

Supporting UUFB and Its Mission©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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You may not know it but today is a very important day. Today is kickoff day. Now for those of you who can't wait to get home to watch your favorite team play this afternoon, I want to be clear. When I say today is kickoff day, I am not referring to football. Knowing that some of you are avid football fans, I am reasonably certain that some of you will disagree with what I am about to say. The kickoff I am talking about is more personal, and possibly more important, at least to this community, than a game of football. The kickoff I am referring to is this Fellowship's annual pledge drive. The UUFB annual pledge drive officially kicks off today.

Those of you who have been members or friends here for some time are probably familiar with this annual event. You are familiar with how it is done. You know that the vast majority of the money needed to keep this Fellowship functioning through the course of the year is raised through this annual event. You recognize how significant the pledge drive is for this Fellowship.

But I have noticed, as I am sure many of you have, that there are a good number of people who have come through our doors for the first time over the past several months. Those of you who have arrived recently may not know what this annual event is all about, how it works, or how important it is to the life of this Fellowship. I would like to take a few moments to share a few things about our pledge drive with those of you who are recent arrivals. Each year about this time a letter, along with a packet of information, is sent out to UUFB members and friends. If you would like such a packet we would be happy to share one with you. In the packet is a one page pledge form. Each person or household that gets a packet is asked to fill out the pledge form and return it. This form asks people to indicate an amount of money they feel moved to commit or pledge to this Fellowship for the coming year, from January through December. At the end of our pledge drive and after the forms are handed in, our Treasurer, David Andes, informs the Board of the total amount that has been collected. He doesn't share who has pledged. He doesn't tell how much anyone has pledged, only the total of the pledges. From this information, the Board, with significant assistance from the Finance Committee, then comes up with a projected budget for the coming year. That budget is then presented to the congregation. Then at the Annual Meeting in January, a vote of the members is held to approve the budget.

During last year's pledge drive, the members and friends of this Fellowship pledged almost \$142,000. That was the highest amount this congregation has ever raised for a single year's budget. And that was in addition to what had been pledged for the very recent Capital Campaign which allowed us to obtain this building, the first building we have ever owned. I am both amazed by and grateful for the incredible generosity that is present in this congregation. The amount of money that has been pledged and given in the recent past is a clear indication that this Fellowship holds a special place in your hearts—and probably in your pocketbooks as well. Thank you for what you have given and for your continuing commitment to UUFB.

This year the Board has set a goal of \$160,00 for the pledge drive. I think everyone would agree that is an ambitious goal. It takes into account a recent decision

the Board made to institute year-round services beginning this coming summer. Now that we have our own building, and a wonderful one at that, the Board thought we ought to make use of it through the summer as we do during the rest of the year.

Some of you might wonder what would motivate a person to pledge money to support this community each year. What I have learned is that every person and household that gives does so for their own reasons. Starting last Sunday, and continuing through mid-December, a Stewardship Moment is included in our service. This is a time when we get to hear what this Fellowship means to some of our members and friends. Thank you Jo Ann for sharing your thoughts and feelings with us this morning. I know that not everyone feels comfortable getting up in front of a group of people and sharing the significance this congregation has in their life. It is my hope though that the sharing you have already heard or will hear in the weeks to come will inspire you to share your own stories with those you talk with before or after services. Tell someone else what brought you here and what makes you come back again and again. Your story matters and I think it is quite likely that when you share, others will want to share their story with you.

In the 16 months I have been your minister I have heard a good number of stories about what UUFB means to you. One part of me would like to share some of those stories because each one of them is important and very meaningful. But I know sharing your stories wouldn't be appropriate. That would take away an opportunity for those of you who have spoken with me to share your story with others here. But there is a story I can share with you. It is a story of someone from a congregation I served before coming to Bozeman. It may not be about this particular Fellowship but it provides a sense of how important our UU faith tradition is and how our congregations change lives. I asked for and was given permission to share this story. In fact, the person encouraged me to tell their story whenever and wherever it might be helpful. I believe this story is a good example of why people are drawn to and feel deeply committed to their UU congregation.

Some years ago a congregant asked to meet with me in my office. As we talked the person told me that finding the UU congregation in that community, and discovering Unitarian Universalism, were among the most important events in their life. Since birth, they had been involved in a religious tradition that was so restricting and stifling that this person felt they were being suffocated. They told me, and here I quote, "This congregation saved my life." Those of you who were here for one of the recent sermons I delivered on our First Principle will remember that I said we UU's have a saving message. This person's story made it possible for me to make that claim, and to know that it is absolutely true. But there is more to the story. This person not only found a new religious tradition in Unitarian Universalism, they found a new career. At the Mountain Desert District Annual Meeting in Boulder, Colorado last month I had the delightful opportunity to reconnect with the person. They are now the head of the Religious Education program for one of the UU congregations in our District. They told me they feel happier and more fulfilled than they could have ever imagined before finding Unitarian Universalism. Our UU faith communities touch and change lives in powerful ways.

And I believe this Fellowship touches and changes lives every day. It does this in so many ways that I couldn't possibly speak to even a small portion of the long list. But I

think our UUFB Mission Statement can give us a sense of at least some of the important ways we do so. Every week our Mission Statement is included on the cover page of our Order of Service. Some of you might read it every week, but my guess is many of you only glance at it. What it states is important enough that I would like to read it to you now.

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman is a liberal religious community of diverse beliefs, bound together by shared values. Our active practice is to:
Gather as a welcoming, accepting and open community;
Foster freedom of belief and responsible inquiry;
Inspire spiritual growth and lifelong learning;
Serve others by social action for social and environmental justice.

Our Mission Statement contains some pretty lofty claims. I know I don't always fully live out what it asserts. Maybe that is the reason it states this is our active practice. I know I am, and it is quite likely we all are, still practicing. We practice here, with one another. We practice with the hope that some day we will be able to make our practice count when we are called into some difficult situation in the game of life. We practice together not just as a congregation but as a team. And this is the reason I stated earlier that the kickoff I am talking about is more personal, and possibly more important, at least to this community, than a game of football.

The pledge drive which we are kicking off today will allow us to continue practicing together for another year. It is your commitment to this community, your dedication to practicing what our Mission Statement asserts, and your investment in the financial future of this Fellowship that makes a difference. It makes a difference not only in the lives of UUFB members and friends. It makes a difference to those we reach out to and support in the wider world.

So as our annual pledge drive kicks off today I would ask you to do three things. Think deeply about the place this Fellowship holds in your life and ask yourself what UUFB means to you. And when you are clear about the significance UUFB holds in your life, share your thoughts and feelings with someone in the congregation. That may be a member of your household but I hope you will share with someone outside of your household as well. And finally, when it comes time to fill out your pledge form, remember that every dollar you pledge is used to support this team, this community, as we practice together and strive to live out the mission we have set for ourselves. Unlike football, the game of life that we are engaged in goes on, not just for minutes or hours, but for years and decades.

Thank you for being a part of this team. And thank you for your generosity. Together we will continue to support one another and make a significant positive difference in our community, in our state, in our country and even in the lives of people in other parts of the world.

May it be so.