

“Stewards and Stakeholders”  
A sermon by the Rev. Cecilia Kingman  
November 1, 2009

We use this word “stewardship” a lot in our churches, and it’s a word I like. Its original meaning is from steward, the one who was the keeper of the hall. This is what it means to be a steward. To be one who keeps the common hall, one who contributes to the common good. And so in our church pledging we are all stewards, all keepers of this hall.

Your pledge team has been using the term stakeholders, and this is a great word too. A stakeholder originally meant one who holds the stakes of bettors, responsible for the pot in a gambling match. It’s now come to mean those who have an interest in an institution, but I like this original meaning. Perhaps the church is the prize here, and we are responsible for keeping it safe.

These are interesting times to give a stewardship sermon, because the economic situation is still uncertain, yes, but even more because of a longer moment of crisis that the church is in.

I don’t mean just this church, but many of our churches, and liberal churches in general. And this crisis is also, as the Chinese character says, an opportunity as well.

For many decades, it was possible for liberal churches to believe that the purpose of our being was to speak to those within our own walls. To offer interesting programming, to provide places for like-minded liberals to gather and perhaps to teach our children something about the world and the people in it. To do some act of charity now and then—to have a canned food drive, or raise money for a cause.

Mostly, church existed to create a friendly community and perhaps to offer some uplifting thoughts once a week. If you observed most of our churches, this would seem to be the point of our existence.

None of that is necessarily bad. But lately, I’m thinking that it just isn’t enough. The church is awakening to the state of the world, and we have work to do.

We humans, and especially we Americans, have before us a crisis of meaning. The old ways have failed us, and we do not yet know how to live in the new ways. We are asking ourselves how to live lives of meaning and purpose in turbulent times. Our children are looking to us for answers, for ideas about the shape of their lives in the decades to come. People come into our churches, seeking community, seeking wisdom, seeking a new path.

We stand at a moment of human history unparalleled in many decades. We are living in a crucial transformation, and it is easy to feel afraid in the face of so many challenges. We worry about our security in these financially uncertain times. But perhaps we are still asking the old questions, still caught in the old narrative.

The greatest lie of all the ages is that we could place our trust in material things. As Alan Watts wrote, “The difficulty with the material world is that it collapses when you lean on it and turns into a fine powder when you clutch it.” We have already tried relying upon ourselves, and trusting our material wealth to keep us safe. Now, perhaps it is time to place our trust in deeper things.

We have so much more than the rest of the world, even now, and we can decide, at any time, to use our resources to build the common good. We can decide that all that we have does not in fact belong to us, but instead belongs to the wider community.

The church, and by this I mean all churches, the church faces an enormous challenge in these times. According to one pair of observers, the crisis in the church is a crisis of vision. “This condition borders on the blasphemous: in our world [more than] 35,000 children under the age of five are dying daily, most from preventable poverty conditions.” We face an ecological challenge, and an ever-widening gap between the rich and poor. Meeting the needs of a hurting world is a vision large enough to need every member of our congregations.

My friends, in times such as these, the church has an even greater role to play in healing human hearts and creating a new story worthy of our lives. Though I know the economic news can tempt us all to hunker down in our own households, to move with fear, I wonder what might happen if instead we moved with courage and boldness into the days to come.

Last spring Bill Moyers interviewed the Quaker educator Parker Palmer. Parker talked about the crisis of spirit and values in our country, and about what he calls the “tragic gap,” which is the difference between the world as we experience it, and the world as we know it could be.

Parker believes that much of the mess we are in stems from our collective unwillingness to acknowledge that gap. We have anesthetized ourselves for many, many years, fleeing from the pain of that gap. We have fled into cynicism or into flighty, otherworldly idealism, all to avoid acknowledging the tragedy of that gap.

It is time, Parker says, for us to confront the distance between the world as it is and the world as we know it could be. It is only by standing in that tragic gap that we can respond creatively to the needs of our time. Both Parker and Moyers expressed an urgent hope that communities, in particular religious communities, would actively invite people into the tragic gap, and begin to live a new narrative of human existence. I share this hope.

People are starving for meaning. The old stories are failing us, and we must create a new story, a story worth living for. My friends, we have here in our churches the beginning of that story. It is the story of human interdependence—not independence. It is the story that says we are a part of the web of existence, not consumers of it. It is the story of the miracle of life, starting from its swirling, protozoac beginnings. It is the story that includes all people, all creatures, all life. We Unitarian Universalists know how to tell this story.

And we have more to offer people in this hour of questioning. We have values that have steadied and nurtured generations, values which prize something other than material wealth. We have a vision of a sustainable and just world community. We have the collective wisdom of the generations. And we have the bonds of community, the commitment to nurture healthy, loving human relationships. We have much to offer, if we will commit ourselves to this new purpose.

To commit oneself to action requires the dedication of resources. And so today I want to speak frankly to you about your financial contributions to the church.

My grandfather taught me to tithe. He was a Baptist minister and so he would have liked this first word, the steward. Being Baptist, he might have flinched a bit at the original meaning of stakeholder! He believed that we give first to the church, because the church has a unique role—the development of the moral person and the transformation of society. Our politics may have differed but I agree with him—the church has a crucial role to play in the world, and stewards and stakeholders are needed.

