

“Immigration and Sanctuary”
A Sermon by the Rev. Angela Herrera
First Unitarian Church
June 18, 2017

Sanctuary.

“Sanctuarium.” From the Latin “Sanctus,” sacred, divine, holy, or just; and “arium” a container. A sanctuary is a place that holds what is holy, sacred, divine, or just.

What is holy or sacred to Unitarian Universalists? More sacred than any symbol, object, or book? Love. Not the greeting card kind. A deeper kind. Love that honors our interconnectedness and interdependence—the very foundations of being. Love that shapes the meaning we make of our existence, through our manner of being in this world. All we have in the end is the love we leave behind.

Sanctus. Sacred, divine, holy, just. It is beautiful that justice is right there with the holy and the sacred in Latin, as though they are of a piece.

It reminds me of something Jesus says in the Christian scriptures. He says watch out for people who interpret the world falsely in relation to religion. He calls them false prophets. Watch out for false prophets. And he tells listeners how to identify them. He says, “You will know them by their fruits.”¹

If we look at everything else Jesus says, we can guess what he meant by fruits. He goes on and on about helping the poor, the afflicted, the stranger. He models it and talks about it. He crosses social boundaries and even goes out of his own comfort zone to do it. But –and I’ve said this before—he says nothing—*not one thing*— about abortion or gays.

Other religions also connect the divine with justice and mercy. The Qur'an tells us that we should “serve God...and do good to... those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer that you meet, and those who have nothing.”²

In the Hebrew scriptures it is written: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.”³

¹ Matthew 7:15-16

² Verse 4:36

³ Hebrews 13:1-3

And compassion and non-judgment are core values of Buddhism.

Sanctuary: where we hold up what is divine, holy, sacred, and just.

The word sanctuary has a connotation of inviolability, too, which is why we speak of sanctuaries also as safe places, such as a wildlife sanctuary, where wild animals are safe from human harm. Or political sanctuary, which is when a country agrees to take in a foreigner, protecting the person from arrest or persecution.

There is a long tradition of offering sanctuary—meaning protection from unjust arrest—in churches, dating back to ancient Egyptians, Hebrews, and Greeks... and beyond.

In the 1980's, some churches took up this mantle in the United States, providing asylum in what came to be known as the Sanctuary Movement.

It all started in Tucson, Arizona, when a Presbyterian minister named John Fife was asked to visit a local hospital to provide some pastoral care.⁴ Over a dozen people had just arrived, picked up by Border Patrol in the Sonoran desert with severe dehydration and heat stroke. And the staff had noticed that they weren't just sick; they were traumatized.

When Fife got there, the people told him heartrending stories about violence and persecution their homelands, in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. The political situation had become so dangerous there that the people had decided to leave, to become migrants, crossing international borders in search of safety.

What would it take for you leave your home, job, friends, church, extended family, culture, and everything familiar to you, and flee to an uncertain, unknown future in a foreign country, with no guarantee of safety or shelter? It would have to be a pretty bad. Bad enough that you had to decide whether to become a victim of it, or gather up your courage and leave.

In Mexico, those migrants had encountered smugglers who promised to bring them across the US border. They crossed through mountainous terrain, walking all through the night. And then... they found themselves in the desert. As the sun rose, the temperature reached 115 degrees. There was very little shade—only a few scrubby bushes. There were no towns. Just sun. Sand. Scrub. Cactus.

The migrants told Fife that they were only half of their original group. Another dozen had died as they were walking on that first day.

Fife decided to help the group apply for political asylum. President Carter had signed the Refugee Act of 1980 declaring that asylum was for anyone with a legitimate fear of persecution or violence in their home country, whether due to

⁴ Details of this story from <http://99percentinvisible.org/episode/church-sanctuary-part-1/>

their race, ethnicity, political, religious, or social group. Anyone who needed it could apply, and asylum was supposed to be granted on humanitarian, not political, grounds. So the case seemed clear, and Fife expected the process to be straightforward.

But what he found was that while the US approved asylum requests for people from communist countries, it often denied requests from Central Americans, sometimes shipping people back to the violence within days of their hearing.

It wasn't hard to see that political motivations were at work. Not only did the US have a point to make in accepting asylum seekers from communist countries, it had a point to *avoid* in denying asylum seekers from Central America. The truth was, the US was actively supporting the leaders of the violent regimes there. And to accept asylum seekers would mean acknowledging that the US was supporting human rights violations.

