

## **The Pearl of Great Price**

In the book of Matthew, chapter 13:44-46, we are told that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that was hidden in a field and a man discovered it, and because of his joy he went and sold everything he had and purchase that field. Again the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant who was seeking good pearls. And when he had found one costly pearl, he went and sold everything the had an bought it.

Well, it's that time of year again, its canvass time.

And so the question I want to raise is this. Now that you have found this pearl of great price; now that you have found this liberal religion, this congregation, The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of The Swananoa Valley, what would you do without it? And what are you willing to do to keep it? See you on Sunday!

Well, it's that time of year again. It's time to put our money and resources where our mouth is. And truth be told we are good at doing this and now the stakes are a bit higher. And so the question I want to raise is this. Now that you have found this religion, this congregation, The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of The Swananoa Valley, what would you do without it?

Would you want the people of this community, and the surrounding communities to lose the chance, lose the possibility of finding a home here; finding a spiritual community that truly wants to model unity and diversity? Which at times can be an extremely challenging thing to do in practice. A congregation that lifts up and attempts to put our UU principles into action? A congregation that attempts to teach children these principles and assists them in learning to live these principles in their everyday lives?

Allow me to "should" all over you for a moment, but don't you feel proud to belong to this congregation? Don't you feel a sense of hope and satisfaction that you are the key component in supporting this congregation as we seek to live out our progressive, liberal religious tradition in Western North Carolina? Well if not, you should! Imagine what would this community would be like if this congregation ceased to exist. I happen to believe it would be terribly missed. I certainly would miss it and I don't even live in Black Mountain. I hope you would miss it as well. I want to support this congregation with my time, my energy, and my money. I hope you do as well. We do not burden other human beings with the dogma of

guilt, shame, and hatred. We encourage those who gather here to be free to share, free to give, free to grow. But religion

should not be a free ride. You really cannot have a religion without

commitment and support. I attended a few UU congregations in NY when I resided there and I met people who loved our philosophy, purposes, and principles. They attended our adult RE classes and pot luck suppers. They socialized and made good

friends. They came for counseling and advice, but they would not make a financial pledge. Their response to the canvass was we think religion should be free. Even though they took advantage of all the services that we offered, they simply refused to acknowledge that *somebody had to pay!*

There is only one reason to join a UU Congregation, Society, Fellowship, or Church. That is to support it!

Why?

Because it is a noble endeavor. Because it is open to human beings (and the animal kingdom) of every race, creed, color, or place of origin.

We have a free pulpit where you can hear ideas expressed here which would cost any other minister of any another denomination his or her career. You want to support it because it is a place you can attend where our children are not asked to bear the cross and splinters of guilt or the threat of eternal damnation and hell fire. It is where children and adults can learn that religion is for joy, for comfort, for gratitude and for love.

You want to support it because this is a place where walls can be torn down instead of built up. This is a place of refuge for displaced persons who have been wounded from their religions of origin. Its a place where they can heal. People in interracial marriages, unwanted free thinkers, and those who challenge religious orthodoxy can attend our services and work out their own beliefs.

You want to support this UU congregation because we are more concerned with human beings than with dogma; because we search for the holy rather than dwell on who is not saved. Because we call no one sinner, yet we attempt to understand how deep is the struggle in each person's heart to become fully human and to hunger for the good, the beautiful, and the true.

You want to support this UU congregation because we are not afraid to laugh; because we stand for something more when living in a time where many churches are more concerned with who you sleep with and if you drink or smoke, than with racism and war. You want to support it because it calls you to worship what is truly worthy of your sacrifice. You want to support it because we take our children seriously and we want them to grow into healthy, responsible, and loving human beings who care for our planet and humanity. You hear me say ad nauseam during the offertory. I quote one of my favorite philosophers, William James, when he says that the greatest use of life is to spend it on something that will outlast it. The Prophet Muhammed says that we cannot want for ourselves what we do not want for others.

Yes, there is only one reason for joining a UU church and that is to support it. Will you?

To put it another way, the gifts of God are free but that does not mean they do not cost anything. True, everything cannot be measured in dollars and cents and if all you can comfortably give is your time, we are delighted and appreciative.

Religion should be free! Yes. Our religion should insure that we are free to think, to choose, to question, and to love. We want to be free of racism,.

You are each free to choose; to decide for yourself how important your religion, your spiritual community worth to you. How much is UUCSV worth to you? How much can you give generously?

We have a wide variety of incomes here. We talk about politics here and religion. We don't give partisan political plugs from the pulpit but we do pay attention to how the political process promotes or impedes social justice. Now its time to talk about money.

We have bills to pay. Rent, my salary, religious education, the newsletter. We have to support our denomination and support our social action projects. This is the culture in which we live. We can put a budget together and talk about it just fine, but now comes the next step. We each have to decide what is fair in supporting our congregation. In order to do this we have to talk it over with people from the pledge committee. We want to be able to make an informed decision. We need to be open, honest, and transparent about what we can or cannot do.

Talking to our canvassers does not mean you will be harassed. It does not mean assigning guilt or shame. It doesn't mean whispering or embarrassment. Talking about money means listening as well. It means laughing, telling stories, and feeling good and talking through challenges.

This is what I hope for the canvass:

I hope that each person will have the necessary information to make the best pledge possible. I hope that people with lots of money will give lots of money! I hope the people with smaller incomes, who have little money, will never feel that they are small people, that they have little to contribute.

I hope that no one feels that they have given too much or too little and that they have done the right thing. I hope that you will each feel that you can ask questions, talk things over with your minister, your canvasser, with the board of trustees, with canvass leadership. If you have a question please ask.

This is your congregation. This is your spiritual community, your spiritual home. This is not your place of employment, nor is it a competition. It's not a cocktail party; we are not here to judge or be judged. We are here to love and be loved. To at least try. We are here to share what we have, what we are, what we hope, what we dream, what we need. We build for all those yet unknown who will enter our house of fellowship, community, and worship.

We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.

May it always be so.