

**Deeply Rooted and Standing Strong**  
**Ancient Wisdom for a Healthy Congregation**

By  
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Like every congregation, ours has its own unique ways of doing some things, including kicking off our annual generosity campaign with what we playfully refer to as the “Sermon on the Amount.” This was the tradition here before I came, but I have always appreciated the lighthearted play on words, which is an obvious pun in reference to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. But a clever pun can only carry a preacher so far, and you might think it would have run its course after a decade of sermons. A little humor helps when discussing money, which can be a rather mundane, if not uncomfortable, topic to discuss during a Sunday service.

You might think after ten years here that I would have run out of interesting things to say during my annual Sermon on the Amount. But it’s never been a challenge for me and remains among my favorite sermons to give. This is so because my sermons on the amount are never about the amount of money that we need to keep our lights on. A sermon about keeping our lights on would be mundane, and I wouldn’t blame you for tuning out. I consider it my opportunity, rather, to remind you of what our church is all about: our history, our values, our great accomplishments, and about all we can achieve in the future. I figure if we’re reminded of what it’s worth to us and our community, then I don’t have to ask you for a dime because we all want to give what we can to support the things of value and meaning in our lives.

So my sermon on the amount is something I look forward to each year because it gives me a chance to talk about something I love, this incredible liberal religious institution that has been transforming lives, transforming our community, and transforming our world for 134 years. It’s about the amount of time we’ve been here, and the amount of great things we’ve accomplished from day one: like promoting women’s contraceptive freedoms, giving birth to religious humanism, being among the first to protest the Vietnam War, helping to expose the Hanford Radiation leaks and shutting down its nuclear reactor, legalizing same-sex marriage, legalizing marijuana that has already lead to increasing talk of ending the drug war altogether, helping immigrants targeted by I.C.E. with their legal fees, and on and on we can go. Our sermon on the amount is about the amount of community we create for ourselves, and the amount of meaning we find in the journey of life, and about the amount of work we do together to make our world a more just place for everyone.

I’m particularly excited about this year’s generosity theme, “Deeply Rooted and Standing Strong,” symbolized by the image of a tree. Given all that we’ve been through the past year-and-a-half, it’s perfect. Not only have we had to cope with COVID-19 and all its ramifications, as well as an incredibly stressful national election, and lots of disturbing civil unrest in our nation, we also faced a distressing conflict within our own congregation, and it would be disingenuous for me not to say something about it as we consider our

continued support. In fact, things were so difficult last year that I skipped the annual sermon on the amount. Our generosity campaign consisted of a letter asking for your support and me thanking you each Sunday for your continued generosity. It was a difficult time in our church. A few upset people were sending out letters to everyone asking you to reduce your pledges to only \$200 a year, then asked our generosity team to base our campaign on their self-manufactured concerns over a looming financial crisis. This was, no doubt, an effort to create the unnecessary anxiety within our congregation to worsen the conflict.

The truth is, we're always anxious about next year's budget and always end up doing what is necessary to live within our means. This anti-generosity campaign made a dent but has not crippled us by any means. More damaging, to my mind, are those particular individuals who left, not because they were on one side or the other, but because they found the conflict unsavory and, understandably, expected better from us. I miss them most of all and hope they will come to understand that conflict is a natural and necessary part of life and that some things are worth fighting for.

In many ways, the conflict that erupted in our church last year is part of a larger culture war that has been escalating for the past fifty years, and represents a battle for the very soul of our nation and its aspiration to achieve genuine freedom, equality, democracy, and prosperity for every soul. On the other hand, after much reflection, I have come to realize our local skirmish was also partly caused by a dynamic that happens to all vibrant congregations whenever they are growing.

You see, congregations are necessarily governed differently according to their size. The smallest size, known as the "family-sized" congregation has no more than 50 members, is usually too small to have a minister or any staff, and is run informally by a few prominent founding members and families who make all the decisions. The "pastoral-sized" congregation has between 50 and 150 members and is too large for only a few people to get away with calling all the shots. So formal democratic processes are put into place, which involves having bylaws and elected Board members who must formally meet, keep minutes, and vote on their decisions. The "program-sized" congregation has 150 to about 350 and is too large for all of its members to know each other. It not only needs small group programs enabling them to make personal connections, it needs formal policies in place to determine how things are done in general, rather than relying upon the situational decision making of a Board of Trustees that is too small to represent the will of the entire membership. Finally, the "professional-sized" congregation, from around 350 members on up, has to have a formal Board of Trustees, along with member approved governing documents, policies, and a professional staff that does a lot of what volunteers were once able to carry out when things were smaller and more manageable.

