

“Million Dollar Baby”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson

March 13, 2005

Well, I feel installed! I want to say that that was about as good as it gets, our service last Sunday night. A number of my colleagues, the senior minister group which meets in Santa Barbara, were effusive in their praise. It was the largest gathering of UU Senior Ministers for an Installation ever, and we did ourselves proud. I am ready just to bask for a while.

A Million Dollar Baby—that is me. After last Sunday’s installation I feel like a million bucks. I can’t tell you how good it felt to be installed as your senior minister, and what a truly great service we had. Everyone who spoke was wonderful—everyone. I send my deepest thanks to Ken Brown, our district executive, and Bill Bogaard, the mayor of Pasadena, to Kathleen for her beautiful prayer, Brandy for his deeply thought-provoking reflections on ministry (we talked about it much this week in Santa Barbara), to Bob Harrison for his wonderful introduction and Mary Fauvre Holmes for being president, to Lee Barker and Anne Hines for their charges, and to my dear friend Michael McGee for his sermon, and to Stephen, Thomas, Jim, and Elaine for the music. It was something!

And, everyone was very impressed that it was just 65 minutes long—these installations have been getting longer and longer recently. One of my colleagues went to one recently that lasted nearly three hours!

As I sat there, listening to my colleagues, listening to the music, glancing over at Kathe and Hannah, imagining Claire listening in from Madagascar, and seeing their joy—well, it struck me how important this work we do together is and how profound a job ministry can be. I remembered what I believe—that this faith of ours is a saving faith, that we believe in being free, and in becoming free, that, in these gathered and beloved communities we call our churches or congregations, the best and deepest of human activities happens. We save people.

I sat there understanding, once again, how much this can matter and how good this work we do

together is. I remembered what Carl Sandburg said—that the church was the last great hope for humankind. I remembered that we have a tradition of religious freedom that seems especially important these days. So thank you, dear Neighborhood Church, thank you. It is truly a privilege to serve as your senior minister.

And now, as they say somewhere, on with the show.

The title of this sermon is not about the movie, though it could be. A good movie. by the way—serious, well done, well acted, dealing with real human dynamics of forgiveness and moral choice, of meaning and passion, of the ability to break through barriers between people, of right and wrong, of courage and cowardice, of kindness and conviction. Even about religion and ministry. Every minister understands the priest’s reaction to Clint Eastwood’s constant questions, and about what happens at the end of life, how we live, and how we die.

Imagine the movie as a religious tableau. Eastwood is the center; he is God. Hillary Swank is Jesus and Morgan Freeman is the Holy Ghost. But Eastwood’s God is a modern God, not so sure of Himself, tired and a bit worn out, wondering whether He has done the right things in His life.

There is plenty there and those issues will come up over these coming years.

But that is not the million dollar baby I am thinking about today. No, it is us, the million dollar baby. It takes just about a million dollars to fund the congregation—programs and services, take care of the buildings and grounds, pay the salaries, fund RE and worship, outreach, and pastoral care. Just about (actually a little more than) a million bucks.

And today, as you know, we kick off our Canvass, today we ask you to come up with a million dollars for Neighborhood Church. It is that simple – just a million dollars. We ask everyone to consider pledging 5% of household income, more if you are able. If that is not possible, then make that a goal you work toward. If

someone can write a check right now, we can call off the rest.

I have been canvassing some of our more generous givers and have asked each of them to increase their pledge by 20%, and some have. Some could not. Some people have doubled or more their pledge. All I can ask is that you be generous and pledge an amount that means something to you.

When I talk with new members and we talk about pledging, I encourage people to make a pledge for themselves and to think of it as something that will feed their spirit. So find what is meaningful for you. That is the key of this pledging business. And I thank all of you in advance.

Emerson, in his scathing review of his minister, Barzillai Frost, said that the job of the preacher, and so of the church, is to turn life into truth, to take the stuff of our living and turn it into truth for living, turn the questions we have about living into meaning, and turn our hopes into justice, our questions into wisdom.

I have been here as your minister for six months now, and duly installed, so here is my vision for Neighborhood Church as a place of life-long learning.

You see, I have a vision for this congregation and it begins this year—Neighborhood Church as a place of life-long learning. And this should come quite naturally to us, for UUs have always been learners; it is who we always have been and, hopefully, still are.

We are the religious folk who, after all, like to question; we especially like to question. We have always affirmed that we should think about what we believe, and that we should learn and keep our minds open. We value education, we like to live in the questions.

