



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@uuneighborhood.org

By Love Held Up

Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson

February 14, 2010

Last week I said that my vision for our congregation is to be a beloved community, and suggested that a community, any community, is comprised of a community of memory and a community of hope. The community of memory is our history – both communal and individual – all those things we bring here to make this place what it is.

It is the memory that people have gathered together to celebrate the free church, to affirm liberty as central to faith, to claim that when we are free, we can become our best, and that those values have stood firm here for 125 years. A community of memory.

But also a community of hope – we look forward, and continue to try to incorporate those values of freedom and tolerance, of reason and justice, of peace and compassion into our lives, both our communal life and our individual lives. A community of hope – believing that together we can do good things. Be sure to come to one of our town meetings – next week and the following week, after the second service to talk out our future.

And I referred to the American philosopher, Josiah Royce, who introduced the term ‘the beloved community’ as an ideal built of the community of memory and the community of hope. Royce argued that loyalty was the virtue essential in building these communities – loyalty to ideals and beliefs and loyalty to the common good, loyalty to something beyond ones’ own self.

I am intrigued by this – loyalty. It is not something we talk about a lot. We are more apt, when considering virtues, to talk about courage or compassion or truthfulness. The four classic virtues are temperance or moderation, courage, prudence and justice. But loyalty? We don’t hear about it a lot – or at least we don’t hear much thinking about it. Often, it seems, loyalty refers more to blind faith, unthinking dedication to something.

But loyalty, unlike the other classic virtues, always points outside the self. We can all be courageous, or temperate or just or prudent in our selves, but loyalty suggests something beyond. We are loyal to something or to someone. Make sense?

I have in my files an old New Yorker article from the mid 90s called ‘The End of Loyalty’ by Henry Louis Gates, Jr and one of the figures in the article was Rosemary Woods – Nixon’s secretary who was central in the 18 minute tape gap of the Watergate affair. Gates was noting the number of member of Bill Clinton’s team who had abandoned Clinton’s ship – Dick Morris and George Stephanopolous and Gates wonders where their loyalty was, and holds up Rose Mary Woods as an exemplar. Today you might wonder about Joe Lieberman.

Loyalty does matter, right? We want our friends to be loyal to us, our partners to us, team members to be loyal. And I suppose we would want to think of ourselves as loyal.

So where are your loyalties? Ask yourself that this week: where are your loyalties? Write them down, in order of priority, and think about them. Are you loyal to Neighborhood Church, for example, where does the church fall on that list? Are you loyal to the values we celebrate, to the values and possibilities we affirm here? Are you loyal to the values of a free faith, of equality, justice and compassion – loyal to this community of memory and community of hope. Are you loyal to this country, this state, this community, to your friends and family, to what values and beliefs? Loyal. Where are your loyalties? To the Dodgers or Angels, Red Sox or Yankees, USC or UCLA? Be true to your school sang the Beach Boys.

James Luther Adams, one the more important UU thinkers in the late 20th Century ‘described the free church as a body of believers freely joined in a covenant of loyalty to the holy spirit of love, intentionally inclusive of dissent,

governed by its own members and fiercely independent from government control, with the reign of the spirit of love among members to be seen in their voluntary assumption of responsibility for the just character of their whole society.'

A covenant of loyalty – promises made and promises met. And ours here is Is what? To be a community, to support each other in our spiritual journeys, to care for each other, to speak the truth with love, to support the church with our time and talent and treasure? To be empowered to live lives of service, integrity and joy? Are we loyal to that?

Of course the difficulty with loyalty is that loyalties often compete – personal loyalties and loyalties to a cause. Loyalty is a critical part for gangs, for political parties, for all kinds of teams, businesses, etc. But are there higher loyalties? These are difficult questions.

Loyalty – what role does it play in creating this beloved community, Neighborhood Church? And, since today is Valentines Day, I want to think with you about the beloved part.

This day is clearly meant to honor romantic love, and there is just great wonder in that deep and abiding experience of romantic love. It makes the world go round, the knees weak, the heart sing. It breaks and makes our hearts. It is the stuff of literature and drama and movies, of visual art and music. Love. My love is like a red red rose. How do I love thee, let me count the ways. Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Or this [I love my Mom]

We all love others, have things we love, activities we love. I love my dogs. I love my wife and my girls. I love good bread. I love good friends and good conversation. I love Willy Mays. I love being out in the snow. I love the mountains and the deserts. I love new socks.