Because of their different governance structures, power-conflicts emerges whenever a congregation goes through a size transition, because some members resent losing their sense of control and comfort in doing things the way they've always been done. Such conflict is a subconscious means of driving new members away in order to reduce the congregation's size back to "normal." Such conflict is painful and ugly and pointless, because it never works. Those responsible for the conflict are usually the ones who end up leaving, feeling angry and embarrassed, and missing the church they will inevitably claim left them.

When I began my ministry at Clifton Unitarian Church in Louisville, twenty-something years ago, it had been a family-sized congregation of about 30 regular longtime members. But, due to attrition, it found its services attended at times by fewer than ten people. After I began, attendance was almost immediately back up to 30 regulars, and the older members considered me a hero. But as attendance continued growing, requiring us to transition from a family-size to a pastoral-size congregation, all hell broke loose and some of the longtime members who had once praised my efforts, believed I had become Satan incarnate. Whenever they were reminded of the church's growth, they countered by referring to the new members as "transients." In other words, they expected them to leave.

Clifton Unitarian had functioned so long as a 30-member family-sized congregation, that its members were used to a few people making all the decisions, with no accountability to anyone else, which is fine for a small informal group of old friends. But a larger church, at least one with democratic values, has to give everyone a voice, and that meant creating a real Board of Trustees that follows bylaws established by the congregation. The older members were also bothered that we needed to renovate the church and expand the sanctuary to accommodate more people. But in the end, it was those responsible for the conflict who left, our growth continued without them, the renovations were completed, and the church emerged solidly as a pastoral-sized congregation. But, I can assure you, as the minister who bore the brunt of the hostility, including from some who thought I should have the magic words to make us all "love one another," it was extraordinarily painful and difficult to get through. But it was also an experience that toughened me up and helped me understand this common dynamic.

Last year, here at UUCS, we had just over 400 official members, meaning we were well into our transition to becoming a "professional-sized" congregation. We had the conflict, some left and, guess what, today our membership number is 350, right on the cusp between "program-size" and "professional-size." You will also be interested to know this conflict escalated after we planned to reveal architectural designs for potentially expanding our space to accommodate the 500-member congregation we were becoming. These drawing were the result of our strategic plan, that had been approved by the congregation with its input. Their progress was also reported to our Board of Trustees and Operations Team at every meeting for over a year. But they could not possible be approved without tremendous support given by a vote of our congregation.

Yet, some of those who eventually began the anti-pledge letter campaign began crying foul, claiming that by showing the drawings to you we were somehow being authoritarian and undemocratic. This was confusing given our open process, and that authoritarianism and undemocratic behavior are based on concealing information, not revealing it. Sadly, our Board leadership at the time, put a stop to us showing you these beautiful, harmless drawings. Like so much else that was happening, they were to be kept out of sight from our congregation. But only those who don't want growth would fear enabling our members to envision adding restrooms to our Religious Education wing in order to better secure our children's safety on Sundays, and air-conditioning in its classrooms. The drawings also include an expanded sanctuary by adding a new fellowship space that would include a coffee stand and bookstore.

With this information in mind, it's reasonable to assume much of the conflict we experienced last year was in reaction to the necessary governance shift going on due to the growth of our church. Professionalizing many of our services and systems meant that some individuals who were used to controlling certain decisions, like staffing and how our money will be spent, were losing their direct influence. Unfortunately, transitioning congregations must endure some degree of such conflict, but will usually emerge from it stronger than before. Those who most fervently resist the transition, causing a lot of ruckus in the process, are the ones who inevitably leave disappointed. The congregation then recovers from the upset and successfully moves forward with its growth. This is precisely what happened at Clifton Unitarian Church, and is what I expect will happen here at UUCS. I'm confident of this because, despite all the difficulties we faced together last year, we are still standing strong. And we are standing strong because we have remained deeply rooted in our values.

