

“What Are Gifts For?”  
October 20, 2024

Romans 12:3-10  
Matthew 5:12-14

On these October Sundays, I’m joining with other members to help us consider together our support for this congregation. John Fieselmann, Andy Bertolatus, and David McCartney have already spoken quite eloquently about this. And next week we’ll hear from Diane Dahl-McCoy.

Last Sunday I looked at *why* we should support Congregational UCC—recalling the good that a congregation can do when as we give and grow *together*.

In the community that is this church, we can let the generosity of others inspire our own.

In the community that is this church, we can let the concern of others inspire our own.

In the community that is this church, we can let the sense of mission and the deep compassion of others lead us forward with faithfulness.

Sometimes a congregation—*this congregation*—can seem quaint, old-fashioned; but this church is life-giving, counter-cultural, even, I would say, vital to survival. A community such as this is essential for a good life. Here there are people who support, challenge, and know you.

You need a place like this.

More people need a place like this.

That, in short, is *why* we would support Congregational UCC.

This morning, I want to explore *how* we might support this congregation.

And, of course, as I say this, members of our Stewardship Board are probably thinking: “Come on, Bill, that’s kind of a no-brainer. Just tell the people to support Congregational UCC *financially* by filling out a pledge card, sending it in to the church, and then fulfilling their generous commitment with envelopes like this one.

“Sermon over.

“Everyone goes home.”

That would certainly be one approach. Along with the Stewardship Board, as well as the Trustees, the Church Council, and the other leaders of our congregation, I *do* want you to give generously to our ministry and mission in the coming year. And, honestly, because this is the Congregational UCC of Iowa City and I know how much you value the work that all of us together do as a congregation, I *expect* you to give generously. It’s just what we do around here—it’s one of the marks of membership.

If you’ve been around here for a few Octobers, you know that preaching about money is something I very much enjoy. And most likely, I’ll get around to that.

But while it would be easy to say “Turn in those pledge cards” and send you on your way, there’s something more than money involved here.

*How* do we support this congregation?

*How* do we generously live out our faith *together*?

By using the gifts that we have.

This is a congregation rich with talent, ability...gifts!

Perhaps some would object, thinking they have no gifts, nothing to be used.

To give a different perspective, when writing to the early Christians in Rome, Paul listed *some* of the gifts that people have. Paul seems to have had a fondness for lists. As we read this list, it is apparent that it is neither exhaustive nor exclusive. He says: “The gift of inspired utterance, *for example...*” There are other examples as well. He says: “*If* you give to charity...*if* you are a leader, *if* you help others in distress.” You might do such things. Or you might use other gifts.

We should understand lists such as this one as simply offering *some* possibilities among many. Any attempt at limiting a list of gifts will be futile, for the Spirit of God will not be limited.

So let me be clear: YOU have gifts—from God. They might not be the ones on Paul’s list, but you do have gifts.

The Psalmist was getting at this, I think, in asking and answering the question:

What are human beings that you, O God, should be mindful of them?

mortals that you should seek them out?

You have made them but little lower than the angels;

You adorn them with glory and honor.

Our “glory and honor” is that we are made in the very image of God, with the ability to create, to bring new things into being, to love. Along with these great gifts, we have received much more as well.

Each one of us brings gifts to this community. Those who teach and those who sing, those who count money and those who visit the sick, deacons and trustees, those who are known as our leaders and those who come here only occasionally. Each person has something unique to offer this congregation. If you are visiting here for the first time today, or have begun worshipping here in recent weeks, you bring gifts to this place.

Beyond that, each one of us has something unique to offer the wider world. A desire to advocate for others, skill at organizing, a passion for justice, the ability to cook a meal. If I might speak to the many people worshipping with us online who, because of distance, have never worshipped with us in person—along with the rest of us here in this room, you have those kind of gifts—abilities to be used for the good of others. Wherever you use them, near or far, you make a positive difference in the world and in some way you even extend the ministry and mission of this congregation.

This is the point. What are gifts for? To be used.

God doesn’t give knick-knacks—you know, things that sit around and collect dust. The gifts you have received are meant to be used.

Reading those words to the Romans again this past week, I was struck by how Paul makes *his* point: “By the *authority of the grace God given me* I say to everyone among you: do not think too highly of yourself, but think with sober judgment.”

Pauls’ authority does not come from what he knows, or his standing as an apostle, or from sheer force of personality. His authority comes from the grace—the freely offered love—of God. Out of that love—and only out of that love—he encourages all who hear to use the gifts they have.

A translation of these words that I heard decades ago has stuck with me for over half a century: “Try to have a sane estimate of your capabilities by the light of the faith that God has given to you all.”

A sane estimate of your capabilities.

It is important that each of us identify what our gifts are and put them to use as best we can. It helps if every now and then, each one of us thinks a little more intentionally about what we have received and about how we might better use those gifts not only for our own delight but also for the well-being of others. This is such a time.

It helps to have a sane estimate of our capabilities—neither an inflated sense of what we can do nor a self-deprecating attitude that disparages our abilities.

Martha Graham, one of the great dancers of the last century said: “I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same.”

That gets at how we might begin to develop that sane estimate of our capabilities. We learn what our gifts are by using them—in whatever way possible, to whatever extent possible.

Years ago, I heard what is now one of my favorite stories. I think I’ve told it to you once already—and will most likely repeat it again. It’s about a man who went into a diner and ordered a cup of coffee. This was during World War II, when various food items were being rationed. Sugar, being a somewhat precious commodity, was kept behind the counter. After getting his coffee, the man asked for some sugar. The waitress poured a small amount into his cup and put the sugar jar away. A little dismayed, he asked for more.

“Stir up what you've got, first,” came the reply.

What gifts do you have? How can you stir them up so that it will be enough—even more than enough?

Sing. Teach. Study. Visit. Give. Advocate. Organize. Do what you like. Do what you have the *gift* to do. Do it not just for your own sake but for the common good.

Here’s the thing: the value of this church for you and for the world cannot be stated in simple financial terms. And so, our giving cannot be restricted to financial transactions.

Most of you have heard me preach enough about stewardship over the years to know that stewardship is not about our financial giving—or at least that isn’t the first thing that stewardship is about.

Stewardship is about how we wisely use what we have. Money—sure. But as importantly—our talents, our abilities.

We give—together. We grow—together. We do this as we use and share our gifts.

It's easy to take a place like this for granted. But in recent years we have come to see in a deeper way both how precious and how threatened a congregation like this can be:

a place of honesty in a nation of lies;

a place of peace in a violent world;

a place of acceptance in a world of hate.

None of us created this unique assembly of people—with our faith and our doubts, our hopes and fears, our strengths and weakness, with our prayers and actions and speech that in a myriad of ways exhibit to one another and to the world how we follow in the ways of Jesus Christ, known and unknown. All of this comes to us a gift, all free.

We recognize that even in worry and adversity, there is a particular joy that we find as we come together in this place, in this community that is always made up of both friends and those becoming no longer strangers.

How will you, in these days, from this place, make use of all you have received?

How will you give to others the gifts that you have been given?

Let us continue to do all of this—together.