

2013 STEWARDSHIP SERMON AWARD WINNER

All In

Sermon by

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The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in conjunction with the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association (UUMA), and the Liberal Religious Educators Association (LREDA) proudly present the 2013 Stewardship Sermon Award.

"All In"

The first time that I went to Las Vegas, I gave myself a \$100 budget for gambling. You can tell that I'm a real "high roller," can't you? About the only game I had any notion of knowing how to play was Blackjack. So, I found a table with a \$5.00 minimum – I warned you I was a high roller – and a dealer with a friendly face, and I sat down to play a few hands. I lost the first hand. Then I lost the second hand. Then I lost the third hand. I sat and I watched as my \$100 pile of chips rapidly dwindled. I won a hand here and there, but soon my stake was cut in half. So I got up and walked away from the table. I failed to see the appeal of gambling. But the next day I decided I'd give it another shot. And the same thing happened. Within the space of about 10 minutes I was wiped out.

As I tossed and turned in the hotel bed later that night, I reflected on my experience. "That wasn't at all fun," I thought to myself. "I could have just kept handing \$5 bills to the dealer, one after the other, and it would have felt the same." To me, it felt like I had flushed \$100 down the drain and had no fun doing it. "What was the appeal of gambling?" I thought to myself. And then it occurred to me that what I'd done wasn't gambling. I had come to Vegas prepared to lose \$100 and that's exactly what happened. And it had happened in small, \$5.00 increments, "death by 1,000 cuts," as they say. And then I had a brilliant idea. A crazy idea. I decided that I would *really* gamble. Here's what I thought I'd do: I would get another \$100 out of the hotel ATM, go to one of the \$25 minimum tables, sit down and place all \$100 on one hand of Blackjack. I'd either recoup my losses or double them. Either way, in what seemed to me like a semi-spectacular "all in" moment. Now THAT felt like gambling.

And it did. I spent the next three days wandering the floors of the Vegas casinos, looking for the right opportunity for my big play. As I wandered, my adrenalin was pumping, my palms were sweaty and my heart was racing at the prospect of betting it all. I had this "rush" going on as I wandered. And as I wandered, I wondered to myself: What if I win? Will I walk away? Or will I try a second hand? And what if I win again? How much could I come home with? My tactic was having its desired effect. Yes, now I knew what gambling felt like.

Finally, on the last night of my trip, I lurked around the \$25 tables long enough and I saw my chance. I screwed up my courage and sat down at the table. I handed over the \$100 bill that had been burning a hole in my pocket all week long and the dealer gave me four \$25 chips. I think she'd seen this gambit before, but I was undeterred. I slid all four chips out in front of me. She dealt the first card. My mind was racing. I worried that I wouldn't be able to add my two cards together. Here comes the second card, face up: a nine. Nice! I thought to myself. Then I peeked at the other card: a six. My heart sank. 15. What do I do with a 15? Do I take another card and risk being busted, or do I stand pat and pray the dealer busts herself? She was showing a two; no help there. The dealer looked at me impatiently. All my gambler's dreams were dissolving in front of my eyes. I didn't have the heart for this. I sat down at the table ready to risk it all, but in the moment of truth I couldn't pull the trigger to make the bold move, to ask for that

next card. So I stood pat. The guy to my right took a card. My card, had I had the courage to take it. A four. Then the dealer flipped over her card, showing a ten. She drew another card, this time a six. Eighteen. Before I knew it, she swept away my chips and my dreams. I had doubled my losses. As I walked away from the table, all the clichés ran through my head: “No Guts, No Glory.” “Go Big or Go Home.” And that night I tossed and turned again, wondering about what might have been.

I know that my little foray into gambling didn’t really put me at much risk. But it did cause me to reflect on those times in my life where I’ve faced a choice of consequence, and to consider how I responded in ways that either were or weren’t fully committed. How many times in our lives do we face these critical choices, these moments of truth? And how many times do we later wonder what might have been? What might have been had we taken the bold step? What might have been had we not been afraid? Had we had enough courage? Had we ignored the naysayers and trusted our gut? Had we gone “all in” instead of holding back?

