

“Sustainable Generosity”

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“Life is short and the world is at least half terrible,” writes the poet Maggie Smith. These days, it might feel harder to think of the world as only *half* terrible. Still, can you also feel the poet’s hope: *“This place could be beautiful, right?”*

What would it take to make a more beautiful world? What would that world look like?

These are big questions and old questions. I imagine that they were questions the Puritans were asking in 1630 when Winthrop challenged them to build a beautiful “city on the hill.” I hear this question in the section of our 1630 covenant we turn to this month as part of our year-long reimagining of this text. This month’s section reads: *“[we...promise...] to walke in all our ways according to the Rule of the Gospell, and in all sincere Conformity to His holy Ordinances”*. In other words, *‘we intend to live rightly by putting our faith into everyday action. We want to live in ways that make the world better, more beautiful.’*

In significant ways, this is the most enduring part of the covenant.

On the one hand, its call to live rightly is directly related to the worst of how the Puritans are remembered—as sanctimonious do-gooders who judged and punished those who did the “wrong” thing, those who did not live by the right rules and conform to the proper ordinances.

On the other hand, the idea of “walking together” remains a compelling metaphor to describe the “New England Way” of being religious. This tradition calls people together in mutual support to figure out how to live rightly and well. In effect, the idea of “walking together” insists that religious community is an interactive, participatory endeavor. We’re not just spectators at a performance; we’re active participants and co-learners in figuring out life.

Of course, there are also many differences between our Puritan founders and today. We do not share a commitment to one religious text as *the* Rule for how to live. Rather, we live in a multifaith context. In this room, I know some of you have Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, and other faith commitments or backgrounds. Nor are do we all share the same ethnic and cultural background. Today we live in a society and a city in which people speak many languages, eat different foods, and celebrate a range of holidays. Today we

don't expect uniformity; we acknowledge and celebrate diversity. And today we continue to wrestle together with the same question: how do we live rightly and well?

There are no simple answers of course. But one general approach is to live by your values. Which means knowing what your values are, and which are most central. Last year, delegates from Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country—including 2 from here—voted to adopt seven common values. (*You can see the full list on the back of your order of service or in the Canvass booklet in your hymnal holder.*) One of these values is **generosity**. On a day like today when our annual Canvass campaign launches, you might primarily think of generosity in terms of money. And, as you heard earlier from our Canvass chair and Treasurer, Mary Ellen Normen, we do need financial gifts to sustain our church. Your annual pledges are a critical piece of fully funding our operations. Our income from endowments and rentals do **not** fully meet the cost of maintaining our physical campus, nor our programming and staff—including all that goes into supporting worship for folks in-person and online.

And generosity means so much more than just financial gifts. Researchers at [the Science of Generosity Initiative](#) understand generosity as “*the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly.*” They identify how you can give “various things: money, possessions, time, attention, aid, encouragement, emotional availability, and more.” A common intention across all these different expressions of generosity is to enhance the wellbeing of others. In this way, choosing generosity also means *rejecting* certain vices such as selfishness, greed, fear, or meanness.

Can you think of a time someone was generous towards you? I think of Deb and Bradley Hyde. In my mid-20's, I was mother to a toddler and struggling in a difficult marriage. Deb was older and a loan officer at the bank where I was a mortgage processor. When I needed to get out of the house over the weekend, she welcomed me and my son to her home, where her husband Bradley treated us to elaborately homemade macaroni and cheese. Their generosity renewed me and kept alive my faith in a more beautiful world. Deb was one of the first to know when I decided to file for divorce. After mentioning that the court filing fee was a hurdle, she immediately opened her purse and handed me a hundred dollars.

What could it mean to you to live generously? Would it change how you already live? In a climate of increasing fear, reminding ourselves of the virtue of generosity challenges us to resist our urges to just pull back and protect ourselves. Rather generosity calls us to act liberally for the good of others.

Even so, I know there is fear. Fear of cuts to government programs like Social Security or Medicare that you or a loved one may rely upon. Fear of economic disruption and

downturn. Fear of the corrosion of democratic norms and practices. Fear of being targeted for an identity you may carry as an immigrant, a person of color, a Liberal.

And we are Liberals. For centuries, we have been part of a religious tradition that has been open to new understandings of the world that change what we believe and how we live. Even at our beginning, the Puritans risked an ocean voyage and unknown continent for the chance to live out their understanding of faith. Some of their actions are definitely not ones we would endorse today as generous or just—especially to the people they enslaved and to the Indigenous peoples of this land. Still, over time, the members of this church wrestled with changing understandings of freedom, joining the ranks of those who fought for abolition and then civil rights for African Americans, women, and LGBTQ folx. Over the centuries, the members of this church have not settled for the answers given by a previous generation, but have continued to ask the questions: what does it mean to live rightly? What does it mean to do good? What could it mean to put our faith into action?

We must continue wrestling with these questions for our moment. This is the meaning of “walking together” that has long defined our way of being religious. In this moment of fear and disruption, the value of generosity can help guide our way.

While I do hope valuing generosity helps to inspire your financial gift during this year’s Canvass campaign, my concern is about far more than the imbalanced state of our operating budget. More broadly, I am wondering how we as a congregation move from recent years of disruption onto a more sustainable path for the future.

Five years ago, at the beginning of March 2020, Covid-19 was not even yet declared to be a pandemic. By the end of the month, we would be in lockdown, pharmaceutical companies would be racing to develop a vaccine, and the church services had moved online. We really had no idea what we would come to endure in the coming months and years. I remember at the time hearing that we would not even understand the impact for years. Indeed, five years later the crisis has faded, but its impacts remain. Here at First Church, membership declined during the pandemic and has not recovered. Since my arrival in 2023, I have heard many stories of difficulty during the pandemic and ministerial transition. Those years created loss, conflicts, and pain, some of which remain tender or even raw.

I knew that the church was not in its strongest place when I stood here nearly two years ago during Candidating Week and accepted the call to be your minister. On that Sunday, I used the same reading as today, the poem “Good Bones,” by Maggie Smith. Then like today I acknowledged both the hard time the church had been through *and* my belief that, “*This place could be beautiful, right? You could make this place beautiful.*” I want to reaffirm that message today as you consider your contribution to supporting this church. Because there

are real challenges facing the congregation in this moment. The church cannot continue operating at a loss indefinitely—it is not sustainable. We will need to work together to imagine and build a path towards a sustainable future. A place to start, I believe, is to recommit to the practice of generosity.

We need generosity not only in whatever financial capacity you may have—and we are a congregation with a wide range of financial capacity. We also need generosity in your willingness to greet and follow-up with visitors seeking a place to belong in these hard times. We need your generosity in imagining and developing new revenue streams, or, for those spreadsheet lovers, identifying places of savings. We need your generosity in sharing with your friends and neighbors why participating in this community makes a difference in your life . . . and might also be a gift in their life as well. We need your generosity of time to show up for Sunday services, social justice events, and acts of care for each other. I need your generosity to be open to ideas and ways of doing things that my new perspective might propose. This is *not* to say that you are not already very generous in so many ways. Rather, it is to affirm just how important such generosity is to sustaining a community like ours. Indeed, as a liberal religious community, practicing generosity is foundational to who we are.

In a moment of fear and disruption, we may feel a pull to retreat into a place of self-preservation. And there may indeed be times we need to recognize our limits and prioritize self-care and renewal so that we might sustainably practice generosity. Still, I hope each of us seeks to practice generosity—giving freely and abundantly to promote the good of others. In so doing, perhaps we can make the world a bit less terrible and bit more beautiful.

May it be so. Amen.