

A Sacred “Yes”

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD March 2, 2024

Periodically, while sitting at my desk, reading through emails, or crafting worship, the office phone startles me with an unexpected ring. Often when I answer it’s a company trying to sell a service to the church, an automated message telling me about our Google Voice subscription, or even pure silence. Any yet, from time to time, it is a dejected voice I hear. A voice quietly and nervously distraught. Lost, in need, resigned of hope. “I need help,” the voice offers. Food, shelter, heat. My response? A sacred, compassionate, loving, “yes.” I may not know their history, their plight – I cannot vet every story on the other end of the phone line. But what I do know is that someone needs help, no matter why. And so, I offer a response that my faith has taught me – not simply can I help, but how can I help. How can I help? Through my discretionary fund, I can assist in paying a bill, I can fund a night at a hotel, I can offer a gift certificate to a local grocery store. I say yes, because I can, because I have the resources - is not this the only reasoning we need? - then I ask how, because my faith and my conscience call me to. A response like this, which we can each offer, is a sacred affirmation. I see you. I hear your needs. Let me journey with you as we work to heal but a small piece of your struggle for security, wellbeing, and peace of mind. It is an affirmation followed by an unconditionally loving question – Yes. How?

I invite us into a moment of silent meditation and reflection. When, why, and how do we give? How is this in alignment with our faith and our morals? We live our values, we liberate our souls, we engage in sacred reciprocity. Today is an exploration of our theologies of giving.

“May your life preach more loudly than your lips”¹ spoke father of Unitarian Christianity William Ellery Channing. It is lives of compassion and kindness and morals and sacred intention that exemplify the tenets of our faith, not the words that stream from our well-intentioned lips or hands. We profess inherent dignity and worthiness, but how do we live it? We affirm and

¹ “Unitarian Christianity” by William Ellery Channing

promote the interdependent web of which we are all a part, but how does this Principle guide our actions? It is demonstrated as we decide what to prioritize – the worthiness of those on the fringes of society or our work against the inequities that tear our web apart, or our faith community that heals us and guides us. Where do we focus our time and our energy? This question begs of us deep, personal introspection. How do we want to profess, live, and prioritize our values in this short and fleeting life? We preach from our actions, dedicated to equity of the marginalized, remaining committed to countering the climate crisis through our activism, or supporting our faith community as a gift of the soul.

May we, in turn, lift up the words of renowned poet Maya Angelou. What are some hidden and possibly unexpected gifts of preaching from our actions? “I have found that among its other benefits,” writes Angelou, “giving liberates the soul of the giver.”² We are liberated; our very souls are freed and unfettered as we generously share our gifts with the world. There are times when, conversely, I feel my soul compressed and tightened – a response to those moments of which I could have offered a sacred yes but didn’t. Passing the unhoused without even offering kind words or a smile. At times our souls are held tight and for whatever reason we do not share what we can with the world. This hurts us just as much as it hurts those in our midst. It becomes a broken and hollow life of hoarding resources, not sharing our faith, love, and funds with this beautiful and aching world. I feel it in my chest. And yet we can choose to liberate our souls, our hearts, our minds through our gifts. Think about this. How do you feel in a moment of indifference? Conversely, how do you feel in a moment of offering pure love to a stranger? To a faith community? Again, “May your life preach more loudly than your lips.”

Navigating our own theologies of giving, may we reflect, giving is not an entirely selfless act, for we receive sacred gifts in return. I invite us to words of the Christian faith and the New Testament. Luke 6:38 offers, “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the

² *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* by Maya Angelou

measure you get back.”³ Give, and you will receive. What do we receive when we give love, life, resources, and faith? Sometimes it is obvious, sometimes more hidden and discrete, yet I offer, always present. In giving to our faith communities, we receive that which feeds our hearts and our souls, fosters compassion and wellbeing for all, those within our walls and beyond. In giving to one who is suffering, we open the door for reciprocity, receiving help, in return, when we are struggling, in almost a karmic way. In serving the least of these we are offered a world of love and equity through which we can all shine, a world in which we are bound together through the web of love. I give to those who call requesting help, knowing that in return the world has a little less pain, a little less detriment. When we give freely of ourselves, we in turn cultivate a stronger faith, a more abundant compassion, and an enduring love and in this way giving becomes a spiritual practice. And this works conversely. When we receive, we are called to give in return. Throughout my life I received love, compassion, and care through the most difficult and trying of times. In response, I became a minister, in hopes of guiding you through yours.

