

“I Hear Liberal Means Generous!”

Sermon by The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, October 21, 2007
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

It was the middle of October, a day much like today, 80 degrees and clear skies. They had been harrying him all day, trying to trip him up with trick questions. This time one of them thought he had the teacher trapped since he was surrounded by his disreputable friends—tax collectors and shelf-worn women wearing hot pants and halters, with little kids in tow.

“Look, it’s tax time and they’re after us again,” one said. “Teacher, we know that you’re honest and impartial because you pay no attention to appearances, but instead you teach the way of truth forthrightly. Should we pay or not pay the government that we’re angry at?” The heckler’s friends howled with laughter as he flipped a silver dollar at the Teacher.

He picked up the coin and looked at it. “Whose picture is this?” he asked, pointing at the woman on the coin. “And who made it?” “Why that’s the Lady of Liberty,” said the heckler, and the government made it.” Then give the government what belongs to the government,” said Jesus, “Give God what belongs to God—and give me what is mine.”

You may remember that story differently. I know you recall the punch line one way or another, but I’ll bet not one of you remember that there were three choices available to his listeners.

Okay, Jesus didn’t mention the Lady of Liberty. She hadn’t been born yet, nor had her coin been minted. You remember that the King James version of the Bible quoted Jesus as saying “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” But the oldest version actually says what I told you in my modernized story.

There were many different gospels besides Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Most were destroyed or lost over the centuries. But fragments of a fifth gospel pre-dating the four you probably remember was discovered some 60 years ago in Egypt—the Gospel of Thomas. In the closest literal translation, it says “Give the emperor what belongs to the emperor, give God what belongs to God, and give me what is mine.”

That last phrase sticks out like a sore thumb, said the Jesus Seminar which printed an analysis of the gospels 15 years ago. They said they doubt if Jesus actually said it, but who knows? No one there had a tape recorder. You pays your money and makes your choice. I say he said it. Jesus had a great sense of humor that can be seen in some of his parables when readers avoid the sentimentality that governs most people reading the Bible.

After showing his listeners how silly the question was in his response by refusing to answer it directly, I think he might have added “and oh, yes, give me what is mine.” That has something to do with our service today.

Jesus wasn’t shy about accepting gifts. One well-known story even tells of one of those shelf-worn women breaking into a dinner party where Jesus was waxing prophetic, and washing his feet with perfume. Some ancient critics claimed they were prostitutes, but there’s no Biblical evidence of that. Jesus was criticized by others who suggested he should have sold the perfume and used the money to help the poor. He just ignored his critics.

There’s a long tradition of dissent over how people should show their thanks. The great lawyer Clarence Darrow once was nearly knocked down by a harebrained client whose legal problems he had solved.

She burred “Oh, Mr. Darrow, Mr. Darrow, how can I ever show my appreciation?” Darrow replied “Ever since the Phoenicians invented money there has been only one answer to that question.” Show me the money! He didn’t actually say the latter. That was from a recent Hollywood film, but you get the idea.

There was a time that people in a Unitarian church would have been impressed by an admonition from Jesus that they pay money to the church. Admittedly that was many years ago. Now you make decisions about things like that on your own, using your own reason and counting your own cash. But I still stand here with Jesus to say to you, “give me what is mine.” I’m not talking about me, Dick Weston-Jones. I’m speaking as a representative of the church to say that to you on Pledge Sunday and to remind you that the church is you. It’s yours, always was and always will be. Give your share of what it takes to be your church.

The church represents you to the world. It is you in the way that it celebrates and explores and challenges and teaches and commemorates and laughs and weeps and stumbles and dances; in the way that it picks up litter by the road and gathers food for the hungry and helps the homeless and opens space for people to speak who have no other public place to speak safely.

Who else would it be but you? Some folks here are new or almost new. The church can be theirs too if they want it to be. It is an open church, but not really a free church. Someone has to pay for it to be here. If not you, who will that be? We’ve got to pay the bill. We sometimes forget that we’re paying it to ourselves, for ourselves. And for others too!

Here’s the truth about the finances of this church. The members and active friends aren’t sharing its costs evenly. An analysis last year showed that about 75% of the funds came from about 40% of our pledging members and friends. We planned to spend an average of about \$950 for each of the 76 adults, members and friends, who come fairly often. We have a budget this year of about \$70,000. Last year the median pledge was \$720. Half of the pledges were below that and half above it. The average per pledging adult a year ago was \$860.

We’ve done well this year. We’re currently several thousand dollars in the black thanks to the generosity of members and friends. A number of people pay pledges well over our average pledge, or our budget wouldn’t be balanced.

At the end of September we were more than \$2,000 ahead in pledge payments, and we had an infusion of over \$5,000 from our annual service auction that helped us pay expenses. That’s great, and we need the support to continue to complete the final quarter of the year.

