SERMON: "THE SPIRIT OF GENEROSITY"

Annie Dillard in one of my favorite books, "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek" writes, "When I was six or seven years old, growing up in Pittsburgh, I used to take a precious penny of my own and hide it for someone else to find. It was a curious compulsion; sadly, I've never been seized by it since. For some reason I always "hid" the penny along the same stretch of sidewalk up the street. I would cradle it at the roots of a sycamore, say, or in a hole left by a chipped-off piece of sidewalk. Then I would take a piece of chalk, and, starting at either end of the block, draw huge arrows leading up to the penny from both directions. After I learned to write I labeled the arrows: SURPRISE AHEAD or MONEY THIS WAY. I was greatly excited, during all this arrow-drawing, at the thought of the first lucky passer-by who would receive in this way, regardless of merit, a free gift from the universe. But I never lurked about. I would go straight home and not give the matter another thought, until, some months later, I would be gripped again by the impulse to hide another penny."

Do you, like Annie Dillard, have an uncontrollable impulse to give generously, or do you need to practice, to develop your "spirit of generosity"?

All religions call people to develop their "spirit of generosity." It is a basic spiritual value. Islam makes charity one of its five pillars. The Jewish scholar Maimonides presented a system with levels of giving, of which the upper most level is that of selfless, anonymous giving. Jesus encouraged people to "cast their bread upon the waters"; he suggested that it would come back manifold. Christianity even went so far as to say we needed to give the ultimate gift: our lives, or at least our egos, in order to be free. Modern spiritual movements speak of the necessity of "letting go" of our fear and living graciously.

Traditional religion has been very serious about our duty to be generous; the consequences of not doing so were quite severe, as witnessed in a joke a colleague [Drew Kennedy] shared with me.

"Once there was a man who died and came before Saint Peter at the gate of Heaven & Hell. St. Peter had to decide where to send him.... So Saint Peter asked him, 'Well, tell me, what have you done in your lifetime to help people?' The man thought and thought, but could not think of anything he had done for anyone else -- until finally he remembered that, well, yes, he had once given a quarter to a Salvation Army Santa Claus. Well, St. Peter didn't know what to do. 'Is that all?' he asked. The man said, 'Yep, I'm afraid that's it.' "Well, this is a tough one," said Peter, "I'll have to talk this one over with God. I'll be right back." St. Peter found God in his study, leaning back in his big chair, and told him the story. God listened thoughtfully, paused, and then in his infinite wisdom said: "Give the man his quarter back and tell him to go to hell."

Well, you can see that having a "spirit of generosity" has been an essential element of religion for some time. And, I believe that everybody has within them some of that spirit. However, most of us put a lot of limits on it as seen in the following story.

An elderly gentleman was dying in his bed at home as was the custom years ago. His family and friends gathered at the house to say their farewells, and to support, Martha, his wife of 55 years. While some relatives sat in the bedroom with George, others were in the kitchen with Martha where she occupied herself as was her want with
baking; perhaps she was keeping particularly busy at this time as a way to manage her feelings around the imminent loss of her life partner. George reminisced with those around his deathbed about the happiness of their years of marriage: of their children, of Martha's faithful devotion, her sense of humor, and most of all her good cooking. As he spoke the smell of the chocolate cake she was baking wafted into his chamber, and he said, "Oh, what joy! How I would love to taste Martha's chocolate cake one last time! Please ask her to bring me a piece." Unfortunately, when the request came to Martha in the kitchen her response was "No way! I'm saving that cake for the reception following the funeral!"

Martha loved her husband dearly; she had some of that "spirit of generosity," but she set limits on her giving and that spirit, so do we. Unitarian Universalists say that freedom is our number one value; we have freedom from hierarchal authority, but statistics indicate that we are not free with giving our money. (We have the second highest income level among all demographic groups, but the lowest giving level.) The word "liberal" means one who is "generous of spirit"; we are "generous of spirit" in some areas. Many of us believe the government and other people should be generous with rights and funds for those who are in need; we are liberals, but as Will Rogers put it: "I can remember way back when a liberal was one who was generous with his own money." Unitarian Universalists give to multiple charitable groups like NPR and PBS, but usually at the lowest levels.

I have given some examples that indicate what a "spirit of generosity" is not, now let me cite some inspiring illustrations of such a spirit. It has been my practice in stewardship services to ask for testimonials from members of the congregation. I served the Unitarian Church in Fort Lauderdale from 1978 to 1982, and to this day I remember vividly the testimony of a woman in that congregation. She was not a wealthy woman; her home was modest and in need of repair. But she stood up and said that she was going to raise her pledge to the church by the amount of money she had saved to repair her kitchen sink. Yes, she threw everything she had into that church—including the kitchen sink!

Standing in the reception line following the service at one of our congregations on Association Sunday in 2007, a woman, who was not wealthy, handed me her check. That year we had a national match of all donations plus that congregation had a donor who matched everything they collected, so every dollar raised was quadrupled. With tears in her eyes, she handed me her check for $250 saying, "I never thought I would be able to give $1000 to something I love so much as Unitarian Universalism."

