



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

No Hate Zone

Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson, Senior Minister
September 12, 2010

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

How many of you have a garden at home? What kinds of things are you growing? What is good now?

A garden is an old metaphor for lots of things – not a bad metaphor for a church. We are like a garden here – things grow, especially when we plant them and care for them. We have periods of quiet and periods of growth, and, I would like to think, what we grow here sustains us. William Ellery Channing – the great Unitarian minister of the early 1800s – once said the purpose of religion is to grow a soul.

All you kids – if you are not sure what a soul is – ask your parents. And adults, if you are not sure, ask a child.

Sometimes, though, things grow in a garden that are an absolute surprise – a huge mushroom grew overnight in our garden recently – it might have been a puffball, which is not dangerous, but then it might have been poisonous. But we couldn't be sure so we did not eat it. What was amazing, though, was how fast it grew, and how sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between something that is safe and something that is not.

Take religion for example – both good and healthy and poisonous and destructive. And how fast religious feelings can grow.

Hatred is another thing that can grow fast, especially when fueled by religion. – how quickly prejudice against Islam and Muslims has grown in our country. Friday, as you must know, was the end of Ramadan – that month in Islam when Muslims remember the revelation to Mohammed of the Koran – their sacred scripture. And we get the what's his name in Florida – and as much as many have wished that the media did not highlight him – he represents something going on in the country – this fear of the other. That some political leaders compared burning the Koran with the Islamic Cultural center planned for New York City, near ground zero, that over 52% of republicans believe that Obama is or might be a Muslim, that Switzerland outlaws the building of minarets and France outlaws wearing a headscarf at public schools. Why this fear of Islam?

And why all this hatred of the government, the doubting of global warming, the love of guns – all the violence of the current political season? Something is going on and it is not all good.

Heinrich Heine, the German poet of the 1800s said 'where they burn books, in the end they will burn people.' Prophetic words for his own country of Germany. Where do these people come from, and why such foolishness and idiocy? Burning books? Why are they so afraid?

Why this hatred and so much fear now? How did we get here and what can we do? I want to talk more about this as the year goes by – but not just today – this is the start of another new year to this church that celebrates freedom and tolerance, where service is our prayer, where the joys and sorrows of life are recognized, where reason and freedom and tolerance are our guides. Let's welcome another year together; let's celebrate this beloved community today. Let's turn to each other right now and say 'howdy – good to see you!'

So first things first – today I want to rededicate this ground, this place as a hate free zone. We did this originally in response to all of the bias regarding marriage equality, but we do it again today in response to all the prejudice about Islam and Muslims. No hate here!

In a minute we will do our rainmaking but first some comments. Last Wednesday marked the beginning of the High Holy Days of Judaism with Rosh Hashanah – the new year. These are known as the days of awe in Judaism, and it is the time of the year in which Jews are asked to focus on what is holy and sacred, to ask the question of what your life is for and how you are living, to ask what you believe and how you can let go of what holds you back. To focus on how to be

free of fear and hatred and bias, to find courage to live up to your ideals – the days of awe, days to recognize how blessed we are with this good earth and the possibilities for love and justice, days of awe, days to be humble and thankful.

Friday was the end of Ramadan, the end of the holiest time of the year of Muslims as they celebrated the revelation to Mohammed, also days of awe to remind us of the power and the beauty of words and speech, that we can communicate with each other and with the sacred, that we share a tradition with others who seek freedom and fairness and equality, that truth hath no confines.

And yesterday began the festival of Ganesh in India – Ganesh is the elephant headed god of wisdom and prosperity in Hinduism, one of the more popular Gods in the Hindu pantheon. These are celebrations of what is good in religion.

But what about the US? Is there something we celebrate other than back to school. Certainly not primary season – how dreary is that right now? Maybe the beginning of football season? Our yearly glorification of violent men in tight silk Capri pants, of too men too big – body and ego – who earn far too much in an uninteresting sport [you can tell I am not a football fan]!

Of course, though, yesterday was the 9th anniversary of the bombings on September 11th in New York and Washington, and the plane crash in Pennsylvania – that day when we lost our innocence, when we experienced what so much of the world has experienced. It was a beautiful day that September – we lived in the DC area – it was California weather. That night of September 11, 2001, we sat in a darkened sanctuary and listened to Henrik Gorecki's Symphony of Sorrowful Songs as fighter jets flew high above us. It is something to remember – how awful violence is; how fragile life can be, how brave so many are, how we can rise above tragedy.

There is a line in Melville's last book, Billy Budd, when Captain Vere is wondering about what motivated Claggert to hate Billy Budd and he says it was 'a mystery of iniquity.'

A mystery of iniquity, indeed. A mystery why men would fly planes into buildings to kill innocent people; a mystery why someone who reveres a book would want to burn another; a mystery why people of one faith would believe that only their faith is true and that others can die because of that; a mystery why fear and hatred grow so rapidly and easily like that puffball in my garden

So why all this hatred and why all this fear? Why all this violence and why all this arrogance? Why this mystery of iniquity?

Our task here, my good friends, is to try and understand that mystery and then to practice, even if we do not understand, practice the ways of peace and of love. The mystery of iniquity, the possibility of courage. Here we establish a no hate zone – a place where we honor each other, where we can be different, where no one has a lock on truth, and where we can seek a better life together.

That's our job this year –

So let's make some rain. We are still in a drought and we could always use more rain. But this year let's ask for something else than rain here in Southern California. I want to urge everyone here to conserve water at home – you know how to use less – just use less.

Our rain today is for tolerance to rain down on the world, or at least on our country, to put out the fires of prejudice and hatred, of division. And, if there are any books on fire, rain to put the fires out.