

Being Sanctuary

A Sermon by
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia, MO
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About six months ago, we, the members of this intentionally welcoming faith community, voted after a thorough discernment process to become a *Sanctuary Congregation*. We knew at the time we didn't yet have enough information to know everything that our claimed designation might entail, but it was very clear from all we observed occurring in our country – so many things that seemed to be cruelly designed to make our immigrant friends and neighbors feel unwelcome – we knew that those things had to be answered by people of faith, people like us who proclaim as our very First Principle the dignity and worth of every person.

Our congregation's vote was decisive and it was both locally nationally newsworthy. And we celebrated But now six months have passed and not a lot has actually happened within these walls. No calls for sanctuary have yet come. But as a congregation, we are about to dive deeper into what BEING Sanctuary might mean for us. So, this is kind of a “heads up” sermon about some opportunities that may be on their way to us.

But before we do that, I want you to “meet” (through my sermonizer's poetic license) some of the people I have encountered through the work I have been immersed in these recent months.

And, in order to do that, I offer a bit of background of which you may or may not be aware: Rev. Molly and I and other members of UUCC are active in an interfaith group called Faith Voices of Columbia.

This group, which includes representatives of the Muslim community, the Jewish community, Baptists, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ - anyone whose faith inspires them to act on behalf of the most vulnerable in our society is welcome.

As part of Faith Voices, my volunteer hours have been primarily spent with the immigrant community, but others in our group are working on equally important things like voting rights and payday lending, economic justice and healthcare reform. As you know, there is, sadly, so very, very, very much to do.

It is through this work, that I have encountered some truly extraordinary people:

The first I want to tell you about young mom who lives here in Columbia – she has 2 children, now aged 9 and 4. If you encountered her at Hy-Vee or Walgreens she would be unremarkable to you ... EXCEPT if you glanced down at her sandaled left foot because there, on her ankle you would see a large black bracelet with a GPS unit the size of our smart phones. This “shackle” is her 24/7 companion; she is forbidden from removing it for any period of time.

Her years have already held more difficulty than we can imagine. As a young wife, living in Central America, she experienced abuse at the hand of her husband. Needing to escape his anger, she fled to her parents’ home with her kids. They welcomed their daughter but were unable to provide financial support for her and the children because of their own health issues. It quickly became evident that it was on this young woman’s shoulders to provide not only for herself and her children, but also for her parents.

She industriously began a small business, like many businesses in that area. She started a tiny little store where she sold *ropa*

americana (used and discarded American clothes) - and she made a go of it!

She generated adequate income, anyway, to begin caring for her loved ones. But that did not last long because she was soon faced with yet another horrible decision point. In the face of so much poverty and corruption in her region, local gangs had risen in power and one particularly brutal gang began to demand protection money from her. They let her know that if she refused to pay their exorbitant sums each month, they would destroy her business and bring harm to her family.

There was really no choice..... if she tried to pay them off, there would be no money left to sustain her loved ones; and if she refused, there would be no business at all and possibly grave danger to everyone she cared about.

It was then that she, with great reluctance, determined she had no alternative but to leave her home country and venture to the United States to try to find a way to make a living. What else could she do?

She got connected with a person who promised to bring her to the U.S. - but because the huge risks and the huge costs, she realized that she could only bring her younger child with her. She had to leave her daughter in the care of her parents, hoping that when she got here, she could find stability and send for her as soon as possible.

The person who agreed to bring her and her son (the coyote) required her to scrape together a payment of \$5400, presumably to cover both the transportation and the bribes to the authorities along the way. She assumed bribes were paid because the three week bus trip was made without incident. However, those were three very difficult weeks with little food and little water and, of course,

extreme physical discomfort. Remember, that she had a confused and scared three year old in tow as she passed those many long days in that crowded bus.

And so, they finally arrived at the border wall separating Mexico and the state of Arizona. She had been told that if she could scale this wall and wait on the other side, border agents would at some point arrive and she could plead her case for asylum. As she stood at the base of that wall, watching as her traveling companions were scampering over, she was hesitant and fearful. Who knew what awaited her on the other side? What would happen if she and her young son were separated? When – if ever - would she be able to see her daughter again?

Finally, she broke away from those terrifying thoughts and with the help of some other travelers, she and her little one were able to climb over, and then she did just as she planned. She did not run. She sat down right there and waited. It wasn't long before the Border Patrol did come along. They took her and her little boy (and the others they had captured) to a warehouse-like room in large detention center.

