

"Religion. Sex. Money."

Readings: From *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*
'Birds and Bees' by Faith Shearin
'Money' by Dana Gioia

Sometimes, you just can't help but feel smug. As your minister, I don't recommend it, it's usually not a productive state to be in, but sometimes it just happens. Last Friday, I was in a meeting with about 20 local clergy people and two leaders from the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety. We were talking about the election and we might move our community forward together in the midst of all of the divisive and hate-fueled rhetoric. As you heard during the announcements, there will be a brief event next Thursday and an interfaith service the night after the election. In the meeting, one of my fellow clergy people said, "what we really need to do is have more interfaith dialogue. We need to see that despite our differences in belief our values are the same."

And that's when the smugness hit. I thought, nearly every dialogue that happens at People's Church is an interfaith dialogue. We are atheists and Christians, agnostics and Buddhists, humanist and naturalists, Pagans and mystics, people who don't have a tidy label for their beliefs, and so many others. Even within these groups there are so many ways of beings. Our humanists are not all the same; those among us who believe in God don't all believe in the same God. We don't always delve into these differences, but they are here and real and we recognize them.

Being real and honest about our religious differences is a powerful thing we do here. We bring trust and truth to our relationships here. Croatian Christian theologian Miroslav Volf writes 'Telling what one believes to be truth is a way of being loyal to a relationship; telling what one believes not to be true is a way of defecting from a relationship. As a consequence, the virtues of integrity and fidelity are understood to be at stake in all those situations in which the virtue of truthfulness is at stake. We speak truth because community matters to us and we sustain community that matters to us by speaking the truth.'¹

Here, we are loyal to our relationships and our community by speaking the truth as we understand it. Every time I get to lead a service here, I am loyal to the relationship you created when you called me as your minister by speaking the truth as I understand it. Today, with our service titled 'Religion. Sex. Money.' I get to be loyal to you all by speaking the truth about the things that many of us were taught that it is rude to talk about. Thank you for your trust; I hope my truth is worthy of it.

We bring trust and truth to our Sunday services and so many other areas of our congregational life. We are trust-worthy and truthful about sexuality. This is life-giving and life-saving. This is another thing that makes me feel a little smug about us. Our Whole Lives is the lifespan comprehensive sexuality education program that is one of the jewels of our religious education program here. Here, children and adults learn about their bodies and relationships, and explore their values with their peers in developmentally appropriate ways. What we teach here is informed by science, as well as our values of respect, safety, inclusion, justice and self-worth. We do not tell people here that there are arbitrary rules to follow that will keep them good or pure, but empower them to find joy in their bodies and relationships in ways that are appropriate for their stage of development. We believe that sexuality is a precious gift and can be

¹ Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. page 262

expressed in myriad ways, and must always be accompanied by consent. This is a rare and precious thing we're doing here at our church. It ripples out in powerful ways.

Right now, we're offering Our Whole Lives to our 5th and 6th graders. Families are getting here at 9am every Sunday so their children can learn. A few weeks ago, Bella Pye, one of our kids, was sick and couldn't attend, so her mother, Ally Santos Pye was doing a little education at home. They have given me permission to tell this story. Ally asked Bella, "What accompanies the egg on its way out of the uterus if said egg does not get a chance to meet a sperm?"

Bella responded, "Dignity."

And while that might not be the scientifically correct answer, it is a beautiful answer, deeply true. Bella is learning in her church and in her family that her body is dignified, worthy of honor and respect. May all our children, and may all of us associate the natural workings of our bodies with honor and respect, not shame or fear. May they and may we remember that dignity is always with us. It is inherent. Our trust and truth makes it possible for Bella and our other children to grow into the knowledge that their bodies are precious and powerful.

And now, let's talk about money. For me, money is harder to talk about than sexuality or religion. Perhaps that's true for you too.

One of my dreams for People's Church is that it won't always be this way. I hope we can bring the same truth, the same comfort, the same trust, the same respect for diversity to our conversations about money that we bring to our conversations about religion and sexuality. I believe that we are called to break this taboo and be more frank and honest about this.

All of us come here today with different personal relationships to money. For some, money is closely linked to shame or guilt or power or love. For some, income is closely linked to self-worth, our salary determines our importance. For some, spending money is a source of pleasure; for some, it's stressful; for still others, it's compulsive and unhealthy. Each of us come from families that likely had specific rules about money. Maybe money was always talked about or never mentioned. Maybe bargain hunting was prized. Maybe giving away money to church or charity was so important that there was never enough. Maybe there was just never enough. And then we go out into the world and hear other money messages. How do our values come into play in our decisions about our money? How do we move away from the hopes and fears and patterns that we inherited toward making choices rooted in our values? If exploring the spiritual and moral power of money and improving your relationship with money is something you want to do, I invite you to join me in a new class I'm offering. It's called Money, Spirit and Life, based on a curriculum published by the Unitarian Universalist Association. We'll explore our personal stories of money, how money operates in our world and how our values call us to earn, spend, give and invest. Whatever your relationship with money, this class is for you! We'll be meeting on Sunday afternoons, once a month, beginning November 13. There's more information in the latest newsletter.

And in addition to our personal stories of money, I believe we are called to bring more honesty, more respect for difference, and more comfort to our conversations about the church's financial position.

First, a little background.

