

## *Out of the Box*

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson  
March 8, 2009

As most of you know, my Mom is, in her words, 'getting old' and will be 98 this coming June 2<sup>nd</sup>. She and my Dad were married in 1933 and so she has some real experience with economic down turns. For her whole life she has been thrifty, though never cheap or stingy, and has had a marvelous sense of what matters and what does not. She has never liked things, and has always wanted to take care of herself and her home. She was a teacher but gave that up when my folks were married – it wasn't right, she said, for two people in a marriage to be working at the same time when so many were out of work. She has always given at least 10% of her income to her church.

She sews well – still is doing that, now for her great grandchildren - and here is her broom – bought from a Fuller Brush salesman in the late 30s, the bristles trimmed every decade or so to remain a good broom. I keep it as a reminder that we can usually make do with what we have.

Lately she has been getting rid of things. I think she finally believes that she will actually die someday. For my birthday last month, she sent me an album of pictures of me as a little boy, along with pictures of my grandparents – 3 died before I was born – and of her and my Dad when they were young. They were so handsome together!

Along with the pictures, was a book from my brother, a birthday present. We have not exchanged gifts for our entire adult life so it was a surprise. The book is by Bob Cullen and the title is Why Golf?

Indeed, that may a question on many of your minds these days. Why golf, indeed?

That is, the saints be praised, an entirely different sermon than the one I want to give today, which would more properly be called 'Why Community?' or 'Why Religion?'

Community is our theological theme for this month, and it gets at the very heart of who we are and who we might become – and I mean both we as individuals and we as groups.

You know the tension – we are singular beings but also a part of something greater than the self. To be fully human, so we seem to think, we need to be both free and bound, separate and connected – free to be our own self yet bound to others. This is a paradox – the more free we are the more we can be connected; the more tied together we are, the more we can be free.

We are pretty good, we UUs, about the self part, but what about the community part, the bound part?

Week before last, I was up in Santa Barbara for my annual retreat with the other senior ministers of large UU churches – large being those churches with more than 550 members. We talked a good bit about the economy, and how our congregations were responding. Several are in distress – in places like Michigan because of the auto industry or North Carolina because of banks, or Connecticut because of insurance – but most congregations are like Neighborhood – being prudent and cautious and hopeful.

So, for everyone who has made their pledge for this coming year – thank you. We are currently about 5% ahead of last year, which is just about where we need to be. Please be sure to be here next week at 10:00 for our Celebration service – one service at 10:00 – if you have not brought your pledge card today or haven't mailed it in, bring it next week.

If you can increase your giving, please do. If you need to reduce your giving, please do – just try not to stay the same. If you are new to pledging, know that it costs about \$1800 per member to run the church. If you have questions, please ask a Board member or our Canvass leaders, or me or Hannah. And thank you ....

At the retreat, we also talked a good bit about Facebook, and how new technologies, especially those dealing with social networking, might be applied in our work.

At the heart of both our discussions was the need for community. It is what you tell me, after all, you are seeking - community. It is the number one reason visitors and new members give for being here – the search for community. This was less true 25 years ago when I entered the ministry – people then were looking for intellectual stimulation or escape from a previous tradition. That is still sometimes true, but overwhelmingly, people say they are looking above all for community.

Here are some facts: [and thanks to my friend Peter Morales for this]

A recently published sociological study shows a decline in close relationships so large and so rapid that the data shocked sociologists. The study was in large part a repetition of a study done in 1985. Both studies interviewed people about the number of persons with whom they confide personal information. The studies went on to ask people a number of questions about who these people are in which the subjects confide. The data for the new study were gathered in 2004 and published this year. By asking the same questions that were asked in 1985, a valid comparison can be made.

Here are some of the highlights of the data:

\* In 1985, the modal response (the response given most often) was having three people in whom one could confide. In 2004, the modal response was zero.

\* The percentage of people who said they had no one with whom they could confide jumped from 10 percent in 1985 to 24.6 percent in 2004. That means that in just 20 years the percent of people who said they have no one to talk to went from one person in ten to one out of every four.

\* Almost half of all Americans now either have no one or only one person with whom they can discuss important matters. The percent of people who either have no one or only one person has almost doubled in 20 years.

\* If a person has only one confidant, chances are that the one confidant is his or her spouse. What this means is that the ties beyond the nuclear family are being cut.

Other studies have shown that people who have either no confidant or one confidant have inadequate support. What this all means is that in one generation the percentage of people with inadequate social support has gone from a quarter of the population (that was bad enough!) to almost half the population. And the biggest decline has been in the relationships that link us to our neighbors and our community.

I wonder what Facebook etc would do to this data. It remains true that so many feel isolated and seek companionship and community.

Before I was in Santa Barbara, I was a part of a national conference, held here in Pasadena, of members of the health care professions on *Improving the Quality of Spiritual Care as a Dimension of Palliative Care*. Representatives of differing health care professions – doctors and nurses, social workers and chaplains met to explore ways in which spiritual health and well-being could become an expected part of health care. I was the only congregationally based clergy there.