At its height, about 500 churches got involved, including some Unitarian Universalist congregations. At one point, the government sent two undercover operatives into John Fife's church.

Fife recalls that the operatives kind of stood out from the beginning—they were rougher than most church volunteers, and seemed to have an awful lot of experience on the border. It turned out they were former *coyotes*, human smugglers whom our government had arrested, then cut a deal with. If they'd wear a wire and help get the leaders of the Sanctuary movement arrested, the government would let the *coyotes* go free.

On the morning of his arrest, Fife was asleep when he heard loud banging on his door. He opened it. There stood two uniformed immigration officials. His first thought, he says, was the group of migrants inside his church just across the street. So... he made the agents coffee. And read their indictment line for line. And stalled. And stalled.

Eventually, 63 migrants were arrested and 16 leaders indicted.

Now, at first the leaders were looking forward to their day in court. They were acting on clear religious teachings to care for the stranger, the wayfarer, the person facing unjust persecution. Equally importantly, the way they saw it, they weren't the law breakers—the government was. For ignoring the Refugee Act. The trial would be a chance to shine a big huge light on that.

But they suffered a major setback when the federal judge in charge made the decision to bar any discussion of several topics. The topics were: the United States refugee law, international refugee law, conditions in El Salvador, conditions in Guatemala, or religious faith.

Fife's lawyer drew an analogy to a man whose car breaks down on the road on a winter night when it is forty degrees below zero, and walks to the only house

around, and finds it locked, and breaks in to get warm. And then is charged with breaking and entering, with none of that story allowed in court. Without the context, Fife and his group were sure to lose.

Sure enough, they were found guilty. Fife went home and organized his congregation to deal with his imprisonment.

And then finally, to everyone's surprise and possibly due to public pressure, that same judge gave them only five years probation and no jail time.

Fife went right back to providing sanctuary again... just as he told the judge he would.

At that point, the government decided to move on. To Albuquerque, as it turns out, arresting a man and a woman here. This time a jury found them not guilty. Between those two outcomes, the Sanctuary movement retained its strength and continued for some time.

Since then, there have been many changes in the world. But one thing that has not changed is the reality of people migrating to the United States. I'm going to share a lot of information with you in the second half of this sermon. I'll make the text available on the church website this week if you'd like to see my sources, which I'll list in the footnotes.

According to the Center for American Progress in Washington DC, approximately 43.3 million foreign-born people live in the United States. 20.7 million of those are naturalized U.S. citizens. 13.1 million are lawful permanent residents, 1.7 million hold temporary visas. And 11.1 million are unauthorized migrants.

A little over a quarter of foreign born residents are from Mexico. Others come from China, India, the Phillipines, and other countries around the world.

Among those who are undocumented, in 2014 almost half—42%-- entered the country with permission. Then they overstayed their visas. Visa overstays exceeded unauthorized border crossings every year from 2007-2014. That's not what we hear about in the news, is it?

There are many reasons people choose to come to the US. Some come for school or employment, some to be with family, others—like those who took sanctuary in the 1980's-- come because they have made a courageous choice to survive.

Within the mix of reasons, US policy and practices continue to play a behind the scenes role in migration, too. For example, 1.5 million small farmers were driven out of work between 1993 and 2005 after US promotion of the North American Free Trade Agreement.⁵

⁵ <http://www.interfaithimmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/IIC-Root-Causes-2017.pdf>

Meanwhile, our system for authorized immigration is inadequate, to say the least.

We need people to fill jobs, and there are people who want and need those jobs, but there aren't enough visas available to meet the demand. And for unskilled workers who have no family members in the US, there is virtually no chance to come with proper documentation.

Part of the problem is that US law says that people from any one country cannot exceed 7 percent of our total immigration--- regardless of the US's relationship with that country.⁶ So Mexico and Liechtenstein face the same limit, even though Mexico is an economic partner located right next door to us and is 3400 times bigger, population wise, than Liechtenstein.

We also don't really have an appropriate infrastructure support the process we do have in place. As a result, the system is ridiculously slow.

Becoming a citizen currently takes from 6-28 years... or longer. If you have a visa that expires while you are waiting, and you don't leave the country immediately, you may be arrested and deported.

When my husband was an exchange student, he ran into this. He applied to stay a second year. While he was waiting to hear back, the expiration date on his visa drew near, and he did fly back to Colombia, only to learn a few weeks later that his request had been approved. Too late. Luckily he had the means to try again and to return. (Lucky for me! Happy Father's Day, Carlos)

There have been children who applied for citizenship as minors, but had to wait so long that they turned 18 before the matter was resolved, which means they had to start all over again at the back of a different line, with even longer wait times, putting them at risk for arrest and deportation.