They named that room “The Ice Box” because this was December and there was no heat and few blankets. Like the previous three weeks, they had little food and water to sustain them. After four days of this, she was finally interviewed and was given a chance to plead her case for asylum.

She was told then that they would allow her to apply if she could identify a relative in the U.S. who would take her in while the application was being reviewed, and if that relative could provide the finances to pay not only her transportation to them but also a \$600 Asylum Application fee. (I have since researched this just a bit

and there isn't supposed to be a filing fee for asylum cases, but this is what she told us was required of her.)

Fortunately, she does have a cousin here in Columbia and that cousin was able to come up with that money. She and her son rode the bus from Arizona to Missouri. She got connected to an immigration attorney here, and she began her legal journey as an asylum seeker.

That was about nine months ago. She has technically exhausted the six month window but her asylum status has not yet been decided. She has been placed on what they euphemistically call "humanitarian parole" where she wears that horrible shackle, and is constantly monitored. Lacking the right documents, there is no legitimate way for her to earn any money. She is constantly "on call" if the St. Louis office determines they need to see her. This occurs at least monthly, but sometimes more frequently, and members of our Faith Voices group go with her and provide transportation because, of course, she has no car.

Think about what an excruciatingly high level of vulnerability that has become the daily standard for her! She has done EVERYTHING the authorities have asked of her and yet each day, and especially each check-in, she never knows if they might decide on that day that her time is up and she must be deported. She is in a cruel limbo in which she has no power whatsoever. Her attorney is working hard on her behalf but there is no guarantee of any sort -.and so she waits. She walks through her days with that visible evidence on her ankle that she is being treated as if she were a criminal when all she actually is, is a loving mother and daughter, a very brave and resourceful one, trying desperately to attain some degree of financial and physical safety for those she loves the most in the world. What would YOU do if these were YOUR circumstances?

Clearly, my heart tells me this woman is our neighbor - and in need of our compassion and care.

And through people like her, we have met others. One such meeting occurred up in a rural town north of here where I had the privilege to sit down with a small handful of immigrant persons (some documented and some not) who told me about the struggles they face. They offered many ideas of how U.S. citizen-allies might be helpful with making their lives just a little less frightening and a little less painful.

They told me, for instance, that many who have migrated to this country are quite unclear on the difference between ICE agents, police, sheriffs, security guards, military persons, etc. Anyone in a uniform is a source of fear for them, and very much to be avoided. Therefore, they do not ask for help if they are victims of crime. Unreported domestic violence among these folks has gone way up, as one example of this.

They told me too about something that is occurring in other places around this state. Knowing the confusion about personal rights and the powers of law enforcement, some true criminals have acquired uniforms and they go to the homes of undocumented people, pounding on the door and claiming to be ICE agents. When the terrified family opens up, they burst in, steal their possessions, and depart as quickly as they arrived, leaving these already vulnerable and impoverished people in an even worse state - and totally without recourse.

I heard many such stories that evening. They tumbled out at such a fast pace that my small amount of Spanish comprehension had no chance, but even the interpreter had trouble keeping up.

After our evening was ended, and we stood on the sidewalk in the growing darkness, saying our goodbyes, and one woman took my hands, and hugged me in a deep and sincere embrace. She said quietly in my ear, “Just this morning, I was praying. I was asking God, *WHO will care about what is happening to us?* And then you came and you listened. **Thank you** for caring.”

These people, too, are our neighbors.

They don’t yet need the shelter of the building that our sanctuary vote represents, but there are many other ways in which we can stand in solidarity, shoulder to shoulder, with folks like them.

I am grateful to be part of UUCC’s newly formed Sanctuary Team here at church. Allie Gassman and I are co-chairs and it includes Anna Lingo, Joe McDonald, Ruth Milledge, Dave Gibbons, Janice Smith and Barbara Boshard. We are working on ways outside this building that we as a congregation might carry the spirit of our Sanctuary vote to others in need, before the drastic step of taking physical shelter here is needed. We are working on how to make our offers of help most effective and, I promise, this Sanctuary Team will keep you posted as there will be upcoming opportunities to join us in our efforts, should you feel led to do so.

I trust you can tell, that this work has been extremely moving for me. Those nearest me can attest that it has, in fact, been life changing.

And here’s what’s funny about taking up causes like this. During the time our asylum-seeking friend and her little boy were scaling that wall, I had no idea their plight would take such a prominent place in my heart.

