

REACH FOR THE LIGHT - Sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Maureen Killoran at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach, FL, February 7, 2010.

We found you. But you knew we would. It's Stewardship time . . .

I'm reminded of the two men who got themselves shipwrecked on a desert island. One man panicked, ran around yelling, "We're gonna die! We're gonna die!" The second man was cool. He just sat there under a palm tree, drove the first guy crazy. "What's the matter with you? You crazy? Can't you see we're doomed?" The second man just shrugged. "No problem. I make \$100,000 a week."

The first guy didn't get it. "What difference does that make? We're on a desert island. No food, no water. We're going to DIE!"

"Chill, dude. I make \$100,000 a week, and I give 10% of that to my church."

"SO???"

"Listen. I give \$10,000 every week to my church. BELIEVE ME. My pastor IS gonna find me!!"

There you are.

I've been a UU for 40 years, and I KNOW we don't like to talk about money. Sex -- no problem. We're proud to teach values-based sex education to children and youth, sometimes even to adults. It's not uncommon for sex to be the subject of sermons

But money -- now that's personal. We don't like to talk about giving money -- and the reality is that what we don't talk about, we very seldom do. And so once a year, your minister devotes her sermon to the subject of giving. Of generosity. Of supporting the ministry of your religious community. She talks about the \$600 that it costs to sustain just the ministry of this congregation -- each day, every day, not just in the high tide season, but 365 days a year. \$600 per day for the ministry of this congregation, and almost all of that comes from ordinary contributions from ordinary people -- people who believe in the values for which this Fellowship stands.

- * People who are inspired, or sustained or challenged by the services.
- * People who are nurtured by this community.
- * People who understand that sometimes we need pastoral care or support, that sometimes no matter how stubborn we are or how independent we may be, sometimes we need a little help from our friends.

There you are.

There you are. And you. And you. And you too. Alone, no one of us can create or sustain this community. But nobody's asking you to do it alone. In this coming month, you will be asked to do just exactly what you CAN do. And you will be asked to stretch, to reach just a little farther than you have done before.

"We are not mighty powers," said Ursula LeGuin. "We are not mighty powers, but we are the light." And Jesus of Nazareth said: "You are the light of the world. . . . People do not light a lamp and hide it under a bushel. They put it on a lamp stand and it gives light to everyone in the house." (Matthew 5:14-15)

We probably don't think about it very often, but those words could have been spoken with UUs in mind. We make our faith a private matter. It's not without reason that Unitarian Universalism is sometimes dubbed "the best kept religious secret in America." We keep it so private that even our wallets don't even know what we're about.

Remember, when you compare faith communities across the board -- Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Baha'i . . . survey after survey shows UU's at the top of the pile in terms of education and income . . . and down at the bottom in how much money we give to our church. My friends, we've got our lamps hidden under so many bushels that you'd think something terrible was going to happen if we pulled them out and let them shine.

Let's consider what can happen when you hide your lamp under a bushel.

The first possibility is that it's very cozy inside -- except there's not enough oxygen, so ultimately the light goes out. I've seen UU's -- whole congregations -- where the light's gone out. People drag to church maybe every couple of months. The building looks like nobody cares -- and the people kind of look that way too. Things need doing, but nobody steps up. After a while people stop coming, and the ones who are left wonder why -- but frankly if the light has gone out, only the most stalwart enjoy sitting in the dark.

So that's the first possibility when your lamp's under a bushel. The second is that the bushel itself catches fire. Lots of excitement there. Before I went to seminary, I belonged to a lay-led congregation in Toronto. We'd finally raised money for a new sign, if only we could decide what it should say. We argued ourselves into exhaustion over the relative merits of "Don Heights Unitarian Center," "Don Heights Unitarian Society," "Don Heights Unitarian Congregation" or "Don Heights Unitarian Church." Finally, as afternoon wore into evening and evening faded to night, we voted, the decision was made, and for ten years the sign outside that building read, "DON HEIGHTS UNITARIAN _____."

Call it watching bushels burn. Call it stirring tempests in pots of tea. Call it an unerring ability to make big issues where small ones ought to be. I say this is one thing we do very well . . . and it is one way to avoid becoming the strong religious presence that this faith movement is meant to be.

I've seen a congregation's light go out. I've watched bushels burn. I am thankful that I have not yet witnessed the third possibility -- where we hide our light under a bushel, hunker down while the rest of the world goes dark. Praise be, so far no matter how dark the world has grown, there has always been at least a glimmer of light.

I don't believe we can count on things to stay that way.