The only way to avoid the wondering of the “what if” is to make a full, unrestrained commitment to a course of action, whatever challenge it is that we’re facing. It’s like standing on the edge of a swimming pool when we know the water’s cold. Dipping our toes isn’t going to get us into the water; we’ve got to jump in with both feet, or even head first. I’m learning this every time I put on a harness and hook it up to a paraglider. If you don’t know what paragliding is, it’s a sport where you attach yourself to a large fabric wing, like a kite, and then hurl yourself off the side of a hill or a mountain and glide back to earth. If you know what you’re doing you can actually soar like a bird for hours. What I’ve learned so far with paragliding is that you’ve got to commit. Once your wing is inflated above you, you’ve got to run as fast as you can toward the edge of the mountain. If you balk, if you run half-heartedly, you’re never going to fly and you’re likely to end up in a heap or in a tree. To gain the freedom of the flight you’ve got to overcome the fear of failure. It’s about going “all in” every time.

What is it that’s expected of us as members of this church, as members of this faith? While belonging to a congregation and living our lives as Unitarian Universalists isn’t likely to be as physically risky as paragliding, I’d like to believe that the same lesson applies. If we’re going to fly, we’ve got to commit. We’ve got to go “all in.”

I’ve been reading a captivating book titled *Out of the Flames: The Remarkable Story of a Fearless Scholar, a Fatal Heresy, and One of the Rarest Books in the World*. This is the story of the sixteenth century Unitarian Michael Servetus. Servetus is one of our Founding Fathers. Talk about committed. Imagine living in 16th Century Europe, where the Church of Rome is burning heretics at the stake in virtually every town on the Continent. Where Martin Luther and John Calvin are protesting the abuses of the Catholic Church and starting a powerful new religious movement that is becoming equally violent in the enforcement of its doctrine. And imagine telling both the Pope and Calvin that they are wrong. Telling them in a very public way that their doctrines are unsupported by Scripture. That Jesus was

a man and not God incarnate, that there is no such thing as the Holy Trinity, and that God lives in each of us.

As you might suspect, this “good news” of Unitarianism that Michael Servetus declared did not go over well. He was first jailed by the Inquisition for heresy against the Catholic Church, but he escaped before they could kill him. Then he was arrested by the Calvinists for heresy against the Protestants, and he wasn’t so lucky the second time around. John Calvin had Michael Servetus burned at the stake along with all the known copies of his books. Michael Servetus went “all in” for his faith, that’s for sure.

Here in the relative comfort of the 21st Century, we don’t think that declaring the principles of universal love and acceptance is such a dangerous thing. But let me remind you of the Rev. Mark Kiyamba, who visited our church last November. Mark is the pastor of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Kampala, Uganda. A church that is openly accepting of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered persons, a church that provides safe haven for people who identify as GLBT. And that is no small thing in Uganda, because that country has essentially legalized the murder of homosexuals and those who harbor them. In Uganda, if you know someone who is gay you are required to report them to the authorities and if you’re gay you’ve got a target on your back both from the state and from armed thugs who are out to kill you. And here is Mark Kiyamba, declaring our doctrine of universal love and salvation. His life and the life of his wife and his children have been openly threatened because they are living out the principles of our faith. Another case of going “all in” for who we are and what we stand for.

So, am I asking you to bet your life on our faith? If it came down to that, I suppose I would hope that our commitment to Unitarian Universalism would cause us to stand up for justice, to proclaim our gospel of hope, to stand on the side of love, even in the face of death. But on most days, thankfully, none of us faces that kind of test. We’re not asked to make that kind of sacrifice. In the face of that kind of commitment, though, doesn’t it seem almost ridiculous to think that we would say “No thanks” when we’re asked to help make peanut butter sandwiches for the homeless shelter?

I received an email from one of our members this past week, responding to mine in which I asked how her family is doing, why I haven’t seen them in church at all this year, and why they haven’t offered a pledge for next year. In that email, the writer said, and I quote, “I think we [my husband and I] are both in desperate need of a place where we can have quiet and reflection with no strings attached and we just aren’t finding that at UUCDC anymore.” *A place where we can have quiet and reflection with no strings attached.* That one little phrase has pretty much prompted this sermon. Maybe it was the stark contrast between the writer’s stated desire to get something for nothing and the self-sacrificing biography of Michael Servetus that I’m reading.

Our faith, and membership in this church, comes with strings. To belong to this church and to be a Unitarian Universalist is to say “yes” to those strings. We say “yes” to life. We say “yes” to hope. We say “yes” to a belief that all people are

worthy, all people carry a spark of the divine. And more than that, we say “yes” not just to these principles, but we say “yes” to doing the work of our faith, the work of this church, when we’re asked. We can be that “place of quiet and reflection” my correspondent longs for only if, only when, we all commit ourselves to creating that place, sustaining that place, loving that place, and working that place into existence.