We met in large group and small groups. The conference was led, primarily, by Dr Christine Puchalski of George Washington University hospital in Washington, DC – a real pioneer in establishing spiritual care as essential in health care, and by Betty Ferrell, of the City of Hope, also a pioneer in the relationship between spiritual and physical well being. It was a very impressive gathering.

At the end, we gathered – 50 or so of us in a large room – to come up with a definition of spirituality. Quite a process, and I will talk more about this at a later time. But I mention this today because of what, in retrospect, seems a fascinating dynamic. At the heart of our discussion was the

understanding that people need supportive relationships to be well, and that in times of crisis, they need them even more.

Throughout the discussions, great pains were made to talk about spirituality instead of religion. Indeed, an initial version of the definition of spirituality was quite wholly secular, until, at my insistence, the word 'sacred' was inserted. We worked hard to talk in ways that were not tradition specific; though most there were Christian, there were several Jews, and one Buddhist [Roshi Joan Halifax – a fascinating woman who is abbot at the Upaya Zen center in Santa Fe and is a leader in hospice and palliative care] and one Unitarian Universalist – that would be me. A Muslim leader was invited but was unable to attend. We sought consensus across religious tradition lines. This was surely a very good thing.

But I wonder, too. I wonder about this de-coupling of spirituality from religion. How many of you here think of yourself as spiritual but not religious? I bet a bunch. How many of you would say you would like to be more spiritual but not more religious? I hear this often, and it was reflected at the conference I attended.

Here is my quandary: If spirituality has something to do with the individual search for meaning and with the individual experience of the sacred, with mystery, then how do we understand the relative importance of the individual and the community? Where is the community part? Does this make sense?

If spirituality is rooted in the individual and religion is rooted in the community, how are they balanced?

We have come through a long period of super-individualism, of a focus on the self and the individual ego. This is not news. We live as if we were separate selves each with our own particular world and set of experiences. UUs have led the way in this – Emerson is the great prophet of the self.

But the group has been central to the religious impulse since the beginning. In the beginnings of Judaism, the promise to the individual – Abraham – will be that his descendents will be a people, and still today there is a deep sense of identity of Jews as a people.

The Buddha claimed there were three essential items– the buddha nature– that self within, the dharma - the teachings of the Buddha, and the sangha - the community.

Christianity has the disciples – Jesus was not complete until he formed a group [my favorite quip is that 11 is the perfect size for any group, as Jesus found out that twelve is one too many]. Mohammed had the companions. Monasteries and convents of all kinds have arisen to seek the holy; ashrams and retreat centers, and while from time to time, people have gone off alone into the wilderness, the great religious leaders come back into community.

This is just to say that we need each other and that we are bound together in an inescapable web of destiny, as MLK put it. I am you and you are me and we are all together sang the Beatles – goo goo gajob!

Religion, from the very beginning, has affirmed that we are both an individual and a part of something, and that the task of the religious life is to find ways to balance that. That is the hard part.

Paul Tillich argued that the primary virtue in the modern world, which is marked by anxiety he claimed, is courage and that courage is expressed in two ways: the courage to be as a self and the courage to be a part. Separate and connected; we are both.

Martin Buber, the great Jewish theologian of connection, said that the great revolutions of the 1700s affirmed three great principles: liberty, equality and community [liberte, egalite, fraternite in the French]. And in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century liberty went west and became license; equality went east and became the faceless collective, but community was lost.

We need all three. You need all three. You cannot become a full person if you are not free, if you are not of equal worth and dignity, and if you are isolated. Your faith cannot be whole if it is practiced just alone; spirituality with no connection to others is only half faith. To be fully human, we need both religion and spirituality – we need that inner journey and we need to be with others in community.

There is just no other way to do it.

This is an anxious time and we need strong communities more than ever. A colleague of mine once said that congregations were like bowls into which people poured their lives. The job of ministry, he went on, was to keep the bowl in good enough repair so that very few lives would fall through or out.

Like a chalice – another kind of bowl, this congregation is a vessel – your lives poured into it, your sorrows, your struggles, your questions, your hopes, your dreams, your gifts, your strengths, your generosity are all poured into it, and held by what we do together. We are the glue, we share the ministry of keeping this vessel in good repair.

I have often quoted Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish leader of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century when he challenged religious people to ask the question of covenant. Not, as we do so often to ask what it is in a congregation that deserves our loyalty, but rather what is demanded of us. Of each of us, of all of us.

And while it matters a great deal to ask the question ‘What do I believe?’ more importantly in this time is to ask ‘What will we promise one another?’ ‘What will we covenant together to do and to be? What is demanded of you and of us, together?’

In this we will not be perfect. No one – not me, not any of you, will get the exact congregation you want. But here, I know and I believe and I hope, that together we will get what we need – look, we have gone from the Beatles to the Rolling Stones in just one sermon – we will get what we need - a place to serve the spirit and have a deeper spirituality, and a community, standing together in good times and in bad, in sorrow and in joy, in birth and in death and all those times in between.

I was going to tell a really funny story, an old Bob Newhart routine, and the sermon title came from that. I will save it for later. The times are not funny for too many. But we do need to get out of the box, the box of the self only, the box of materialism, and find the freedom that comes in being together, in community, woven together in a web of faith.

If ever we needed community, these are the times.

Amen