

*Today and Tomorrow*  
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson  
June 14, 2009

We all have people in our lives we would like to be like – models, mentors, heroes – you know, those people we look up to and think, ‘Boy, if I could only be like him or her.’ I meet these people all the time – some of them are right here, in this room. This is a good thing, I am sure. Imagine if there was no one you thought was better than you – pride goeth before the Fall as they say.

This is part of the religious life, part of what we try to do here – get to know our betters, watch those people we admire, figure out what qualities makes this person so good or that person so wonderful. Just look around you – here is a room filled with models. There are no perfect people here, but there are a lot of terrific people here – heroes, I think.

This is no room for the egotist, no place for swaggering; it is a place for humility, a place for learning from others. Rilke says:

Doors will open to all who knock,  
and you'll find a sense of humility  
in all relationships, in you and in me.

Our task in life is, after all, to become better than we are. We can only do that when we link with others. A full life is found only in relationship with others. So we are a community, a bunch of partners in living. We do that all the time here – partner with each other to do one thing or another. Let me count the ways.

One of those partners I cannot but help think of today is Tom Yeakle. Some of you are new and didn't know Tom. He was a member for fifty years plus, and died just about two years ago now. He sang; he composed; he did the newsletter – all those things with his beloved wife Elizabeth. For several years after I came here, Tom and I did this service – the day of the Annual Meeting - we would do this service together. He would write some music based on some texts and I would comment on them.

It was a good discipline for me, to take a text and try and understand its meaning, and to see how it might fit together with the music Tom composed. It brought an awareness of patterns and connections, of how individuals become a part of a larger whole. Again as Rilke says:

Everything will come again into strength:  
the lands without boundaries, the waters flowing free;  
the trees growing tall, and the walls built low.  
And in the valleys, a people as diverse and  
enduring as the land.

There is an old saying that where people meet and seek their highest aspirations, they meet on holy ground. That is true, I am sure. Process theologians – this is the discipline that argues that God is becoming, not being [Alfred North Whitehead and John Cobb were two leading process thinkers] – say that we are co-creators with God of the world. Process thinkers imagine God as incomplete and that our task on earth is to create, with God, the world. They see God and us, life itself, as dynamic. Co-creators. I think Tom and I tried to do that.

It is what we all do here – with God we are co-creating the world. We are all in this together, my friends – a people as diverse and enduring as the land!

So what I want to do this morning is to suggest to you something of the world we have created this past year and what we might look forward to in this coming year.

I have been in ministry, now, for 28 years. It is a long time and I have seen a lot, and hopefully learned at least a little. I have served small churches and large churches, healthy churches and conflicted

churches – and let me tell you, healthy is much much better. I have been on the west coast and the east coast. Each year has had its distinctive marks but this past year here stands out as one of the most distinctive.

Just think about all of this: the year began, I would argue, on May 15, 2008 when the CA Supreme Court granted same sex couples the right to marry. This set in motion several things – first was cause for celebration and joy, and a number of ceremonies that Hannah and I officiated at last summer and Fall. I remember the Sunday after May 15 when I asked Stephen to play the wedding march for the prelude and this room erupted in cheers and applause [I have tears in my eyes as I write this]. I remember the cheers when I would say to a couple ‘and according to the laws of the state of California, you are now married, partners in life and love forever.’

It was heady and wonderful. I know that some in this congregation have mixed feelings about this issue, and I know some have been concerned about the focus on marriage equality. I am grateful that those with concerns are still here. We must always remember that we do honor our differences, as long as they are expressed with respect and honor.

The ruling by the State Court led to our efforts to overturn Prop 8. We did a lot – phone banking and petition gathering, marching and writing letters. We had such hopes that our long-standing traditions of tolerance and freedom of religious belief would be upheld. Since around 1970, UUs have been urging equal treatment for the LGBT community; we hoped our work for freedom and on the behalf of love would win.

Of course, it did not win – though only in a legal manner. I would say, though, that in fact we did win, and I am confident, that before my ministry ends, I will again pronounce people legally married here in California without regard to gender. Remember all of the emotions – from the original joy in May to anger and sorrow and resignation that lasted through this year, focused again this May when the Court upheld Prop 8 but also recognized the weddings we celebrated last year. But what an effort – we stood up for something and I could not be more proud of this congregation. Bravo to us.

You might also remember that there was a presidential election going on and many of you were involved in that. I was on CNN overload and I think I spent more time in Wolf Blitzer’s Situation Room than in my own living room. That was just the beginning of the year!

And, of course, we were preparing to call Hannah Petrie as our associate minister, and later installed her as such. This is important because it affirms a shift in the history of ministry at Neighborhood Church. Though you have had two ministers for a long time, the second minister most typically was responsible for Religious Education. But now, with Sara LaWall as Director of Religious Education, Hannah has focused on our Social Justice programming. Our RE program is expanding and Social Justice is stronger than at anytime I have been here; this reflects your commitment to the next generation and to the world outside these walls. This is admirable and right, I would say.

We prepared for a Green Fair, held in January – a huge undertaking and a great success – please let Hannah or Beth know if you would be involved in a Green Fair this coming year. We began the organizing for the Jericho Road Project [more on that in just a bit] and were involved in housing issues here in Pasadena. We made two trips to Tijuana for Esperanza. We had another Big Saturday. We gave the offering plate on the second Sunday away.

