the Long Range Planning Committee has been working hard on significant changes in our governance structure. At this May's Annual meeting, we'll be asked to adopt By-law changes that will reduce the size of our Board of Trustees and establish a Program Council to share the responsibility of overseeing congregational life and programs. This is a good step forward in adapting to the growth that we are experiencing.

Another new initiative this year has been to extend our generosity beyond our own walls by contributing our plate collection to a charitable cause the first Sunday of every month. When we contribute to Park Forest Day Nursery, Habitat for Humanity, and others, we are putting our dollars where our values are, and letting our light shine out into the larger community. That is

highly appropriate. Our mission, after all, calls on us to live our values both within and beyond our walls.

I could go on, but I don't want merely to celebrate the past and rest on our laurels. I want us also to shine our lights out ahead into our future, to consider what more we can do. What dreams are yet to be realized?

This morning I want to tell you about an upcoming opportunity to be a part of that consideration, that dreaming. Four short weeks from now, the weekend of April 20-22, we will be hosting a consultant from the Unitarian Universalist Association for an Assessment Visit. The consultant will meet with various leadership groups within the Fellowship, as well as with as many members and friends as we can bring together. She will gather information and help us to clarify our current situation and our desired future. She will then give us specific recommendations on how to get from here to there, to reach our long-term goals. This is a great opportunity for us to build on our momentum and take the next steps in our evolution as a community.

There are two sessions open to all who are interested in being a part of dreaming our future: Saturday morning, April 21, and after the service on Sunday, April 22. The more of us who participate, the more productive the process will be. So please come if you can. Help dream the dream. Help turn the dream into reality.

Come, dream a dream with me, and let's keep the flame burning strong and bright. So may it be.