Questions like these, What is the relationship between science and religion? Can you prove the existence of God or is it just belief? What is the self, the mind, or the brain? What is consciousness? Is there a metaphysics? What does the world mean and can science offer meaning? Where do values and morals come from and how do we know what is right

and what is wrong? What is our place in this vast universe?

Questions like, How is music similar to faith? Why has so much of the greatest music been written for religious communities? And is the experience of being carried away in music like or the same as a religious experience?

What does literature say religiously? Is religious language, like poetry, metaphor and symbol? Why did Melville hate God so? And what is the meaning of his story “Bartleby the Scrivener”?

Questions like, How can I live well? How can I experience God or how can I find meaning in the depths of nature? What should we teach our children?

I want to establish a center for Spiritual Growth and Development, focusing on learning how to be spiritual in this world. I imagine courses on various religious disciplines and practices, and occasional retreats where we can explore our spiritual life.

For me, I am doing a couple of things next year. The first is a community-based “Fiction and Faith” group, held over breakfast at a local restaurant to discuss short stories dealing with religious themes. And I hope also, with a certain member of the congregation, to offer a course on food and faith, preparing a gourmet meal once a month and then discussing essays about the role of food in our lives and its religious aspect (this’ll be a fun one). And I want to begin a series of leadership training programs helping members discover their gifts and learn ways of becoming a part of the ministry team of the church.

What I look toward is a church that empowers its members—you—to do ministry. I think of people like Betsy Blue who has dedicated more than a few hours to the Welcoming Committee—this is her ministry. Or to Jo Kehoe who arranges flowers so often for Sunday morning—this is her ministry. Or Eric Peterson, the king of microphones and audio who does so much to make the service audible and recoverable —this is his ministry. And Elizabeth Sadlon and her ministry on the Finance Committee. Or the 30+ people in Tijuana this weekend—their ministry. Or all those who teach, who sing in the choir, and who participate in Small Group Ministry.

To see Neighborhood church as a place where members are empowered to live lives of meaning and service and joy, where we learn how to be more spiritual people, better people, living better lives.

To see Neighborhood Church as a place that transforms lives and sends its members out into the world to transform it with acts of love and justice. To learn how to be in the world in the very best way, to stimulate the mind and the heart and the spirit, to grow our souls.

This vision will help us be a voice here in Pasadena; it will give members here chances to explore their faith. It is—to go back to Emerson—to forge truth out of our lives, to live deeply with integrity, with joy. To forge truth out of the events of our lives, to transform ourselves and the world, to live with integrity, meaning, and joy.

Let me end with this story from Stefan Jonasson and why we are needed. Some of you know this story, but it is a true one and a good one:

Not too many years ago, in the dawn of the computer Internet era, the UUA set up a chat list on line. Stefan—he is the UUA consultant for large congregations—participated in it. One day there was a post from someone asking to know more about Unitarian Universalism, and Stefan was rather concerned about the quality of the responses. Something about the query struck him and so he responded privately, offering to send some material.

The writer thought that would be good, but asked that the material be sent in a plain brown envelope. The writer was a teenager from a small town in Georgia, a town where the Southern Baptists were the liberals, and she was afraid of the reaction if her parents or others knew what she was getting.

She had had these thoughts about religion for some time—questions, really—and wondered whether she might be mentally ill. While doing a report on the United Nations for her high school, she

came across an article in the encyclopedia about Unitarian Universalism, and she thought that perhaps she was not mentally ill and that there were others who thought like her. This led to the internet and the question for the chat list.

Stefan sent her material. He drove down to North Dakota—he is from Saskatchewan—to mail it, thinking that a package from Canada might be suspicious. The girl got it and they continued a correspondence for a while. She went to college, the first in her family ever to go to college, and they lost touch with each other.

Until one day, when Stefan was visiting a UU congregation, well away from Georgia, when a woman came up to him after the service. It was that high school girl from Georgia, now a woman with a professional career and a family, and an active member of that UU congregation.

That woman, that girl— she is out there looking for us. Perhaps she is here today, visiting for the first time. Perhaps she is one of you, looking for a faith that affirms her, that has a saving message of freedom. She is out there looking for us, looking for this faith which affirms the inherent worth and dignity of everyone, which seeks to encourage us to live lives of integrity and service and joy, which seeks to transform this world through acts of love and justice.

She is out there; she is in here. And we need to be ready for her; we need to be welcoming to her when she comes; we need to create a free and saving spiritual community here for her.

She is out there; she is in here, she is a part of us. She is that spirit in the human soul that seeks freedom, that seeks meaning in life, that looks to serve the world, that seeks to learn, to go deeper, to broaden our horizons.

She is out there; she is in here; she is us.

It is up to us.

Amen