



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Is There an Angel in the House?

Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson, Senior Minister

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

A little later this Fall, on November 14th, we will celebrate 125 years of Neighborhood Church. For its first 35 years or so, it was a congregational congregation, and in the early 1920s, it merged with a newly organized Unitarian congregation. For the next approximately 50 years they remained married – Neighborhood Church was both Unitarian and Congregational. This is not so strange. There are still congregations in New England that are both.

We share, after all, a polity – that is the term for church governance - we both hold that congregations are autonomous. We decide for ourselves how we worship, who our ministers are, what actions we take in the world, how we spend our money and use our resources. We are both liberal religious movements, and though Congregationalists are explicitly Christian and Unitarians are not, we both believe in love instead of fear, in mercy more than judgment, in being open in belief and thought.

Over those 125 years of this congregation, there have been a number of ministers. Hannah and I stand in a long line of men and women who have served this on-going liberal religious community. The congregation has had its ups and downs, like all institutions, but it has been on a rather remarkable 40 year run now, coinciding with the arrival in 1968 of the Rev Brandoch Lovely as minister. He was serving the UU congregation in Hingham, Mass when he and Judith moved out here to begin their California life.

The church in Hingham is known as the Old Ship Church; it was built in 1691 and is the oldest church building continuously used for religious purposes in the US. The congregation Brandy came to here in 1968 met in the oldest church building in Pasadena, about to be torn down for the 710 freeway that never arrived. He was minister here for 25 years, a fifth of its history.

I entered the ministry in 1981 – this January will mark 30 years in the liberal ministry for me. My first settlement was in Costa Mesa, and when I started I had no idea what I was doing. I have been successful – after all I am a minister here. This congregation is one of the very healthiest in the whole denomination; we are currently the largest congregation in our district. I learned about ministry from Brandy. I learned some things by the seat of my pants, but it was Brandy who was my mentor and my teacher. If I have done well, it is largely because of Brandy. When I was in Costa Mesa, I often called Brandy and said ‘Now what do I do?’ and he would tell me. He was never wrong in his advice. When I was in Costa Mesa, I dreamed of being minister here – who wouldn’t want to be in Brandy’s church? He and Judith welcomed Kathe and me 25 years ago when we came out here to Orange County and when we returned six years ago to Pasadena.

He became a friend; I loved him. The world is emptier for his passing but much richer for his journey through it.

He was a master minister. Many of you knew him and many of you did not, but his presence looms here, in the very best way. For some of you, he was your minister, irreplaceable; for some of you not, but we are today what we are in significant measure because of Brandy Lovely.

We will celebrate his life this coming Saturday, and so I don’t want this sermon to be just about Brandy. He wouldn’t want that either. After all, he was from New England and had a reticence about him. He taught me that the central task of ministry was to serve congregations. He loved congregations more than any minister I have ever known, and this one in particular. I am lucky; we are lucky, many of you were lucky, to have Brandy in our lives.

We had lunch regularly and loved talking and arguing – about theology, about churches, about whether golf or baseball was a better metaphor for life. He was kind – sometimes blunt and his comments could cut, but he never intended to hurt. He cared for others – after all congregations are nothing more than collections of people seeking better lives, or, as he might say, more authentic lives.

In the last six months I have said good-bye to the two people who most formed me – my Mom in July, and now Brandy. Time marches on, through joy and sorrow and no one of us has much choice other than to face it, to face this day and then the next. The question is: now what?

The question is how we move forward. With courage, with fear, with hope, with love? With faith? With all of those things to be sure. We march forward, not alone, but with companions. We share our hopes, our fears, our sorrow, our joys. We lift each other up when we are down and we reach out our hand when we need a hand up.

We can't do it alone. Brandy knew that. He had Judith above all, but he had his family, too. He had friends – many of them here. He had his colleagues; he had this congregation. He had a whole cloud of witnesses to his living. God, I will miss him.

Our theological theme this month is compassion. It means to suffer with. That feeling with, as the word suggests, the feeling for, the being kind and generous to others, forgiving others their failures and understanding their struggles. Our second principle argues for justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

Compassion – it is central in all religious systems. Loving others, loving-kindness. It is, perhaps, most important in Buddhism – I first read about Buddhism in a little book *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, published in 1955 and still in print.

We live in a very troubled time. This political season is unlike any I can ever remember, not only because of its goofiness and that some candidates are so wholly – well, I don't know the word – but for the anger and the underlying hatred being expressed. People saying they will tell the president to go to hell, that they will kick ***. The intensity of the negative ads; the posing with guns; the desire to cut off help to anyone who needs it; the anti-social, selfish attitude; the demonizing of the other, the desire to turn our back on the disempowered; the blaming of victims for their status.

Could anyone here point to where compassion is being expressed in our political process? Who are the candidates who are the champions and agents of compassion? We are in trouble – not financially but morally and spiritually.