Or this:

Love should grow up like a wild iris in the fields,
unexpected, after a terrible storm, opening a purple
mouth to the rain, with not a thought to the future,
ignorant of the grass and the graveyard of leaves
around, forgetting its own beginning.

Love should grow like a wild iris
but does not.

Love more often is to be found in kitchens at the dinner hour,
tired out and hungry, lingers over tables in houses where
the walls record movements, while the cook is probably angry,
and the ingredients of the meal are budgeted, while
a child cries feed me now and her mother not quite
hysterical says over and over, wait just a bit, just a bit,
love should grow up in the fields like a wild iris
but never does
really startle anyone, was to be expected, was to be
predicted, is almost absurd, goes on from day to day, not quite
blindly, gets taken to the cleaners every fall, sings old
songs over and over, and falls on the same piece of rug that
never gets tacked down, gives up, wants to hide, is not
brave, knows too much, is not like an
iris growing wild but more like
staring into space
in the street
not quite sure
which door it was, annoyed about the sidewalk being

slippery, trying all the doors, thinking
if love wished the world to be well, it would be well.

Love should
grow up like a wild iris, but doesn't, it comes from
the midst of everything else, sees like the iris
of an eye, when the light is right,
feels in blindness and when there is nothing else is
tender, blinks, and opens
face up to the skies.
~ Susan Griffin ~

This is the kind of love that lasts, the love that grows up in the midst of life, in the day to day activities, the love that resides in memory and hope, that sustains us rather than just exciting us and is the kind of love in the beloved community. The love found in volunteering, in turning to the person next to you, in sharing grief when we mourn, joy when we celebrate. That kind of love – day by day, week by week on into the years.

Or this:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no; it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests, and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error, and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

This is the kind of love as part of the beloved community. The kind of love that remains when things change. Love, and loyalty are the ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken. This is the love we seek here.

Several of you noted that in my sermon last week I said that my vision for Neighborhood was to be the beloved community that I said I did not foresee any significant change. A couple of you said to me that change is inevitable, that if we don't change we die, we stagnate.

Well, yes and no. Things change and don't change. We often make an idol of change. I am the same and not the same after my sabbatical. This congregation is the same and not the same as it was five years ago. Our values hold steady – that ever fixed-mark – though we have many new members, though we have lost members, though we have new initiatives, still we are still a community dedicated to freedom and justice, reason and tolerance. The same and not the same.

We are loyal, I hope, to those things that remain – the community of memory – and change for those things we hope for – the community of hope. And we love what we stand for and who we might become.

We do have these ephemeral loves, the loves that are not mutual, that have more to do with desire than meaning. But the kind of love a beloved community suggests is the kind of love built on faithfulness and on fidelity – that lasts through time, has a past and imagines a future, that is mutual, that is a covenant.

My sabbatical re-affirmed this: I love this place and I love you, and I love serving in ministry here. My loyalty resides here and that is a good thing.

I want to end this sermon about love and loyalty with a poem – and I want to dedicate it to the loves that hold us up in the world, the loves, past and present, experienced and hoped for, the loves that have ended and those that remain. All of the loves, from little to big, loves born of desire and maintained through practice, the loves that make us foolish and bring us wisdom.

We all wish for a sense of belonging and meaning in our lives, to be connected to others and to the wider world. Love really does make the world go round.

Here is a poem by the Chinese poet Bei Dao for all those loves in our lives. It is called 'A Bouquet' It is my bouquet to you:

\

Between me and the world
You are a bay, a sail
The faithful ends of a rope
You are a fountain, a wind
A shrill childhood cry

Between me and the world
You are a picture frame, a window
A field covered with wild flowers
You are a breath, a bed
A night that keeps the stars company

Between me and the world
You are a calendar, a compass
A ray of light that slips through the gloom
You are a biographical sketch, a bookmark
A preface that comes at the end

Between me and the world
You are a gauze curtain, a mist
A lamp shining into my dreams
You are a bamboo flute, a song without words
A closed eyelid carved in stone

Between me and the world
You are a chasm, a pool
An abyss plunging down
You are a balustrade, a wall
A shield's eternal pattern.

Bei Dao