I don't believe the world can be lit by a handful of individual torch-bearers, whether it's you or me or somebody else, struggling away in isolation, doing battle against the dark. Remember Edward Everett Hale's words: "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."

It's true. We are not mighty powers, but we are the light. And in this Stewardship campaign that's coming up, if you do the something that YOU can do, this Fellowship has a chance, a real, a viable, an exciting chance to make a difference in the wider world.

It's called reaching out. Reaching out with your bit of light and sharing it.

Okay, I see your eyes glazing over. Naps are being taken. Grocery lists are being made. I'm reminded of the story of the evangelist who had the congregation in his hand when he shouted, "Brothers and sisters, this church of ours ought to run. Are you ready to run?" And the people shouted back, "Amen, Brother -- Let's run!"

And he called again, "Brothers and Sisters, this church ought to fly! Are you ready to fly?" And again they answered, "Amen, Brother, let's fly!" Once more, the evangelist chanced it -- "Brothers and Sisters, it takes money to fly! Are you ready to give?" . . . and the response was silence, for the brothers and sisters had taken their wallets and walked home.

It may be that there are advantages to our uptight tradition, what some have called, "God's Frozen People." I may not get the encouragement that comes from y'all calling back, "Amen!" or "Preach it sister!" -- but at least most of you are still here.

[Can I get an Amen?]

If you believe that it's possible for this fellowship to shine, will you give me another Amen?

If you believe . . . no never mind, I'm not going to push my luck any farther . . . But I say again that this Fellowship stands the verge of an exciting opportunity, and what it will cost is an additional \$27.40 per day . . . I'm starting to sound like an infomercial, so I'd better explain.

Up until now, your ministry budget has had a line for all the dollars and checks you put in the offering. Setting aside 5th Sundays, that adds up to \$10,000 a year. Ten thousand dollars that in addition to all your pledges, has been used for programs and salaries and all the other costs of everyday ministry. But -- hear me -- if the total amount of all our pledges comes to \$195,000 for the year beginning July 1, this Fellowship will be able to reach beyond these walls, to use that money to heal and empower our hurting world.

We are not mighty powers friends, but \$10,000 can make a pretty big difference to the wider community. And when we illumine another's path we also brighten our own.

I understand last Sunday's town meeting talked about how you can grow your membership -- well I can tell you one way. In every congregation that gives away their Sunday offering, number 1, they do a lot of good in their communities -- and number 2, new people start coming in, getting involved -- people want to be part of a church that walks its talk, that makes a difference in the world.

Here's the good news: YOU CAN DO THIS. You have the money.

The bad news . . . the money's still in your pockets. It's still caught in your heads, the tension between giving more to the Fellowship or giving more to other causes or hanging on to that money for the absolutely bottomless list of needs, wants, demands, that face it, my friends, are never going to go away.

The money's still in your pockets, caught in your decision-trees, -- So let's think about it. Maybe I could do like the pastor who told the congregation he'd doubled his personal pledge, and

he invited everyone who would double theirs to stand . . . And it was of course pure happenstance that at that moment the pianist began to play. . . {SOUNDS OF STAR SPANGLED BANNER}.

No, I guess that wouldn't work.

Guilt doesn't motivate us . . . Hmmm . . . let's see . . . as Unitarian UNIVERSALISTS I can't very well threaten you with Hell . . .

But *there you are*.

Do you believe this Fellowship matters, that if UUFVB's light go out, there would be a difference in YOUR world? [Can I get an Amen here?]

Do you believe it matters that people who are homebound receive regular and supportive visits from their church community? That non-judgmental pastoral counseling is available for members in crisis?

Do you value the community activities, the fun things like Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, the 4th Friday potlucks, next week's the Valentines dance?

Do you value the justice work -- monthly meals for the Homeless Families Center . . . support for the UUSC . . . Fair Trade corner . . . the holiday gifts for Project Niños and teen mothers and the troops in Iraq? How about the thousands of pounds of food you bring for the Food Pantry? [Can I Get an Amen?]

You value these things -- and now have this incredible opportunity actually to make Fellowship the beacon of free religion you have dreamed it could be.

Will you do it? Will you reach for the light?

I don't have to go any farther. You know what I'm saying. We don't like talking about money . . . we don't like being asked to give . . . but the only way we live our values, my friends -- the only way is to take action.

If you leave it to all those other guys -- if you wait for people with more money, or greater financial stability, or less complicated lives . . . my friends, if we leave it to "somebody else," NOTHING IS GOING TO HAPPEN.

And so, I leave it in your hands.

There you are.

This congregation -- and you -- are poised on the edge of possibility. You can do it. You can reach for the light. It's up to you.