

Let the Revolution Begin
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson
November 6, 2005

A couple of weeks ago, as you know, I visited my Mom in Milwaukee to help her out. She is 94 and was recovering from an infection caused, we think, from a fall a bit earlier. She is now doing well, though she was not during the week I spent with her. My worry, of course, is that this is the beginning of a visible slide to her death. These questions of life and death are not easy ones.

I am ready and I am not ready. I have learned many lessons from others, and an important one is from those who grieve and those who mourn: that as much as some deaths are anticipated, and some even welcomed when it ends pain and suffering, it is never the right time. The loss happens suddenly, just as the passage between life and death is sudden.

My hope is that my Mom will continue to gain strength and continue to have a good life. She is ready to die, and has been for some time, and hopes that her death will be peaceful, like turning out a light, we said. It is a good Buddhist image. She is ready, I believe, because she has lived a good life.

We had lots of talks. You may know that we are close, and we understand that we are a lot alike. We have been close our whole lives. There have been differences, of course, and even important ones. The biggest one is religion.

My Mom is a Christian, a Lutheran, and devout. Her faith is—and this is not pejorative—a simple one. She believes deeply that Jesus is the Son of God, died on the cross to save us from damnation, and rose from the dead on Easter as a sign that our price has been paid and that, if we would only believe that, heaven can be ours.

We talked about heaven. She believes it is an actual place, and that when she dies, she will be reunited with my Dad, her beloved husband, and my sister Karen, her beloved daughter. She anticipates that with joy.

She believes that there is one way to salvation and that is through Jesus. Like the good Protestant that she is, she believes that redemption and salvation come through belief. Her religion is clearly creedal,

and she believes that those who are outside of that creedal profession are lost.

She loves me and so, obviously, worries about the state of my soul. I think it is hard for her to understand how someone so like her, and who has studied religion so much, could not see the truth. She does not think she is better than I am in any way (pride is not one of her sins), but it perplexes her no end. I think she worries that when my brother and I die, she will be reunited with John but not with me, that I will end up in hell, and that we will miss having a wonderful time in heaven together. (If she is right, I guess I will have to have a good time with all of you!)

Since I was probably a teenager, I have not been concerned about an afterlife. If there is one, I am sure it is nothing at all like this life. And since I am sure that any kind of life after death would have to be so different as to be beyond my imagination, I have not thought about it. It is a non-issue for me. This does not mean it is or should be a non-issue for anyone else. It just is for me. For me, the question has always been whether there is life before death, not after. We know we have this life and so what we do with it seems to be the only real question we should ever ask: How should we live?

We talked about all of this, and I said that what mattered was how we lived, not what we said we believed. And my Mom had to agree that that was what mattered as well. She is not ready to give up the words, nor would I want her to, but we both agreed that all of the saviors of humankind—Jesus, the Buddha, Mohammed, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, the great religious leaders—all talked more about how we live.

Beware those who pray in public, warned Jesus. My Mom even told me she had written a letter to George Bush asking him how he could call himself a Christian when he supported the oil industry so and went to war on a lie! You go, Mom! Deeds, not creeds, in other words.

We agreed that Jesus talked far more about how we live than what we believe or say we believe; that

his great commandment was to love what is holy and others as one loves oneself; that his parting instructions to his followers were to feed the hungry and house the homeless, visit the prisoner and clothe the naked. We agreed that the heart of religious faith was living a worthwhile life.

Though she still believes that there is one way to salvation, she agreed that we see that way by how we act. Words are slippery devils; acts are clear—they are only what they are. Our kids know the difference, and parents will often admit to this in that saying of “Do what I say, not what I do.” But it’s what we do that counts.

If we don’t live our values, then we have no values or no life.

So, it was a good trip, though hard. When my Mom asked me if I believed in Jesus, I said “yes” though probably not in the same way she does. I think we found some peace in that, and could come to an understanding that our respective religious communities matter a great deal and are the places in which our salvation will be worked out. Our salvation, whatever that might mean, and the salvation of the world, will only come about through the things we do.

Which brings me to today and our saying goodbye to Jo’Ann De Quattro as she leaves to take a position with her religious community, her congregation. Many of you know Jo’Ann better than I do—you have lived and worked with her for these past four years. She started work the Sunday after September 11th, 2001, and she has helped lead you in the work of faith.