Conflict happens, but our enduring values are what sustain us. Jesus is reported to have said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household."<sup>1</sup> This is a troubling verse because it doesn't demonstrate the more peace-loving statements attributed to Jesus that we might prefer, like "Turn the other cheek," "Put away your swords," and, "Love one another." But I think even Jesus recognized there are some things worth fighting for, nonviolently, of course, but worth going through the conflict and struggle for. He understood that remaining deeply rooted in those values that keep us standing strong, and that have kept our church standing strong for more than century, means sometimes having to withstand conflict and opposition. He also said it's necessary to let the wheat and the weeds grow together, for "if you pull the weeds now, you might uproot the wheat with them."<sup>2</sup> Whatever else he may have meant by this, it's clear he understood that our growth and progress requires us to stay rooted, and

that we can't do this in a monoculture. If we all have to think alike, we risk forsaking our values just to get along.

Given this year's generosity theme is "Deeply Rooted and Standing Strong," it's fitting we should reference Jesus, who gave us the original Sermon on the Mount, because he often used gardening metaphors in his parables. In addition to reminding us to be stoic about the reality of conflict in our communities, Jesus' parables remind us not to waste too much time worrying about things we can't prevent. Instead, we should focus our energies and resources on things we can influence. Recall his parable about sowing seeds in the right kind of soil, not on an open path the birds can easily get to, or on rocky ground their roots cannot penetrate, or among thorn bushes that will choke them out. Wasting time on things that aren't going to happen only leads to unnecessary stress and to disappointment. Wasting time trying to control others, including trying to make them happy, is not possible for us. We can only control ourselves, our own behavior and attitudes, which requires us to remember the values that ground us and hold us steady, no matter the circumstances we find ourselves in. Do not scatter seeds where they cannot sprout, nor tend to gardens that refuse to grow.

Jesus' parables are incredibly stoic, inasmuch as they require us to recognize, "to everything there is a season and a time for ever purpose under heaven," including conflict. As the Roman stoic philosopher Epictetus said, "Of all existing things some are in our power, and others are not in our power."<sup>3</sup> Wisdom, for the Stoics, means knowing the difference between what we can and can't control, and what we should and shouldn't control. This reminds me of Jesus' parable about a man who simply scatters some seed, then goes about his life, sleeping and rising, without ever tending to them again. Yet, "the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear."<sup>4</sup> All he has to do is rest and reap the reward of nature's handiwork. Likewise, we cannot and should not strive to control the hearts and minds and wills of others. We can only express our beliefs and demonstrate our values, and let those seeds take root where they can, then rest and let nature takes its course.

We've been through a lot during the past year, and our church has been through a lot more during the past century, but we are still standing strong, because it was originally seeded in rich soil and has developed deep roots. I'm referring to our enduring liberal religious values. For some, these values might be best articulated by Unitarian Universalism's seven principles. They do articulate our values well, but these seven statements didn't exist until the mid-1980s. Our congregation has existed since the mid-1880s, and Unitarianism has been around a lot longer than that. So I prefer a much older and simpler list, dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance that gave birth to European Unitarianism, and to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment that gave birth to American Unitarianism: Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance.

However we prefer to express our enduring liberal religious values, they are the deep roots that hold us steady against life's storms and that enable us to stand firm, no matter our circumstances. As a historic 134-year-old Unitarian church, we have remained standing because we have long stood for the virtue of reason—the notion that our beliefs, as imperfect as they may remain, must be rooted in objective, provable facts; and for the virtue of freedom, that every individual on this planet should be free to determine their own beliefs and to speak their minds and to have a voice in how they are governed, no matter who or how many may disagree; and we have stood for the virtue of tolerance, the belief that no matter how different we may be, we are all part of the human family and deserve to be welcomed, respected, and included in the benefits of society. We cherish doubt. We cherish dissent. We cherish diversity.

This is why we are still standing, despite our recent struggles and those that occurred long ago, because our roots have held us firm in the midst of every storm for more than a century. We are a tree that is still standing strong, and still growing, and is still going to need to make room for others. With this purpose in mind, I'll conclude with another of Jesus' parables:

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."<sup>5</sup>

Isn't this what we're about? Is this why we remain standing strong? Because we want to be a place with such large branches, such big hearts and open minds, so that others can come and rest in its shade? No matter how small we may seem, how helpless we may sometimes feel, no matter how powerful and frightening the storms we must endure, there is so much more to us beneath the surface that makes us unshakeable. Like the song says, "roots hold us close, wings set us free." Our church is such a tree, with branches for the birds of the air to find comfort, rest, strength, and community, because it is so deeply rooted in those enduring principles that are so worthy of our support.

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 10:34-36

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 13:29

<sup>3</sup> Oates, W.J., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, Random House, New York, NY, 1940, p. 468.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 4:27-28

<sup>5</sup> Mark 4:30-32