



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Sermon on the Amount

Jonathan Mason © 14 April 2019

Thank you, Clay. I'm Jonathan Mason, a long time member of the church and the head of the 2019 Pledge Drive and I am happy to come to you today to talk about the state of the congregation and the formal kick-off of our 2019-2020 pledge drive.

It's been three years since I addressed the congregation and before we get to the canvass issue at hand, I'd like to give a quick summary of my history as a Unitarian and the ongoing development of my Unitarian theology.

I grew up as a Unitarian in Detroit, Michigan but then stopped when my parents had a disagreement with the minister when I was 12 years old. I started going again in 1990 when I was in New York City and met Mary, my partner of 30 years, who was also a Unitarian. Because we've moved around a bit, we've been part of seven congregations back in the US and have been part of this congregation since 2000, when we moved from Cincinnati, Ohio to New Zealand.

The first part of my Unitarian search for truth kicked off when I attended a weekend meeting at the Unitarian Church in Cincinnati. At this meeting, multiple scholars analysed the New Testament using reason and rationality to determine what was authentic and what did original Christianity look like. Key takeaways were that there were many parts of the New Testament that were not historically accurate and there were innovative ways to judge their authenticity. For me, the conference kicked off 15 years of research on the New Testament and the early Christian Church, which included probably half a dozen talks to the congregation on various aspects the New Testament seen through a Unitarian lens.

Although I remain interested in New Testament studies, I moved into a new part of my search for truth and meaning in a talk on a Sunday here about 8 years ago with the connection between time and the natural world we see around us. As I've gotten older, I think about my parents and grandparents and the passage of time, and 100 years ago doesn't seem that long ago anymore. I had a great uncle that fought in World War I and I talked with him in the 1960s about his time in the Great War.

But in contrast to historical time, I am awed by how long that bird and tree species have been around compared to us. To give a few examples, the kauri and rimu trees date back to the time of the dinosaurs and were common trees in both hemispheres 75 million years ago. The Tuatara is a member of a reptile

family that was quite complex and large 100 million years ago, but is now the only surviving member of the family. While some birds such as the introduced species of house sparrows and mynas have only been in New Zealand for 100 years, others such as the kiwis, kakas, keas, and moas date back 60-80 million years ago. Outside human dynamics, outside cities, the pulse of non-human natural life having been going on a far longer time than I can easily comprehend.

When I think of 60 million years, it's hard for me to contemplate. The nearest analogy that I can think of is 12 sell-outs of Eden Park with every seat occupied by a 100 year time frame. As the most intelligent species on the Earth today, we have the responsibility to try to protect the planet, consistent with the seventh Unitarian principle which I focused on in a talk on climate change that I gave to the congregation six years ago.

In the last five years, I've become increasingly interested in intelligent life in the universe to further reflect on my life here behind the fourth Unitarian principle of the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. It's been quite an interesting space with some fantastic movies such as Contact, Interstellar, and Arrival intelligently exploring these issues, and in the last ten years, powerful telescopes finding that there are many planets in other solar systems in the Goldilocks zone such as Earth that could support life.

For those that pose the reasonable question, if there's intelligent life out there, where are the flying saucers here, I'd make the following observations:

1. Distance is quite a challenge to space travel. Under our fastest space ship that we have today, it would take astronauts 180,000 years to reach Alpha Centauri, the closest solar system to our sun.
2. We haven't figured out how to protect astronauts against radiation which would kill them within a few years.
3. However, there is a real possibility in the next 100 years that we will successfully communicate with other civilisations through radio signals, that can now be better targeted to Goldilocks solar systems.
4. And most intriguingly, has anyone heard of Oumuamua? This is an object travelling through our solar system that is shaped like a cigar. It was discovered coming into our solar system in October 2017. The head of the Harvard Astronomy Department, a professor named Avi Loeb, believes is likely a space probe from intelligent life outside our solar system. It has several attributes like a possible solar sail that make it unlike any other comet or asteroid that astronomers have ever found before. NASA is considering whether it could launch a probe to reach Oumuamua before it leaves.

So speaking of reasonable questions, you may be wondering what did the last five minutes possibly have to do with the pledge drive.

And my response is that the Unitarian Church has been very important for me on my spiritual journey to find meaning and truth in life over the past 30 years. But in addition, there are three other reasons that I come to this church:

1. The people that I meet in Unitarian congregations are interesting.
2. I am challenged by the ideas presented at the congregation.
3. It is important for Unitarianism to have a voice for rationalism in the world over the next 200 years.