Living a life based on a theology of giving requires a certain mindset. We respond to the inherent worthiness of those in our midst, we liberate our own souls by giving, we engage in a reciprocity that heals others just as it heals us, and we do this because we truly believe we have so much to offer. Let us reflect on this morning’s reading about the tension between scarcity and sufficiency. We may so often feel in a place of scarcity – what do I have to give? Or, what can I possibly let go of? I am not ready to share this – what if I need more for myself? Let us instead settle into this idea of sacred abundance! We each have something. Sufficiency – I am enough, I have enough.” Sufficiency – If I look around me and within myself, I have what I need.⁴ Do not these simple statements offer us a profoundly different way of looking at our own lives, our own interpretations of what we have within and among us? We have such gifts and in turn, we can give. We can give of our time, we can give of our inner gifts, talents, and passions. In my life, I have been called to serve as a chaplain in myriad forms. Others may

³ Luke 6:38

⁴ “The Surprising Truth of Sufficiency” by Lynne Twist

volunteer. And, we turn here to monetary means, for so much of what the world needs is tangible, financial help. We return here to what I hope to have exemplified above, as I quote, “it is using money in a way that expresses our integrity; using it in a way that expresses value rather than determines value.”⁵ May we open our souls and share with one another. How can we prioritize our deeply held morals? Intentional giving. How can we express our values? By funding that which, to us, is of utmost importance. In whatever capacity we have. We give because others need. Charities and foundations, yes. And we give to that which also in turn directly feeds us. Church communities. We are enough so may we give.

Church communities. Our Story for All Ages we shared this morning touched my heart. The giant tree, likened to our own faith community. No one owns it, yet we each contribute in our own way. I quote, “We are keepers of the tree because this is where we are nourished. This is where some of our most precious memories are, and where our people have dreamed. This is where we remember who we want to become.” I love that – “This is where we remember who we want to become.”⁶ Have you ever forgotten, and found it here? I know in my heart faith has served me this way over and over and over again.

Why do we give to this church community, in particular? I offer that each Unitarian Universalist church is a silo, offering its own unique gifts. In reflecting upon this idea in preparation for Stewardship month, I intuited what I find to be our silo: spirituality, love, and care. This is what we offer in abundance. This is what Channing Memorial Church has to give. So may we give in return. May we give so we can sustain a community of love and care – where you, at some point, will be a recipient. May we give to sustain our worship services that feed the soul and foster spirituality, the music that tends to the heart. To a community that offers support when times are hard – tangible food, yes, and also a unique form of unconditional love. We help those both within and beyond our walls. We engage in small groups that feed the heart, mind, and soul. We fund our values: an accessible bathroom, or the seeds we are planning for a

⁵ “The Surprising Truth of Sufficiency” by Lynne Twist

⁶ “Sustaining the Tree of Life” by Lynn Gardner

religious education program. We work to bring our gifts and values to the world around us. So. May we give. William Ellery Channing offered, may we give to that which enables us to live our values, may our lives preach more loudly than our words. Maya Angelou reflected, may we liberate our souls by sharing all we can, bringing abundance to the world. Luke professed, may we engage in sacred reciprocity, knowing that when we give, we will, in turn, receive. I offer, may we give because we can, because that is what our faith and our conscience call us to do.

Let us end where we began. We each receive those calls, someone or something asking for our help. Perhaps, as I shared earlier, a phone call with a direct ask, or perhaps a more abstract tugging at the heart strings or the soul as we witness the world around us. In some way, shape, or form, we are called to help. Someone is in need. So, this is the challenge I present to all of us: Respond in affirmation, respond with a profound and resounding “yes.” I hear you, I see you, I acknowledge your pain, your need. And may we follow this “yes” with a humble, “how?” How can I help? What can I possibly do to respond to these needs and live my values? What can I do to free my soul and offer personal liberation, healing me just as I heal you? So, this month, as we settle into a sacred time of stewardship, a fellow congregant will reach out to you to hear about your faith journey and ask if you are able to give in return. I invite you to a sacred and holy response. Yes. How?

May it be so, and Amen.