

“Am I my brother’s keeper (Genesis 4:9)?” This is Cain’s response to the Lord who asks him, “Where is your brother Abel?” We know that Cain killed Abel although we truly don’t know why. We aren’t told specifically, however we can assume anger, jealousy and envy might be the culprits.

Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain was a tiller of the soil and each brought forth offerings to the Lord – Cain the fruit of the soil and Abel the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. Without explanation the Lord had regard for Abel’s offering yet had no regard for Cain’s. Again, we don’t know why. Many religious scholars believe that Cain offered simply fruit of the soil...not his first fruits. Were they leftovers – that which he simply had lying around after he ate his fill? Was it not given from the heart? Was his offering something that didn’t truly cost him anything? Was his offering only that which he could conveniently afford to part with and no more?

And Abel’s offering? His offering was the firstlings of his flock...his best gift. Abel had no guarantee that those of the flock not offered would be able to produce future offspring. His offering shows commitment...that his heart is invested...that he is invested...that his well-being is in some way tied to the quality of that offering and to his relationship with the Lord.

Well, in case you didn’t know it, didn’t check the sermon title on the website or in your order of service, today is stewardship Sunday. Sorry, but it is now too late to escape. The doors have been locked! 😊

How would you characterize your best gift to...and I’m not going to say best gift to UUMAN...because I’m talking about something bigger than that.... The easiest way to put it is, “How would you characterize your best gift to everything that we do through UUMAN?” The reason I put it this way is because our mission and vision mandate that we be oriented both inward and outward. (Nurture our Spirit. Strive for Justice. Transform the world. UUMAN’s vision is to be a vital and visible community for all, bravely working toward the day when social, economic, and environment justice is a reality.)

So how would you characterize your best gift to everything that we do through UUMAN?

For me, the most important thing, your best gift, is the gift of your presence. There is only one of you in this world and when you’re not here, we’re something different, something less, without you.

But “Am I my brother’s keeper?” YES...YOU ARE! We show up for one another here. We bear witness to one another’s deepest joys and sorrows here. Susan Manker-Seale, in our call to worship this morning says, “to see each other’s joys and sorrows as our own, and know that we

are not alone.... that our yearning is assuaged and our lives fulfilled in *one another* (Susan Manker-Seale, Out of Our Yearning).

We are counting on one another; we rely on one another in ways we can't possibly imagine. The stories we tell, the stories we share with one another *here* are a source of hope to those who might be suffering, to those who show up here who might be leading lives of "quiet desperation (Henry David Thoreau)." It gives new meaning to Ram Dass' call to "Be here now." To me, to be here now for one another is the best gift you can give.

So, after your presence here, how would you characterize your next best gift to everything that we do through UUMAN? For me, the giving of one's time comes next; and in a way, the giving of one's time is related to the giving of one's presence. Time and presence are indicative of showing up both physically and with your heart...that you're committed, you're invested in this community and what this community can do together in the larger community.

One often hears the word "talent" in stewardship messages. I get this. I understand this...and it is convenient to have skilled and talented people around who can get things done efficiently. The word "talent" though conveys a sense of mastery and accomplishment in a given area...a level of competency. Talent doesn't convey anything about what's in a person's heart. I most appreciate, I most admire those who have no particular talent in a given area yet when see a problem they are willing to roll up their sleeves and figure it out. I think Harry Truman said, "A great person is a good person who happens to be around when greatness is needed." Seeing a good, unskilled, untalented individual jump right into a situation where greatness is needed is beautiful sight. That is an expression of love and commitment. It's a testament to what's in a person's heart.

For me, the giving of presence and time, regardless of skill or competency, are the best gifts that one can give to a community. There is no substitute for it...and money can't buy it... but I'd be remiss to say that money isn't necessary...that money isn't part of the equation.

Of course, we have bills to pay – the mortgage and upkeep of this beautiful building, the salaries of staff (and we surely appreciate that), but we need to recognize that that is your gift to UUMAN, it is not necessarily a gift that encompasses everything that we do through UUMAN. Remember, our mission and vision mandate that we be oriented both inward and outward.

Paying the mortgage, salaries and expenses is actually overhead, not even truly part of our inward focus ministry. Presently, of our \$342K budget, only 1.2% of it is directed toward our inward focus ministries. For example, our Adult Faith Development budget is \$300. Outside of Sunday morning worship, can we fully "Nurture our Spirit" on an inward focus ministry budget that is only 1.2% of our overall budget?

What about the outward focus? Presently, of our \$342K budget, only 1.5% of it is directed toward our outward focus ministries. This includes a Social Justice budget of \$1000, Earth

Ministry budget of \$200, Partner Church budget of \$250, Membership budget of \$400 and expected 50/50 donations of \$3500. Again, how can even begin to “Strive for Justice, Transform the World” on an outward focus ministry budget that is only 1.5% of our overall budget?

Michael Durall, a UU author of the book “The Almost Church Revitalized,” says that “Protestant congregations, churchgoers most like UUs in socioeconomic terms, maintain [an outreach and social justice] budget line item between 10 and 29% [of overall budget] (Michael Durall, The Almost Church Revitalized, p6).”

He also says that, “Clergy and lay leaders should ask members and friends to reach the 5-10 percent [of after tax income] giving level at the earliest opportunity (Michael Durall, The Almost Church Revitalized, p61).”

5 to 10%!

Yet at this morning’s reading, the sexton and his wife, after hearing the outcries of those being asked to give as such a level, freely shared that they routinely gave 10% of their income to their church. 10%! In my previous career, I remember sitting across the table from an hourly steelworker in Braddock, PA who said he routinely gave \$10,000/year to his church.

You might say, 5-10%!....I’m over 65 and on a fixed income. Well after adjusting for inflation, adjusted median income for those over 65 has gone up 70% since 1975; for young adults ages 25-34 there has been no increase in income (David Leonhardt, “The Fleecing of Millennials,” NY Times, 1/27/2019).” And “people 55 and older control approximately 65 percent of all the wealth in America (Michael Durall, The Almost Church Revitalized, p64).”

To speak from my own personal experience, Tammy and I have made our way to this level of giving. We have four children and have done lots of college savings, and we took a big hit in the 2008 stock market decline; and we still incur college expenses...and we are still finding it takes some significant expenditures to help launch young adult children when they face emergency and unforeseen circumstances.

Yet even with all this, we have made our way to the 5-10% level of giving of our combined after-tax income. We donated \$12K to our home congregation’s capital campaign to renovate their entire building. This donation took place during my seminary internship after we had already left the congregation. We will never enjoy the benefits of that renovation. And presently, in this current fiscal year, we are giving more than 6% of our combined after-tax income to UUMAN...and we’ve increased that percentage for this coming year.

Michael Durall again says,

When I meet with people who commit 10 percent of their incomes (and sometimes more) to the church or to other causes, I often ask what they gave up to become so generous. To a person they do not understand the question. The universal response is

that they gave up nothing, not a thing. They report their lives have been immeasurably enriched by the experience. Even more surprising, many say they used to worry about finances until they started giving 10 percent, and now that worry has almost completely vanished. This is the great paradox of a religious life. Give it a try and see what happens. (Michael Durall, "The Almost Church Revitalized," p63)