I am often asked by newcomers to our church what is expected of our members, and this is what I tell them. I tell them that to be a member of this church and to claim this faith as one’s own, you must do four things. First, you must commit to showing up on Sunday mornings. Worship is the central, communal act of the church, and members should participate in worship on a regular basis. Second, you must commit to actively engaging in your own spiritual growth. Take an Adult Faith Development class. Come to yoga. Sit in meditation. Attend a Small Group Ministry. Our Fourth Principle, which I see as the keystone holding the arch of Unitarian Universalism together, says that we engage in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. I expect all our members will do that.

The third thing that’s required of all our members is that they will support the church financially, to the best of their ability. Generosity is an important spiritual practice, but it’s not *just* a spiritual practice. It is a practical necessity. We cannot keep the lights on and the doors open, we cannot offer self-sustaining programs without your financial contribution. Give us your pledge. Put money in the offering plate. Buy something at the auction. Your commitment to this church and our faith must take tangible form in your giving as best you’re able.

Finally, the last string that’s attached to membership, or maybe it’s the first string, is that you will get involved. That you will serve others. That you will embody your commitment to us by joining a Ministry Team. That you’ll weed the Garden for the Community that we’ve just started. And not just in these beautiful days of spring but the dog days of August, too. That you’ll bring a meal for the Interfaith Hospitality Network or you’ll simply make coffee on a Sunday morning. Making a commitment to membership means that you’ll bring all your creative energy to our community and either join or start a program that strives to create a just and sustainable world, to use the language of our Mission Covenant Statement. As I’ve said before and I’ll say again, over and over until you kick me out of this pulpit, ours is not a Sunday morning faith. It’s a faith that must be lived out every day in your workplace, in your family, with your friends, and, most of all, by offering your talents to our community, all for the greater good.

These four things – attending worship, growing spiritually, supporting financially, and serving others – are the only things we ask. And they are everything. This is what Parker Palmer was talking about when he referred to being and becoming a part of “the community of our lives.”¹ This is what I mean when I speak of making a commitment and going “all in” with the church. Those of you here today who will

¹ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, p. 16.

be attending the fourth and final session of UU101, well, you've just heard my spiel about membership. For the Senior Youth who have bridged to young adulthood, I hope that when you find a UU community to call your own in the years ahead, you make these same commitments to it. And for those of you who are already members of this church, I hope I've been clear about what I think it means to be a part of this community, *our* community.

Perhaps there was a time when we didn't put expectations on our members. Perhaps there was a time when we were an "anything goes, believe whatever you want to believe" kind of church. Perhaps there was a time when you could be a member with no strings attached. And perhaps, just perhaps, that's why our numbers are dwindling and the very future of our faith is in jeopardy.

Membership comes with strings attached. Those strings bind us to the church. They bind the church to us. And most importantly, those strings bind us, each to the other. With those strings we are woven together into one body, one spirit, one united Whole. You can't sustain a congregation, or any community of meaning, without them.

I leave you today with these words, taken from a prayer of the **Arizona Hopi Nation**:

There is a river flowing now very fast. It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid. They will try to hold on to the shore. They will feel they are being torn apart, and they will suffer greatly.

Know the river has its destination. The elders say we must let go of the shore, push off into the middle of the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above the water. See who is in there with you and celebrate.

At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally. Least of all, ourselves. For the moment that we do, our spiritual growth and journey comes to a halt.

The time of the lone wolf is over.

Gather yourselves!

Banish the word struggle from your attitude and your vocabulary.

All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.

We are the ones we've been waiting for.

This day, and every day, I wish you peace. Amen.



2013 Stewardship Sermon Award Winner Rev. Peter Friedrichs

Rev. Peter Friedrichs serves as pastor of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Delaware County (www.uucdc.org) in Media, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia. He received his M.Div. degree from Andover Newton Theological School in 2006, where he was awarded the James Luther Adams Prize for studies in Liberal Theology. In that same year he was ordained jointly by his home congregation in Yarmouth, Maine and his internship congregation in Augusta, Maine. Peter is an avid fly fisher and paragliding pilot who lives in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania with Irene, his wife of 32 years who also serves UUCDC as its Director of Religious Education. They are the proud parents of two adult daughters, Rebecca and Julia, and joyful grandparents of two year old Jack and newborn James. This is his second Stewardship Sermon Award.