In worship we began the year with monthly themes for worship – our Chalice Circles used those themes as starting points for conversations, and we also began the year without Stephen Grimm who was on sabbatical. Nancy Holland filled in for Stephen and did just a wonderful job – such a treasure she was – and is! We tried some different music, following the recommendations of a couple of years ago during the RISE process that there be an expanded musical vocabulary in our worship.

Let me pause here for a second - I know that there are a whole variety of opinions about music here – this happens in every church you know – and we will continue our conversation about music this coming year. We will be reviewing the whole music program to understand what is done well and what could be

done better, so I want to ask for everyone's forbearance in this. Musical tastes are individual – no one style of music is inherently better than another, nor is any one kind of music more religious or more spiritual than another. We have a diverse congregation with differing tastes and desires. Like the readings I choose – from classical to contemporary - our musical offering will be varied. And we will continue to explore how the music we have here can make our worship life richer.

Back to last year - Sara LaWall went on maternity leave and had her baby, and RE sailed right on through with Erika Stallings steadfast support and the YRE committee's diligence.

Behind all that happened this year – a year in which we added more new members than anytime within the past 5 years or so – was the crash of the economy. We have all felt that – I have had many many conversations with you about worries and concerns – it has been a really hard year for a lot of people and anxiety about the future is never easy. In the midst of this, we had to conduct a Canvass and ask members for a financial commitment.

Led by Gillian Symonds and Tom Petersmeyer, and supported by the Board and Canvassers, you responded, and we will be OK and continue to be strong. If you are interested in working on next year's Canvass, please let me know. This is rewarding work, and you get a lot of support from our staff and from the Board – please do step up and volunteer for this.

This is the end of my fifth year with you and I suppose we are getting used to each other by now. The honeymoon is probably over. This was a great year for me, but it also was a hard year – the work was good and deep and emotional, I don't regret anything of the work – but I was in pain for most of the year because of my hip. I would stand up here, this last year in front of you, and hurt, and wonder how I could make it through the day. And then I would look out and see this great cloud of witnesses of our better natures – the better angels of our nature as Lincoln said. Seeing all of you soothed the pain a great deal. You gave me strength.

I am reminded of something from Frederick Buechner – a much published Presbyterian minister, an excellent writer and thinker – about how Sunday is for a minister, especially in that moment we move from the chair behind the pulpit to the pulpit, ready to preach. Seeing all these faces filled with expectation. Knowing there are stories of joy and stories of sorrow sitting there, understanding that some are in pain or feel lost, wondering about their place in the world. Others hoping for some intellectual stimulation, a thought or an image to carry through the week.

Buechner hits it on the head: he writes, 'the preacher in his robe, with a dry mouth, feeling as if he has swallowed an anchor. If it weren't for the honor of the thing, he would just as soon be somewhere else.'

If it weren't for the honor of the thing – that is it. An honor to stand here, just as it is, I hope, an honor for all of you to sit there, surrounded by all these heroes, the members of Neighborhood Church. We all live through some kind of pain in the course of our lives – sometimes it is physical, sometimes emotional or spiritual; sometimes it is financial or social. Struggle is a part of all human experience – and in those times, we can look around us for strength from others. I did this last year and I know many of you did, too.

I know how much it meant to the same-sex couples here that we stood with them and celebrated with them. How much it means to not be alone, but to stand with or lean on and give a hand to others. I know how much it meant to those who lost loved ones that we stood with them, sat with them, heard their stories and comforted their sorrow. I know how much it meant that we stood with those and shared their joy. And you know that, too.

We did really well this past year, really well – we stood for justice and compassion, for tolerance and for reason; we stood for beauty and for generosity. We stood for all the things that help us be more human and live better lives. We created holy ground here.

So what is next? What now? Several things are upcoming – beginning in October, we will have an intern minister. Marisol 'Maddie' Caballero will our intern, shared with Throop Church from October through June. She is a birthright UU, a Latina and is coming with her partner – we are excited. The People of Color group is partially sponsoring her – remember the barbecue today celebrating Juneteenth after the annual meeting [I helped cook the ribs and chicken yesterday and once again, Master Chef Silvera Grant has come through! I am really looking forward to our intern. We participate in preparing for the future of our faith by this – this is exciting.

We expect to launch the Jericho Road Project – this will expand our social justice activities by linking professional skills in the congregation with the needs of non-profit agencies in the San Gabriel Valley.

I will be on sabbatical in December and January exploring my prayer life and, hopefully, deepening my own spiritual practice. Hannah will return with a new UU, and we will explore a new round of worship themes.

As I said we are looking for people to help with a Green Fair and the Canvass; we want to hold an auction and need volunteers for that. We need someone to take over Dining for Dollars [all you spreadsheet lovers out there – this is the job for you] and, as always, teachers and ushers, coffee makers and office help – all a chance to keep neighborhood Church strong.

Five years – these have been among the best of my life in ministry. You are a wonderful congregation; it is an honor to stand here. It is humbling and inspiring, exciting and daunting – all the things that can come together for a full and good life.

Just as Rilke said:

Everything will come again into strength:  
the lands without boundaries, the waters flowing free;  
the trees growing tall, and the walls built low.  
And in the valleys, a people as diverse and  
enduring as the land.

And there'll be no churches where God  
is caged and lamented  
like a trapped and hurt animal.  
Doors will open to all who knock,  
and you'll find a sense of humility  
in all relationships, in you and in me.

There will be no fretting about what's beyond this life,  
no predicting the future or denigrating death,  
but only a deep longing for the gift of serving  
the earth, so our sense of belonging is also useful.

Amen