

“From you I receive, to you I give, together we share and from this we live”.

I love that little ditty! I’m so glad to have found an opportunity for us to sing it, other than at Thanksgiving time. I find those words moving, spiritual in fact. Such few, simple words capture what community is all about. More specifically, what faith community is all about.

That little ditty recognizes the “I” and the “You” of community. It recognizes the give and take that’s required of us to be in community. But most importantly...foundationally, it’s significance lies in the last two phrases: “together we share and from *this* we live. In other words, it’s the sharing that takes us beyond merely being alive, to truly living.

Sharing connotes a giving and a receiving. Both are required to close the circle of sharing. Both are necessary for true community. This morning I want to focus on the giving side of the equation. I’m going to reframe it a little bit and talk about it in terms of service; a particular kind of giving, a particular kind of sharing.

Our Theme for this month is Service. To provide service, to be of service, to serve...this is what I want us to focus on this morning. Webster's defines "to serve" as "to be of use, to furnish or supply with something needed or desired" and service as "to be of help, use, benefit, contribution to the welfare of others."

In the Jewish Tradition, contained in the Mishnah, the authoritative interpretation of scripture, is the Hebrew concept of tikkun olam. Tikkun olam expands our usual understanding of the term service...we might even say it sanctifies the term service. It’s a phrase that means, "repairing or healing the world", which suggests humanity's shared responsibility to heal, repair and transform the world.

This concept is intended to inform not only Jewish thought, but moreover, behavior. Actions and deeds are intended to reflect the concept of assuming personal responsibility for repairing and healing the world. Not because “it has been written”, but because it’s the right thing to do. It moves us all in the direction of harmony.

Imagine, how your day to day decision making process and behaviors might be affected by living out that expectation? By internalizing a sense of responsibility to help repair or heal the world.

As we heard in the words of Cesar Chaves earlier today: “We can not seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community...Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.”

This seems a very Unitarian Universalist construct or way perceiving the world. It so fully reflects a way to operationalize honoring the worth and dignity of every person. Progress and prosperity for our community...for their sake and for our own, is a way to acknowledge our interconnectedness. It’s in the doing, not the thinking or conceptualizing.

It’s the doing part of Small Group Ministry that makes me such a fan. I’ve been pushing small group ministry from well before I arrived here. And I’m likely to continue to push it as the best way I know to operationalize community, faith community.

In small groups, we have an opportunity to practice being in meaningful community. We have the opportunity to learn that the sharing of our lives does not require us to “like” one another or be “friends”. Or to share the same exact outlook on life or the same politics.

All of that may be nice, but it is not required. In fact, having significant overlap in likes, viewpoints and preferences is not real life. There is too much diversity in the world for us to expect to regularly encounter people very much like ourselves. Often, and much to our chagrin, such overlap doesn't even exist in the smallest of our communities, two person partnerships and families.

Growth, spiritual development lies in navigating our differences in such a way that we continue to honor the other's worth and dignity. In such a way that we don't lose sight of our interconnectedness and the larger whole that we are all a part of.

Small group ministry provides a safe place to practice both being our true selves and learning to accept other "true selves" in the room. All without regard for political beliefs and personal foibles. In other words, small group ministry is a mini version of a faith community, or a healthy congregation.

While doing some research on the theology of service I came across some small group ministry session plans focused on service. Here are some of the readings and questions I found.

"Any ordinary favor we do for someone or any compassionate reaching out may seem to be going nowhere at first, but may be planting a seed we can't see right now. Sometimes we need to just do the best we can and then trust in an unfolding we can't design or ordain.

Sharon Salzberg.

"The call to service is a yearning for the heart to live and move beyond ourselves. Love, compassion and gratitude lead many to a life of service."

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, from *Spiritual Literacy*.

“Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

“In helping others, we shall help ourselves, for whatever good we give out completes the circle and comes back to us.” -Flora Edwards

“We include service in our model of Small Group Ministry because service is always both a path and an outcome of spiritual growth.”

- Rev. Calvin Dame

The session plans gave us some questions to ponder and answer during a session with your fellow travellers:

- Describe a time when you reached out to someone or when someone reached out to you, with a simple gesture of the heart. What feelings did this gesture evoke?
- There is a need for service on a person-to-person level and for service on a broader level, working for change locally, nationally, or internationally. Based on your experiences, does one appeal to you more? If so, how or why?
- A powerful intimacy can develop when groups work together to serve. Describe a time when you felt this and what it meant to you.

These short readings and questions are designed to take us deeper into our selves. They ask us to reflect on our thoughts, beliefs, feelings and experiences, and to then share that part of ourselves with the community. We share both for ourselves and for others’ benefit.

Service is both a spiritual practice and an obligation. The foundational principle that guides our Caring Circle here at UUFP is this: every member of this congregation should believe they will be cared for, as best as we are able. Being cared for comes with membership. Caring for someone in need can be a spiritual practice that benefits both the giver and receiver, both ourselves and the community.

Just as every member should feel like they will be cared for, every member should accept the responsibility to be caring. Service to others, in one form or another, is an obligation that comes with membership in a faith community, this faith community. It's what balances "giver" and "receiver". Otherwise you are only here for your self, which is a selfish act. It is not a manifestation of "together we share and from this we live". It does not further tikkun olam.

Remember, Webster's defines "to serve" as "to be of use, to furnish or supply with something needed or desired" and service as "to be of help, use, benefit, contribution to the welfare of others." These definitions seem to go a long way in defining a faith community. A congregation is all about people and their relationships. A healthy congregation requires people who give... by way of service and those who receive such blessings.

We are blessed by those who find a way to be of service, who contribute to the welfare of others, who manifest tikkun olam, helping to repair or heal the world. Each month we try to hold up those who most visibly demonstrate service to others and the welfare of this community. We call them Stewards of the Month.

Mary Ann, provides us the benefit of choral music, Barbara and Sue help us to sing and make a joyful noise. Len, our current steward of the month, does a little bit of everything—especially noticeable three seasons of the year riding a lawn mower. Eleanor gives us the gift of color in an attractive landscape.

Margie, Soozie and Judith contribute to the future of our faith through the religious education of our young people. For what seems like forever, Walter has helped us manage our finances and catalogue all our services.

Certainly there are other notable givers, providers of service, in our midst. And there are those who have grown tired and are in need of rest. We owe them our gratitude and appreciation. As they step away, we need others to step forward. As times and circumstances change, as new needs arise, we need people willing to step forward and give of themselves, their time and capabilities as best as they are able.

A healthy congregation requires it. It's a responsibility of membership. And we hope all that serve can say what Tagore writes:

I slept and dreamt that life was joy.

I awoke and saw that life was service.

I acted and behold service was joy.

I close with words of Albert Pine:

'What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us.

What we have done for others and the world remains and is immortal."