We will need more than that to balance our 2008 budget because our expenses are going up. Most pledges last year were for individuals, but some were for couples. The average gift from individuals was about \$400 more than the average per person for individuals who pledged as couples.

The last completed year we spent about \$70 per person more than we got from pledges. That increased income came mostly from increased individual giving, special fundraising and special contributions.

Here are some specific costs of church programming that we figured out last year. In 2006 it cost about \$12.50 per occupied seat per Sunday service. How did we get that figure? By calculating the total yearly cost of the share of the building expenses, minister’s salary, other speakers and music, orders of service, etc., and dividing it by 52 Sundays.

It’s harder to calculate how much it costs per child for religious education because attendance is

erratic. In 2007 it has cost about \$225 per week for the children's program no matter how many children attended. That includes the cost of materials, child care staff, a part-time Director of Religious Education and a portion of my salary that is attributable to work with children. It also includes the portion of the building expenses that belong to the RE program. It's an expensive part of the entire church program and one that is absolutely necessary if the church is to grow.

Lots of you enjoy coffee hour after services, social events like potlucks, concerts, singing in the choir. Last year we calculated that it costs about \$3.50 per person for each time that a person takes part in something social or educational here.

Our Sunday services, religious education, adult socials, education and discussions cost about 72% of our budget. Other major costs are pastoral services, community action and denominational support. Pastoral services, mostly a share of my ministerial time, is about \$76 per member or active friend for the year: a total of \$5,791.

The cost of denominational support and activity is about \$73 per member and active friend, \$5,551 annually. We spend about \$42 per person on community action or \$3,182 annually.

It takes more than money to keep the church going well. That's why we're giving everyone two pledge cards this year, one for your best estimate of a generous pledge that you believe you will be able to pay in 2008, and the other for you to tell us what you would like to do as a volunteer actively taking part in the work and organization of the church.

The leaders of the church will look at these cards to invite everyone to participate in things they would most enjoy doing for the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough. We want you to tell us several things that interest you. You won't be asked to do them all, but it will help us to contact you about the things that interest you the most.

Unitarian Universalists pride themselves on being realists. That's probably one of the most important attributes many of us would list if we were asked about our theology. Money and the need for it is part of our reality. Service is another important part of it.

I started this sermon telling you how Jesus may have been misquoted about what he thought people should do with their money. He's better known for his "Sermon on the Mount," but he never gave one called the "Sermon on the A-mount." Maybe he should have. The liberating power of generosity certainly figured into his teachings. We need to think about what your generosity needs and does for you.

It makes the world around you become you, in the best sense. How do you measure your values? Next time you pay your monthly bills, look at them and think of what they mean. Go down the list of things you pay for. Do it in your mind's eye right now. Really. Think of them

There are the gas bills. There are restaurant bills. There are bills for underwear and towels you bought for your home. There's the trash collection, and electricity. Maybe there's a repair bill for the motor of your car, and an airline flight. What are some of the others? Think of them. How does that work as a statement of your values? You know we put our money where our values are.

It's a little embarrassing for me when I do it. There's not a whole lot there that I want to be remembered for at the end of my life, not a whole lot there that becomes me. But there is a whole lot there, a lot that poured through me that didn't do much for what I believe in. What am I doing? Is this the way I want to be in the world? It seem to me that one of the places we can have the greatest impact is right here.

Some big things are happening for our congregation. We've just completed painting the exterior of the church this week. That's a sign of the maturing of the congregation, that our first coat of stain in this nearly new building was getting old, and needed replacement.

There is movement inside that will take us ahead. Two special blue ribbon committees are hard at work beginning our planning for the future. The first is developing a Long-Range Planning process that will involve the entire congregation. The second, the Ministerial Search Committee, has begun the work to find a permanent minister for UUCH. You know my contract ends next fall.

Big things are happening. The church is doing very well, both financially and in program, but we're a small church and you have said you like it that way. Last Sunday we had so many children here that our classrooms were full. When I turned to find a seat after my opening words I had to walk to the back row to find an empty chair that I could sit in.

We like being small but we like growing too. You're a critical part of that. These are great signs for our future. We need everyone's help to go into our new year with the same strength and enthusiasm!

Yes, give the government what is its, give God what is hers, and then give yourself what is yours. It's your church. You'll create the possibilities here with your generosity, and you know it.

Mignon McLaughlin, in The Neurotic's Notebook, said "We'd all like a reputation for generosity and we'd all like to buy it cheap." Don't try it. It never works. Give generously and you will celebrate with joy.

Dick Weston-Jones

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The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

1710 Old NC 10, Hillsborough, NC 27278 (919, 644-0567), www.uuchnc.org

Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, Minister; phone 919, 932-7447, dwj@wuurld.org