Jesus told his followers to turn the other cheek; he held up the Good Samaritan as a model and claimed that everyone is our neighbor; he said the whole of the law is summed up in 'Love God and your neighbor as yourself.' The Buddha placed compassion at the heart of his faith; giving alms – helping the poor – is one of the primary duties of a Muslim. Hindus have practiced non-violence for centuries.

It is 50 years since the Greensboro sit-in which helped jump start the Civil Rights movement; it was based in non-violence. Thich Nhat Hanh, maybe the foremost religious leader of our time, argues that the practice of mindfulness and compassion is what is exactly needed.

It is the practice. Compassion is not a feeling; it is not an attitude; it is a practice. A practice. How many of you here are compassionate enough? How many would like to be less compassionate? How many more compassionate?

Since ministers are on my mind, here is an example of compassion, a simple act. Late July I went back to Wisconsin for my Mom's memorial service. It was at my Mom's church. Led by her minister. It is a Lutheran Church, an ELCA, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It is the more liberal wing of the Lutheran Church. The other two are Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Synod. The Wisconsin synod – my brother goes there – makes the Missouri synod look like Unitarians. Because of the current minister, my Mom's church is likely to leave the ELCA because the national synod has affirmed that gay or lesbian ministers who are not celibate can serve churches.

Ah well. I was confirmed there; my Dad's and my Sister's memorial services were there; my brother was married there. My Dad was president; my Mom headed every woman's group in the church. She was a member for 50 years and was 99, the oldest member, when she died.

Several of the family spoke; I did and my brother did the eulogy. Then the minister shared what he called a reflection. Early in his remarks he said 'What is important here today is not Mickey Nelson or her life, but our faith in Jesus Christ.' And he went on from there. He knew I was a Unitarian Universalist, and a minister, and I couldn't but wonder what I was supposed to think, what comfort was being offered me in my grief, why I was being shown the door when it was my mother who had died. It was pretty hurtful and I was angry.

The service ended and I went out into the narthex, where I was promptly ignored, even by my Mom's minister – a colleague in ministry remember. I went outside to give Kathe and call and vent a bit, then went back inside.

One of my sister in law's brothers, he is gay and is a Quaker [he told me he knew what it was like to be an outsider in that family – they had asked him to do the flowers!] - came up to me and said 'Jim, would you like someone to be on your team?'

Would you like someone to be on your team? How wonderful was that? How compassionate was that? I was no longer alone in my sorrow, no longer isolated in my suffering. I needed an angel in that house and Clifford appeared.

Can you be more compassionate? It takes practice. Last week, the service here was remarkable. Hannah gave one of the best sermons I have ever heard and I was obviously proud of my daughter, Hannah. She said something that matters a lot for today, and it was repeated in the sermon. She said in her work, she is not trying to save or to solve but simply to help. This is a key to compassion – it is not intended to save nor to solve – though that may be the result – but rather to help. It is that simple.

So this is what I promise and I want all of you to try – be more compassionate and keep a running total. I will do this too. Yesterday I can count two acts of compassion/kindness. Every day do something with compassion and note it down somewhere; add it up at the end of the month. Be kind to people at work at home, be kind here. You can practice afterwards by saying something nice to someone else, you can sign up for the pastoral care team – you can give Mark an event for Dining for Dollars - he needs some more and he will feel very bad if he can't fill his roster. Come next Saturday for our clean up day – compassion for the earth is not out of bounds.

Let's go back to the meaning of compassion, which has to do with suffering. While being compassionate is similar to being kind, there is a deeper quality to compassion – it is about suffering. Passion in the old sense, not desire for something, but passion as is understood in the passion of Jesus. And here the story of the Buddha is instructive.

As you may know, he was born a prince, and his Father desired to keep him from all suffering. He had everything he wanted or desired. There was no sight or sound of death or illness or poverty. But one day, the story goes, the Buddha –Siddhartha – saw an aged man and then a sick person and then someone in poverty. And he asked why? Why was there suffering, and, what could be done about it?

To alleviate suffering became his life's work, and as much as any religious leader in history, the Buddha's life is marked by a deep compassion for the suffering in the world.

There are times in our lives when we need someone else on our team, when need a compassionate touch or thought or word. There are times when we need an angel in our house. There are times when a culture must become more compassionate, and this is one of those times. There are times when we all suffer – in lots of ways. My Mom was intently interested in other people; they became the center in a relationship. It gave others strength – it sure did me many a time. And Brandy too – from him I learned that honesty is good, that thinking matters, that clarity is wonderful, but that relationships above all give our lives value. He was an angel in my house.

He was wrong, though, about baseball being a better metaphor than golf for life. But he thought that because baseball is a team sport, and in that he was right. We need each other; we need someone to be on our team; we need to offer to be on other's teams. We need angels in our house.

Because, only together can we save the world.