

## *As We Grow*

Stewardship Sermon, 2013, by Deane Perkins

I have a confession to make. The original title of this sermon was, “As We Grow, We Need Your Dough.” It’s true. This title seemed too blatant, however—there was no subtlety to it. It’s like cooking—you want to taste the subtle flavors and ingredients that make a particular dish so delicious. You want to experience it gently, sensually, cautiously.

But we have, in fact, started our pledge drive. When it comes to stewardship, canvassing and meeting the financial needs of our faith community, there is nothing subtle about it.

Last Wednesday at the Church Council Meeting a representative from Stewardship came to us asking that we submit our pledge for fiscal year 2013-2014. I think they see this group as embodying stewardship—that generous giving of

time, talent and treasure—and wanted to be able to share this with the rest of the congregation. With eight pledges received that evening, the amount exceeded \$43,000, almost a 10% increase from last year.

The Council members cannot afford to deal with money in any subtle way. We receive a budget report every month from our Treasurer. We know that we have about 143 members, that there are over 80 children registered in the Religious Exploration Program, and that there are probably at least 50-60 friends that we also serve. I estimate that at this moment in our journey, our faith community is serving at least 275 people. We are growing, and our budget and pledging need to reflect that growth.

I am aware that not everyone may be happy by our relatively rapid growth. Our church is only 19 years old, and it

probably seems like we haven't had a chance to rest since its small, humble beginnings. We started as a Family church; we are currently a Pastoral church, and we're moving towards becoming a Program-size church

The problem, of course, is that you have created something incredibly attractive, and, together, we continue to do so. To use the culinary metaphor again, you have created a unique, awesomely delicious dish that people want to taste. Many will take a bite and find that it is not particularly palatable. Many will sit at table with us for many seasons, but will eventually continue their journey in a different way and place. Yet many of us will continue to stay here, savoring what we and Unitarian Universalism have to offer. And that is a ministry of the heart, mind, and spirit where life, beauty, truth, justice, and compassion are always celebrated.

I would rather not see our growth as an “issue,” but rather as a consequence of our ministry. It is not something over which we debate, as much as that which we embrace, because we are doing the work we need to do for ourselves and for the world. Granted, some might need to grieve the loss of the family church. I hope, though, that there are ways, such as our Small Group Ministry Program, our Lifespan offerings, and our Congregational Conversations, that allow us to continue fulfilling our need for intimacy.

I would also rather not see money here at church as a “difficult issue,” as much as something that we can talk about openly and respectfully. I understand that we have been accused of “always asking for money.” There is no way that I want people to feel guilt or shame about money or their pledges. That’s not what we are about. But, at the same time, there is

nothing wrong about talking about money, nor about asking for money. In fact, I have maintained that our relationship to money is actually spiritual in nature—our relationship to money confronts us with who we are as spiritual beings.

I mentioned last Sunday that I spent four hours recently on a plane going to Phoenix with a man who talked openly about his faith—clearly his was a very traditional, conservative, Christian background, as mine was at one time. But we respected one another's faith, and so we managed to talk about political issues, and values as well.

At one point he talked about CEOs and money and those in poverty. He repeated what I heard often during the Presidential debates, that the wealthier one percent of our population will help create jobs and infuse the economy with a healthy dose of money. I was not inclined to renew these debates, but instead

asked him about the deep economic inequities that exist within our population. How much money does a person really need to be happy? *Time Magazine*, by the way, noted that anything beyond \$70,000 annually does not increase happiness (*Time Magazine, Fall, 2012*). And I mentioned further that one of the most clear messages in Jesus' preaching was how difficult it was for the rich to truly honor their being as givers, rather than as takers, and that it was the poor who were to be upheld, supported, and blessed.

My flight partner wanted to go back to his point that rich people were also givers. I suspect that underlying this man's perspective was the Puritan notion that wealthy people were blessed by God. By the way, when I first wrote the word God here, and looked at my typing, I noticed that I had actually replaced "d" with "p"; I had written: that "wealthy people were

blessed by G-o-p!” I’m embarrassed, and for those of you in the congregation who are Republicans, please forgive me!