For the past few years, People's Church has lived beyond our means. To try to keep things balanced, leaders decided to cut program budgets, forgo cost of living or merit increases to staff, and draw from reserves to balance the budget. Last spring, the members of the church passed a budget with a \$20,000 deficit. While some churches have multi-million dollar endowments they can draw on indefinitely for situations like this, we don't. Our reserves are modest and we are not in a sustainable place financially.

While we could do this for a few years, we can't continue this pattern indefinitely. We want to get things back into balance.

This is not to say that you all haven't been generous. For the past six years, People's Church has had capital campaigns. Between the annual budget and the capital campaigns, People's people have given nearly 2 and a half million dollars to your church since 2009. That's amazing. Thank you.

And about that capital campaign. Perhaps those of you who are newer around here don't know this. The church recently did a building expansion. The cost of that construction is the capital debt we're still paying on. The main entrance, the downstairs classroom, Room 19, the small meeting room, Chris and Dana's office, the bathrooms, and the workroom – all of that, everything past the fire doors on the south side of the foyer is new, just a few years old. Before the new construction, people coming to church had to climb a long outdoor staircase that led to the foyer. People needing an accessible entrance could only come through the back. The building project increased our capacities for staff space, religious education, meetings, summer services in an air conditioned space, and made us more welcoming. You have done good work.

I've been part of a number of conversations in recent months among your board, finance committee, and stewardship committee leaders about how to move the church to a more financially sustainable position, how to return to living within our means. There isn't one easy solution. If there was, your capable leadership would have done it already. We're pursuing a number of paths towards sustainability. We're probably going to switch our benefits-eligible staff to comparable health insurance that's cheaper. We're exploring more rentals of the church building. We're trying to make it as easy as possible to donate to the church, which is why you see the QR Codes have been added to the orders of service, allowing people who don't carry cash or checks to give online. We're making sure fundraisers happen. We're exploring cutting church programs or staff, though that's not something we want to do.

And, you all probably know this is coming, we're asking you to make a supplemental pledge today. Your generosity is what makes this church possible, the generosity of People's people is what has made this church possible since its founding in 1855. We have existed as People of love, people of hope and people of change in Kalamazoo for 161 years because of generosity.

I know that everyone's financial situation is different. I hope we as a community can bring the same respect for diversity that we bring to religious diversity and diversities of sexual orientation and gender identity that we bring to conversations about money here. Some of us have a lot of money. Some of us don't. Some of us carry burdens of debt. Some of us don't. Some of us have inherited wealth. Many do not. Just as our beliefs are unique to us, so is our financial situation.

Maybe you stretched to give generously last spring during our stewardship campaign and pledged all you could manage. If that is you, thank you. Maybe you are struggling financially and can't add to your pledge or pledge at all. We are glad that you're here. Maybe you've only been here a short time—or this is your first Sunday with us—and you're not yet ready to make a financial commitment. As you get to know us better, I hope you will want to join with us spiritually, socially, and yes, financially. We're in so many circumstances in this room.

This invitation is for the rest of you. I invite you to give generously. If you give as part of this campaign, your dollars will go twice as far. A few People's people with the means and the commitment have set up a matching fund for this fall supplemental stewardship campaign. They will match every dollar given up to \$25,000. That's a \$50,000 goal. In addition to making up the \$20,000 budgeted deficit this fiscal year,

we're hoping to pay back some of the reserves we've spent in recent years and pay off some of our capital debt. \$50,000 would put us on a firm financial footing for this year and give us breathing room as we move to longer-term financial sustainability.

I hope you join me in giving generously. I have decided to increase my pledge by \$500. That is a meaningful amount of money for my family. We'll be giving things up in order to fulfill this pledge – but it is worth it to us because of the value that People's Church brings to our lives and our community. I need this church, not only because you are my employer. I need you all to help me raise my child into an adult who quests for truth, respects diversity, makes meaningful connections with others, and finds joy in his body and relationships. I need you to raise up a cohort of children who will share his values and support him as his friends. I need you to continue your work for justice and peace in our world – because our world is calling out for more justice and more peace. I need you to be a beacon for all of the people who haven't yet found Unitarian Universalism – and whose lives will be forever altered once they join with this welcoming, wonderful community. You know why you need this congregation to survive and thrive. Let that lead you to generosity.

You know what generosity means to you. What can you give to support all the good and important work of the church by next June 30, the end of our fiscal year? Perhaps \$500 isn't the right amount for you. Perhaps you'll subtract a zero – or perhaps you can add a zero or two. You know what makes sense – and we are grateful for your contribution, whatever amount you can give.

Now, as Jennifer and Bill play some beautiful music, I invite you to fill out your pledge card. There are pens in cups under the seats at the center aisle. We're giving you a few minutes for this. Perhaps your sitting next to the person you make your financial decisions with and need to talk a bit. Feel free to do that. I encourage all of you, whether you can participate in this campaign or not, to complete a pledge card today. We'll be sending a mailing to the people we haven't heard from – and your response today will save our volunteers some time. And maybe you're a person who needs to mull over this decision, look at your budget, meditate on your priorities. That's fine too. We are ending this campaign on November 10 and will share our good news with you on Sunday the 13th.

If you find what we do here valuable to yourself and world, if you have the resources to do so, please give generously.