**“Together We Thrive”**

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

March 7, 2021

In the letter that I sent to you all as part of this year’s Pledge Drive, I reflected back on the Sunday almost exactly one year ago when we were together in this sanctuary and church building to launch last year’s Pledge Drive. Although we were in the practice of holding two services on Sundays, we had come together for just one worship service that day. A Gifts of Love Celebration was planned for after the service in the Vestry, and the children had decorated the whole space with festive red and pink hearts. Concern over the novel coronavirus was mounting but had not yet led to the shutting down of gatherings - large or small. Mostly, we were starting to wash our hands with more frequency and beginning to stock up on hand sanitizer.

Since that last Sunday that our sanctuary was open for gathered worship, each of our lives has been vastly transformed. Our life as a church community has endured a state of operating virtually with our building’s doors closed for longer than many of us could have conceived.

During this time, I have been amazed and inspired by the care and commitment you all have shown one another and our broader community. Next week, we will do more reflecting back on the year we have all experienced. Today, I will just say how grateful I am for each and every one of you and the community of love and service you build together.

Religious and spiritual community is expressed in different forms across many traditions across the world. Jews gather in *shul*, or synagogue. Muslims gathered in prayer form a *jama’ah*. Buddhist community is called *sangha*. Pagans gather in *coven*. Quakers come together in meeting. Practioners of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism gather in *satsang* to learn from spiritual teachers.

Community, the gathering - physical or otherwise - of people in shared purpose, is essential to almost all spiritual paths and religions, and Unitarian Universalism is no exception. It is with and amongst other people - other tender-hearted, searching, joyful and broken-hearted people - that we lament and praise, laugh, cry, and give thanks, and learn and grow.



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Our worship theme this month is “Commitment.” And, you may have noticed that the words “community” and “commitment” have something in common. They share a Latin root in the prefix “com-,” which means “with.” This shared etymological source speaks to the integral role of commitment in community.

Christine D. Pohl, a Christian theologian and professor of social ethics, speaks to this connection in the following passage from her book, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us*. She writes: "Communities in which we grow and flourish, last over time and are built by people who are faithful to one another and committed to a shared purpose. Community life certainly has moments of incredible beauty and intense personal connection, but much of it is daily and ordinary. Our lives are knit together not so much by intense feeling as by shared history, tasks, commitments, stories and sacrifices.”

Even while we, as a community, have had to endure a year of church life physically apart (and will likely do so for a little while longer), we have continued to knit our lives together through our shared purpose and commitments - welcoming one another, caring for one another, and reaching beyond the metaphorical “walls” of our church community to be of service to our neighbors.

Over the past several months, you have lovingly crafted and written Valentines to other church friends.

You have put together and delivered thoughtful care packages to families.

You have donated items for boxed lunches and dinners shared with those experiencing food insecurity in our community.

You have shown up for worship on whatever device you might have available and offered your presence to others.

You have facilitated and participated in Chalice Circles offering attention and careful listening as well as gentle reminders when someone is still “muted.”

You have called and written postcards to voters around the country to promote voting and democracy.

You have served on committees tending to the sometimes tedious but necessary administrative tasks that enable this congregation to run smoothly.



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We continue even through this challenging time to nurture this community as a place of flourishing and thriving through the daily and ordinary ways that we show up and with one another.

I also recognize that this past year of virtual church has been very challenging for some of you. Some in this community have let go of or loosened your commitments in order to have the space and time to take care of yourself, or because the loss of what was has been too painful, and it has been too difficult to hold on as the church has moved forward in these unusual and uncertain times. Letting go of commitments is also part of the journey, and I hope that in due time those who have let go or drifted away from your commitment to this community will return. You are loved and your presence among us matters.

Our commitments, whether to this church community or other groups, to our loved ones, or to ourselves, ultimately shape who we are.

The philosopher and theologian Henry Nelson Wieman has said: "Inevitably in our lives we commit ourselves to something, whether worthy or not. The direction and intensity of our loyalties give shape and meaning to our lives. Loyalties, commitments, covenants, the promises we make to one another: These are the things [that] tell us to what we belong. By doing so they tell us who we are."

Our commitments can provide a mirror on what matters to us and where we find meaning. Commitments made in community can show us where and how we find belonging.

The reason we make the commitments we do is also important to notice.

Sometimes, we make commitments because of feeling a sense of responsibility, duty, and obligation. At times, we might unintentionally make commitments out of habit or inertia or familiarity. And, we can also make commitments in response to a sense of gratitude. In feeling thankful for what we have received, we commit to giving back in some way.

All these sources of commitment have their place, and at any given time, or in any given relationship, all of these sources of your commitment might be at work.



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What is important, I believe, is that we are each able to make and to sustain the many commitments of our lives with joy.

Commitments that are not sustained with joy can lead to resentment down the road.

So, when you reflect on the commitments you are making in your life, I invite you to consider how you might joyfully sustain the commitments that are most in alignment with your beliefs and values.

Today, as we launch the church's Annual Pledge Drive, we turn our attention to the financial commitment we make to this spiritual community - this group of people gathered in shared purpose. When you make a financial pledge to this congregation, you are making a commitment to share of your financial resources with this community so that we can fulfill our mission and live our shared values in the world.

Through our budgeting process each year, we discern together what our needs are and how the generosity of our financial gifts might meet those needs. Each year, at least 80% of our income comes from your pledged contributions.

A primary goal in next year's budget is to continue to offer and expand health insurance coverage for our staff as well as their dependents. We also hope to address the facilities, equipment, and technology needs that will allow us to safely re-open our building when the conditions are right and to continue offering spiritually nourishing programming - both in person and virtually.

The financial resources we gather as a community support the full and robust ministry of this congregation in its many forms - from Sunday morning programming for children and youth, to explorations of racism for adults, to serving human need through direct financial assistance and meals, to educating ourselves on the best ways to protect the Earth. This is all ministry that we do together - staff and volunteers, members and friends, alike.

The pooling of our collective resources - each of us giving according to our capacity and our commitment - is an act of faith and trust, and ultimately, hope.



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I want to recognize that the past year of the pandemic has had disparate and unequal financial impacts on each of us. Even before the pandemic, we each lived with different financial resources available to us, some in this community without any care or concern over financial stability and others just trying to get by paycheck to paycheck. The economic impacts of the pandemic have exacerbated these inequalities in profound ways.

Each year, the church receives a wide range of pledges and financial contributions, and all of them are received with gratitude.

As you consider making a pledge towards next year's budget, I invite you to reflect both on your capacity as well as your commitment.

With deep gratitude, I, along with my spouse, make an annual pledge to support the budget of this congregation. We are thankful for the ministry that provides a nurturing environment for our son and for each of us. We are inspired by your compassion, your care, and your commitment to the values that give life to this congregation's actions in the world. We are fortunate that our income and financial status have not been severely impacted during the pandemic, and so we are increasing our pledge to a total Fair Share Contribution of $4,500. This is where our capacity and our commitment meet to support the mission and ministry of this congregation in the coming year.

Your own discernment of where your capacity and your commitment meet will lead you to your own number. Whatever that number is, thank you. Thank you for dedicating your time and energy to giving it careful thought. Thank you for thinking about the needs of this community and for making it a practice to give generously from your own sense of gratitude.

Thank you for all the ways that you give of yourself from a place of love and gratitude so that we can thrive together.



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