Anyway, I took a different tact. I said that “the real issue for me, the one that underlies all of this kind of debate and conversation and rhetoric, was not political at all, but rather a theological one—it had to do with idolatry. What is it that we worship? In spite of all our politicians crying out, ‘God Bless America!’, or people thinking that we are a Christian country which is chosen because it believes in the one true God, is it not the case that America’s real god is money? Under the pretense of worshipping a god, people are, in fact, worshipping the golden calf. We can defend capitalism and Wall Street and CEOs and billionaires all we want, but let’s not be hypocrites; the bottom line is that we are worshipping money, and that is

idolatrous. And idol worship cannot fill our needs for intimacy and ultimacy. Only Love can do that.”

My flight buddy was silent, though he nodded. We did not speak of it again. Maybe I had browbeatened him into silence. Little did he realize that he had incited the Prophet in me! One of the eight “P’s” of ministry—the Prophet—had clearly been called forth!

We Unitarian Universalists tend not to talk about idol worship except, perhaps, as an interesting historical note when Protestants during the Reformation accused Catholics of idolatry. Muslims, by the way, who believe in the absolute unity of Allah, think that the Christian Trinity is idolatrous. But money challenges we UUs just as much as anyone else, for our relationship to money is a spiritual issue.

Ernest Becker, in his brilliant work, *The Denial of Death*, talks about “immortality ideologies.” He claims that human beings have ideologies that support our desire actually to deny our mortality. We know intellectually that we have to die, but no matter what we believe about the end of our life, it is difficult truly to imagine ourselves dead--so much so that we find all sorts of ways to challenge and confront and overcome death.

Evel Knievel epitomized this challenge to death. As an entertainer and daredevil, he made over 75 motorcycle jumps, including one where he went over 14 busses. During his career, he broke over 433 bones. A British newspaper wrote that Knievel “was one of America’s greatest icons of the 1970s.”<sup>(Wikipedia, see Evel Knievel)</sup> When you challenge death like this, you apparently become an icon or idol or hero. The same is true

of those we send to war; they are heroes by virtue of their returning home after the greatest challenge of all—facing death.

But, says Becker, the reason we do all this is because of our fear of death and the denial of our own mortality. We challenge the very thing of which we are afraid. And if we win, we can think of ourselves as heroes and, therefore, as being immortal.

But the most prominent immortality ideology for contemporary man, proclaims Becker, is money. And I use “man” purposely here, because I am not convinced that this is necessarily true for most women. But it may appear to us that the more money we have, the more power we have; the more power we have, the more we can control our life and the lives of others. And maybe we can even control our death. We need only think of those, for example, who use cryonics to preserve their bodies for future resuscitation. We set ourselves up to be

icons, idols, and heroes by using money as the means for obtaining power and control. However, it is, ultimately, an illusion.

These are the kinds of things with which money challenges us, for our relationship to money says something about our spiritual lives. What is it we worship? What do we fear or try to deny? In what ways, and from what, does money appease us?

While we all want to be financially secure, I don't think we need to buy into a culture of scarcity and fear. I don't think we need to succumb to that part of ourselves that wishes to hoard things and assure our own material well-being at the cost of others. In fact, we need to talk more about a culture of abundance and a theology of stewardship, because, at the very core of our being, we are and have an abundance of life and

love, compassion and care that we wish to share with others.

We are Givers of life and love. We are stewards in the world.

For the last two weeks we have talked about ministry, shared ministry, our being ministers, and our calling. It is vital that we continue these conversations, because we have a tendency to deny the truth of our being holy, of the fact that we are divine beings. That is not a promise of immortality, but rather an assertion of the beauty that is within us. It calls us forth to walk hand in hand, together, and to commit ourselves to fostering the life-energy in our children, you, me, and others.

I see money as a means to do our ministry. It is a tool through which we express our gratitude. Money and ministry, then, have to do with service, with stewardship. Both are a gift. Both come from the heart. And as we grow, we do, in fact, need more dough. But I hope this is never, ever seen as a chore or

encumbrance, but rather as an extension of ourselves as givers and lovers.

May it be so. Amen