My favorite story of giving a generous legacy gift is that of a UU minister who has three children; he and his wife have split their estate to be divided in four ways with the UUA getting one quarter on equal footing with each of their three children. In fact, his wife told me he wanted to leave it all to the UUA; she had to talk him into including their children!

Freedom from a narrowness of mind and heart is what the spirituality of generosity is all about. Developing a "spirit of generosity" is a spiritual discipline that can lead us to enjoy life more, to feel free, more connected to the cosmos, and the community.

The discipline of cultivating a "spirit of generosity" is not just about being responsible, but about trust, joy, and love. Let me suggest some guidelines for the development of such a spirit. The first precept in this discipline is that one must make it a choice, a priority. It is no easy path; and it is easy to ignore. It requires more faith and commitment than we generally exhibit. It is not the usual way of being in our materialistic, individualistic society.
It's a choice, one that requires a leap of faith across the chasm of insecurity.

The second rule is don't compare: if what you give to others is defined by what you imagine others are giving or should be giving, if you are only concerned with giving your equal share, then your giving will be at the "lowest common denominator." That is not a level at which one could expect to find much value and meaning from the "spirit of generosity." Religious practice calls us to rise above whatever others may do to do the right thing. It is important in this discipline not to compare what you do with what others do, but it is appropriate to compare and contrast what percentage you give to charity with what you spend on your other values.

The third precept is similar; it is to not limit your generosity by making judgments as to whether your gift will be well managed, will do as much good as imagined, or whether you can afford to be generous. The joy of giving comes not from knowing exactly how it is going to be spent, but by knowing you did a good thing. It is important to evaluate your concerns. Ask, are you being parsimonious because you don't have any money, or because you are consumed with issues of anxiety and control?

Your generosity is a function of the spirit with which you respond to life. To grow spiritually you may need to give something up, something like control, and fear. To paraphrase Jesus, there is a love in life that cares for us and even for the lilies of the field, but we usually only feel that love when we stop trying to control it. "Spirit of Generosity" would say, "Don't worry whether you have limited resources; worry about how you are responding to the gift of life. Are you hoarding or are you sharing, giving it away?"

Fourth, remember it is the spirit we are concerned about, the spirit with which you give not the amount. The "spirit of generosity" is not concerned with how much you give or to whom, but whether you give generously. Any and every one can be generous no matter how much they have; it is not a function of the amount of the gift; it is more about the effect on the donor and the community. Does your giving inspire others? Does your giving challenge, stretch your mind, heart, and spirit? If not, it is not enough. To grow spiritually, to grow freer, it is necessary to give something of yourself, more than you imagine prudent. And, as Dag Hammarskjold, said, "Only what you have given will be left of... [what] was your life."

It is incumbent upon me to remind you that developing "a spirit of generosity" is not just about giving more to this congregation, though I hope you will do so; it is about having a more charitable, gracious approach to all of life: to other non-profits, to people, and problems.

And, finally, a fifth guide: do not expect miracles. As with any spiritual discipline, like meditation, you may anticipate eventually finding more joy, meaning and value in your life, but the effects on you or on others of your generosity may not be immediately apparent.

To be generous it is necessary to confront ones fear. That is why it is a question of faith, hope, and love. It is a question of how you want to respond to the gift that is life. I believe that through giving generously of our resources of time and money we will grow in faith and freedom, in the spirit that makes life more meaningful for us and valuable for others.

This religious community does many good things for people. It provides a caring community, spiritual development, education, opportunities for putting your faith into social action. This congregation exists for the purpose of helping people become as good as they can be. Giving is a part of that process. Giving generously is a spiritual discipline
that is difficult; I struggle with it too. But, I believe in trying to be free and faithful, responsible. I want my life to be open to the mysteries of love I imagine being a part of. I want to trust life and do what is right. And, I know you do too. The spirit does not push us into doing the right thing; it opens a space for us to move into, however slowly; it invites us to be free, good, holy. The spirit of generosity doesn't push us; it points; it draws arrows—like Annie Dillard in the reading this morning—and like I did on the sidewalk out in front of The Third Street Center this morning. They say MONEY THIS WAY, and LOVE THIS WAY, and FREEDOM THIS WAY. And the arrows are all pointing to this congregation. And they are all pointing to YOU!

On this Sunday kicking off our stewardship campaign, you are invited to be generous. This congregation will be better able to give to others to the extent that those who care about it are able to develop their spirituality, their commitment to this community, and to support it generously. Whether your gift is generous is something that only you know. I hope that you will pledge enough to feel good about your contribution. I hope that you will feel spiritual, free. I hope that like Annie Dillard you will be seized by an impulse to give, and that you will experience the joy, the thrill of giving hope, giving of your abilities and money. I hope that you will be filled with the spirit of love, which reminds me of one of my favorite songs. Please join me in singing "Love is something if you give it away...You end of having more." The words of the "Magic Penny" song by Malvina Reynolds are printed on the insert in your order of service.... So may it be. Amen.