Back then, post-election, I was frustrated and fearful, even somewhat depressed - like the dear friend Junot Diaz wrote to in our reading¹ (although I humbly acknowledge that my fears were from a far less directly-impacted vantage point than those of his students and of his dear correspondent).

What has happened, what IS happening, since the election has called out for a response from my soul far greater than any response than I had yet undertaken in my long and varied life.

Like many of you, I have long been an activist of sorts, caring passionately about a variety of causes and so I have donated money, marched in some parades, I've written tons of letters and made numerous phone and social media posts. But I guess prior to all this, I would have fallen more into the category of a "behind the scenes" activist.

I have just never been a *revolutionary* or *radical* person of any sort. I have always been, for as long as I can remember, much more a "rule-follower." People like me - rule-followers - are simply not typically radical, "out front" risk-taking sorts of people.

That is probably why I chose the quiet intimacy of pastoral care to specialize in my ministry, because it permitted me to do the vast majority of my serving in the safe, gentle confines of a quiet room, or a closed-door office, or next to a hospital bed.

¹ The reading was excerpted from the article "Under President Trump, Radical Hope is Our Best Weapon" by Junot Diaz, published in The New Yorker shortly after the November 2016 election. His article can be found online at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/under-president-trump-radical-hope-is-our-best-weapon>.

So I know this about myself. I am a peaceful, mostly gentle, if sometimes a bit excessively-effusive person who is not comfortable being a “front line” sort of person.

BUT (perhaps like many of you) throughout my entire life, I never imagined that these times would be what they are, that our country would again be facing the widespread and visible unabashed discrimination and violence that is going on today. I see these things as true threats to the survival of the democratic processes we as a country claim to love.

What I know as I stand here this morning, is that it is all well and good and, in fact, important and valuable, to be a quiet and compassionate person in my morning meditations and in my 1:1 meetings with people who seek a spiritual conversation, but it is an increasingly undeniable truth that I cannot claim this beautiful-if-imperfect Unitarian Universalist faith of ours, if I am unwilling to take some kind of overt and observable action. I am more and more convicted that when I read marchers’ signs saying: WHITE SILENCE IS VIOLENCE, they are talking to me .

Not everyone, I know, is gifted with the fluency and quick logic of people like our own dear minister. I have profound respect and gratitude that she and several others in this community appear to easily access the right words and the most precise rejoinder when faced with injustice and when naming oppressions. We cannot all possess those skills – nor do we need to!

You may recall the words to our oft-sung hymn, “Love Will Guide Us” where the lyricist tells us that even if you cannot sing like the angels or if you cannot speak before thousands - everyone is gifted with something they can bring to this urgently-needed justice-making table. There is a role for everyone, wherever we may plot ourselves on that “rule-follower → risk taker” spectrum. And, what we know

is that if we don't show up with all the unique and varied gifts that we each have to offer, justice will not spontaneously occur on its own.

So here we are today. Many of us are enraged and heart-shattered every single day as we hear the latest news of our fragile world's suffering and all the onslaughts brought by wars, climate change, and corporate greed. And we wonder, what can I do? How can *I* change all that is going on today?

To answer that nagging question, I wonder if you would please open your hymnals to the readings in the back? Turn, if you will, to #457 and I'd love it if we could just read and listen to these words together:

*I am only one but still I am one.
I cannot do everything but still I can do something.
And because I cannot do everything,
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.*

Yes! Yes! Yes!

Now, maybe you are already deeply engaged in "the something that you can do." I hope so! But in case not, I want you to know that there is definitely a seat at the justice-making table with your name on it, awaiting your "something" whatever it may be.

And, while we are discerning and then diving into whatever we each discover is our something, as the reading exhorts, we must retain our hope, our *radical* hope, in fact.

As Junot Diaz indicates and as so many others tell us, this sort of radical hope is not blind optimism based on some perceived

guarantee that somehow someday everything will just miraculously work out fine -- but it is based on the belief that we can and must do our own part to work toward a future that does compassionately address the cares and needs of the most vulnerable among us and does envision our world as it is described in our Sixth Principle – our goal is a world community that is a place of genuine peace, liberty and justice for all!

It has been said, *Hope is not the same as joy that things are going well – or even a willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather, the ability to work for something just because it is good.*

May we each seek out the good work that is ours to do, and may our faith and our radical hope give us the strength to carry that load by declaring that whatever we have to offer is not just adequate and it is, in fact, what is needed and that, by living into that work, we are living into the sort of future that we wish to create.

May it be so. Amen.