And the Baptists and other more conservative faiths really understand the power of being stewards and stakeholders. Conservative churches ask their folks to make giving to the church a high priority and the outcome is evident in things like youth programs, beautiful buildings and high visibility in the public square. This reality invites us to ask whether our own children are worth quality programming, whether our own spiritual lives deserve gracious space and whether our own values might need a similar chance for expression in the world.

You have, in the past year, cast a vision of the church you wish to become, the church you need to be in this hour of history. And you have enough—all of you together—to be the church you are called to be. You have this very fine staff before you, a group of people who are serving your mission, doing the work of the church day in and day out.

Three of them do not have adequate health coverage. Your pledge dollars will make it possible for you to be the kind of employers we all say employers should be: just employers who put the care of their workers foremost over the bottom line. Providing health care for our employees is a crucial component of being a just employer.

Through your pledges, you will invest in your young people, showing them that Unitarian Universalism is a living faith that will be here for their future. You will enhance your ability to care for one another through your care team, so that the church can be the community of sustenance and support for which we all long. By increasing your pledge, you will enhance your ability to be a teaching church, by paying your ministerial interns. You will be giving to the future of our free faith.

Your pledges will enhance your worship experience, allowing you to serve the hearts, minds, and spirits of all within these walls. Nurturing ourselves in worship each week then strengthens each of us for the rest of our lives outside these walls, the daily work of being faithful, good, courageous people in the world.

All of it is possible. You could have staff sufficient to run these programs, and you could pay your staff equitably for the hours they work, and provide excellent benefits too. You could do more, even. You could educate ten times as many children, you could welcome all who knock at your doors, you could become a beacon of liberal religious values right here in Shoreline and beyond. You can do all of that and more—anything you dream of.

Lest you think I'm dreaming—let's do the math. The median household income in King County is \$65,000 a year.<sup>i</sup> Median household income means that half of the households in the county make more, half make less. I think we can guess, given the high number of college graduates in the church, that most of our households are at or above the median income. Now, you have 120 households in this church. Most households make yearly pledges.

One thing I like about tithing is that it is a more equitable way to look at our giving. Tithing is based upon a percentage, which means that anyone can be a tither. I like to talk about percentage giving, because some of us are making much more than others, and we want everyone to contribute as they are able. If we honor people who give a greater percentage, even if their gift is smaller than someone else's, we are honoring the commitment and sacrifice someone has made.

So let's take this model and see what might happen here if you all gave a certain percentage of your income to the church. And let's just take a baby step here, rather than the full 10% tithe. What would happen if each household gave 5% of your income? If the median is \$65,000, and if each household gave 5% of that median, a pledge of 3250, you would have \$390,000 dollars in pledge income. That is more than double your current budget.

And just for fun, let's imagine what would happen if all the households in this church gave 10% of that median? That is a pledge of \$6500. You would have \$780,000 dollars in pledge income. Can you imagine what kind of church you could be with that money?

Now, I know that these figures feel like a huge stretch, but it's useful sometimes to stretch our imaginations and wonder what we might be capable of. I suspect that some of you are already pledging 5 or 10 percent of your income, and I hope you will share with others the powerful effect this generosity has on your own life.

My friends, the question is not whether or not you can afford to be the church you dream of, the church the world needs you to be. The question is instead whether each of us has a commitment to in the mission of the church that outweighs our own private fears and our own private desires. It is a reallocation of our dollars into the common good. To do this we need to say that we place our trust, and our commitment, in something larger than ourselves.

It is time for the church to respond to the questions of our times, not by colluding with a culture of materialism, not by feeding the ever-hungry maw of empire, and not by withdrawing into some kind of spiritual gated community, but instead to offer a new vision and a new story worthy of our courage and commitment. It is time for the church to call us into a deeper practice of our faith, and urgently ask us to change our lives. The church we need to be needs us—needs us to commit our abundant resources to the work of love.

For this is what will save us—our love of this earth, our beautiful blue-green home. Our love of all her creatures—the majesty of whales and elephants, the funny wonder of bugs and octopi, the terrible beauty of hawks and wolves. The tender scent of daphne on a spring morning, the red leaves on the sidewalk, the pink of dawn, the rippling song of creeks and trees, the feel of dirt in our fingers.

And our love of all peoples—the myriad cultures, the shape of families, the struggle of the poor and the rich alike to shape lives of worth and meaning. Our love of all creation will indeed save us—will carry us through.

So, as you enter your pledge drive in this momentous year, I want to ask you to do something. First, I want you to sign up for one of the stakeholder meetings. These are important events for this congregation, in which you will share what is meaningful about the church and pledge your support to its care. And as you prepare for these stakeholder meetings, I want you to think deeply about your pledge to this congregation. I ask you to consider carefully what you want this church to be in the years to come.

I hope you will think specifically about what percentage of your income or, if you live on investments, what portion of your assets you will give to the future of this church. If you have families, I encourage you to have a discussion with the entire family. Invite your children into this conversation. Show them what it means to be a steward, a keeper of the hall. Share your decision with them, so that they will grow up knowing your values. Let them see the power of a committed community.

And when you come together to make your financial pledges, I hope you will give your gifts in great gladness. May your gifts build a strong and faithful church. And may the church that you are building serve all in need, all the days to come.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.ofm.wa.gov/economy/hhinc/medinc.pdf> Washington State Office of Financial Management statistics for 2007.