Now let me explain this in a bit more detail.

To touch on the last three reasons for coming to the congregation. First, the people that I meet at Unitarian congregation are interesting,. For me, some of the best conversations that I have had occur after the service, at Men's Group, at Adult Education. Unitarians attract people who don't have all the answers but like me are trying to better understand the meaning of life and how to live it in a more meaningful, satisfying way.

Second, I am challenged by the ideas presented during our services. When I think back upon the great sermons at multiple Unitarian churches, including several from Clay here, they have changed the way I think about the world. I have thought about them all week. They have made me aspire to live a better life.

The third benefit of being a Unitarian for me is to offer a voice of rational hope within a world of increasing populism. Much of Europe and North America are being increasingly influenced by populist leaders who no longer try to work in the interest of their whole country. They instead appeal to members of their base or tribe, and try to marginalise whoever is not part of their base. Democracy has always struggled with protecting the rights of minorities. Populism is a new threat to all healthy democracies and we cannot afford to be complacent anywhere, even New Zealand. In an era of increasing intolerance and hostility toward minorities in many societies, Unitarians can bring our rationalism and openness and build bridges with similarly tolerant Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus to provide needed opposition to fundamentalism and political and social intolerance.

So let me summarise: I come to the Unitarian church because of the people that are here, the ideas that I encounter here help me to give my life more meaning, and the role that we can play in making the world a better place. And that is why Mary and I consciously give our time and money to this church.

So now for the matter at hand which is our annual pledge drive. There are many obligations in life, for example, most of us get up and go to work each day because we need the money and have to pay taxes by law, and while family get togethers are fun, there is a bit of obligation there as well.

But for our church, we are here because we choose to be. We choose to give our money and time to the church, when we have good alternatives for both.

We need about \$110,000 of cash to run the church each year, The items of spend are the minister's salary and minister's expenses which are about \$55-\$60k of our budget and then building expense items like insurance, utilities, repairs, and paying for our part time education and music that all add up to another \$60,000/year. We have pledge income of \$58k, rental income of \$11k, other fundraising income of \$17k and draws from inside and outside reserves to pay for our expenses and meet a balanced budget. The key point this year is that there is a particular fund, the Macky Trust that has provided us bridge funding gifts over the past five years that phase out this year. This coming year (our financial year starts in April) we need about \$8k more in our internal pledge income or fund raising to balance our budget, or about a 12% increase.

A 12% increase might seem like a big number. But we've accomplished so much in the past five years, we have doubled our member base in the past four years from 42 to 84, we have a new projector system going in over the next month, and new Adult RE programme being planned using the new projector, and Peace and Social actions that are more comprehensive than we've ever had.

The average membership unit in our congregation gives about \$800, with 12 units giving over \$1,000. But while pledge income is part of what we need to run the congregation, not everyone is a financial position to give the average or even a minimum contribution of \$132. But let me reemphasise the first point. Unlike so many things in our life, any contribution that you make to the church is voluntary and made because you can afford to and want to. Some of you may not be able to give us as much in 2019 as you could in 2018. That's Ok, others will make up the difference.

Another important point on the pledge drive is that it's not just about giving money, it's about considering whether you can give time as well. Our church has a management committee, peace and social justice committee, and finance committees that would welcome new members and we also have some big fundraising activities such as the service auction in the spring that need time more than money. I'll also mention that the biggest improvement in our budget over the past year came from renting puzzles with members such as Paul and Kay and others giving their time to generate over \$10,000 of new income for the church. That improvement was driven by creativity and time, not more pledge income.

The biggest challenge for a modestly sized congregation is for us all to pull our weight so that our most active members don't get burned out. Clay, myself, or an MC Member would be happy to sit down with you and discuss the church's needs.

This is a congregation with an incredible generosity of spirit . On behalf of the whole congregation, thank you to all of you for the time and money that you've given over the past year.

Thank you for sharing the last 20 minutes with me and listening to several stops on my spiritual journey in my Unitarian search for truth and meaning in exploring

the wonderful mystery of life. As we look around this beautiful 115 year old building, and see the plaques on the wall from previous committed members and I think about the 5000-6000 Sunday sermons that have occurred here, I feel honoured to be part of this rich tradition and exciting future.

Thank you.