The work of faith. I know that Jo’Ann believes that the work of faith is done by us, that justice and peace, equity and compassion, that economic justice and environmental justice, that gender and racial equality, that these things come about because we put our faith into action. After all, she is a Roman Catholic, and that tradition has always claimed that faith must be active to be alive.

She is true to her congregation, her religious community. The opening words were from that community, the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, founded in Canada, in Quebec, in the early 1800s by three women dedicated to teaching girls and

young women. The order later expanded its ministry to justice and peace work. Here is their mission:

Seeking to meet unmet needs, especially among people who are poor and marginalized, we serve in a broad range of ministries.

We provide educational opportunities to diverse cultures, to women striving to build new lives, to children and youth for their full development as human persons, to all people who seek spiritual and emotional growth.

And so has Jo’Ann—a teacher, a peace worker, a justice worker, a conscience for us all, someone who understands that faith without works is dead, that faith is action.

Will we miss Jo’Ann? You betcha, and I, at least, will miss Jo’Ann mostly because I like her. It is not what she has done that I will miss, but the person she is, the unique person she is. After all, we can do social justice work without Jo’Ann; you did it before she was here and we will do it hence. She was not really more than a mirror for us, holding our own values of justice and equity and compassion to our faces and helping us do what we say we believe. She was a mirror—a mirror of our conscience that says that we can change this world, that we can help others.

This last Wednesday, Jo’Ann and I, along with Dick Smoak and Kris Ockershauser, were at a breakfast and heard Terence Roberts—a local psychologist and educator, an African American, and one of the Little Rock Nine, the nine African American students escorted into Central High School in 1957 under the protection of federal troops in defiance of the governor, Orval Faubus.

Part of what he said was that if things were going to change, if the thin veneer of civility momentarily torn away by Katrina was to remain open and the wounds of racism and poverty, the stain of injustice, were to remain in open view, that we had to change, each one of us. We had to be transformed; we had to act, each one of us.

The change, that is, the revolution, begins in here in each of us. It begins when we say no to the status quo, when we change, when our life is transformed.

The revolution begins when we realize that those people in New Orleans, described by someone as so Black and so poor, are us.

He talked about change and about racism. He had a quiet dignity, not unlike Rosa Parks, Jo'Ann mentioned to me later. He told about being a young teenager in Little Rock, at his favorite hamburger place, where he could go and order hamburger, fries, and drink for take-out but couldn't sit at the counter. And one day, he forgot, and sat down, and the diner seemed to just stop and go silent, and he realized what he had done. And so he canceled his order and left, and realized he could not go back there again.

The revolution began for him that day and it began in him. So for us.

We need a religious revolution in this country and it should begin with each one of us—a revolution of community and reason and of mercy. We need to counter the claims of revelation reason, the claims of individualism with community. We need to counter the fundamentalism of materialism with the demands of justice. We live in idolatrous times, times where we worship at the altars of money and things, of self and ego. Let the revolution begin and let it begin with us.

You see, this faith of ours is based on a couple of very important and, to me, non-negotiable values. They are: freedom, reason, and tolerance. From our beginnings in this country, it has been those three: freedom, reason, and tolerance. And not just for us but for the world. Our faith has always said that those three virtues will bring about a more just and

peaceful world and that it is our task to establish them by living them out in our own lives. Freedom, reason, and tolerance. Justice, equity, and compassion.

Remember the famous scene between Emerson and Thoreau? Thoreau was in jail as a tax resister. Emerson visited him in the Concord jail and asked "Henry, what are you doing in there?" And Thoreau famously replied "Waldo, what are you doing out there?"

Where are we? Where are we standing?

Religion in the U.S. has turned towards fundamentalism. This is a great danger to us. In the Jefferson memorial in Washington D.C. are Jefferson's words: For I have sworn upon the altar of god, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.

And fundamentalism of any kind seeks a tyranny. Based on revelation and given to judgment, the new fundamentalisms endanger our freedom; based on judgment they endanger compassion.

Let the revolution begin, and let it begin in each of our hearts as we dedicate ourselves to justice and to equity and to compassion, to peace. Let the revolution begin and let it begin with us in a rededication to freedom and to reason and tolerance.

Jo'Ann. Godspeed. Thank you. And continue to give 'em hell.

Amen