There are people whose parents brought them to the US as young children, who have no memory of ever living anywhere else and may not even have known their own immigration status until they became old enough to apply for college or a job. Until DACA, which stands for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, there was no hope for them. I'm so glad the President has decided to keep that program.

Being in the US without authorization was a civil, not a criminal issue. But you wouldn't know that from our government's response.

The government spends more on immigration enforcement than all other federal criminal law enforcement agencies combined.⁷ It is nearly an enforcement-only

⁶ <https://www.uscis.gov/tools/glossary/country-limit>

⁷ This and the next several pieces of data are from the Center for American Progress: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2017/04/20/430736/facts-immigration-today-2017-edition/>

approach, and, you guys, the enforcement is violent. It is duplicitous—it's based on misleading people. And it is especially harmful to children and families.

Immigration enforcement in the US is characterized by an armed, militarized approach. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents (known as ICE for short) bang on doors and barge into homes at four or five in the morning, while it's still dark and people—parents and children—are sleeping in their beds.

Agents wear uniforms that say "Police"... but they are not police. They hold papers in their hands that say "warrant," but they are rarely the judicial warrants required in order to barge into someone's house or workplace or school. They aren't signed by a judge. Instead, they are a sleight of hand. They are relatively powerless administrative warrants.

But as you can imagine, the whole spectacle—the timing, the banging, the uniforms, the paper that says "warrant" on it—is so thoroughly intimidating that people comply. They don't know about, or they are too frightened to exercise, their right to close the door and get a lawyer. So they are arrested and imprisoned in private prisons, where for-profit companies make money off of the whole ruse. Because it's a civil offense and not a criminal one, immigrants aren't provided with a lawyer. If they can't afford one, or if they can't find one who'll travel to a remotely located detention center, they have almost no chance of avoiding deportation.

When night falls in the US, people are hunted, writes the journalist Maria Hinojosa.

ICE also conducts daytime raids, and in recent years some real police have begun cooperating with ICE, with the result that something like expired license plate tags can lead to deportation.

Several years ago, a group from First Unitarian and I visited a shelter for deported persons in Nogales, Mexico. What I remember most from that trip is how many people are dropped across the border with only the clothing on their backs—sometimes they don't even have their ID, money, or wallet. They may not have had a chance to tell their loved ones in the US what happened to them—they simply disappeared when ICE picked them up.

Deportations have a devastating impact on families. Sometimes children—who may themselves be citizens—are forced into foster care when their parents are taken. Others find themselves suddenly in single-parent households that struggle financially. In particular, when a father is deported, family income can drop by about 73 percent. Breaking up families and thrusting women and children into poverty. This is good for national security?

Using these tactics and others, the Obama administration deported more than 2.7 million immigrants, over 900 people per day. A record number.

During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump said even that was not enough and he vowed to increase it. He made harsh, sometimes outwardly racist, comments

about immigrants.⁸ He vowed to repeal the few changes Obama had put in place, such as instructing ICE to focus on undocumented people with criminal records.

Trump vowed to make it a crime, and not a civil offense, to be in the US without permission. Using that logic, many immigrants would be forced to serve prison sentences before being deported.

After the election, fear rippled through immigrant communities. Some people refused to leave their homes. People stopped showing up at classes, at court dates, even at hospitals.

In response to all of this, a New Sanctuary Movement had already begun a few years ago. And this weekend, the Interfaith Immigration Coalition, a national group that includes our denomination, is conducting a Father's Day campaign with the hashtag "Don't deport my dad." We are taking part in that by focusing on immigration today.

So. What's a church to do? Here are some steps we are taking, and some things individuals can do.

First, it is important for as many people as possible to know what the law really is, and to insist that our government and its agents follow the law. I told you about those administrative vs judicial warrants. That's one example.

This spring, our Board of Directors issued a statement supporting staff and volunteers here in exercising our legal rights to decline to comply with ICE. In other words, we have some rights, and the Board supports us in using them. The Board asked me to ensure we held a couple of trainings, and I did that in April.

So far, there are no reports of ICE agents entering or attempting to enter a church. That's because churches—along with hospitals and public rallies— are considered "sensitive locations," which is a way of saying it would look terrible and make people mad if ICE barged into them. However, ICE agents have been spotted doing surveillance on at least one church.⁹ And protection of sensitive locations is not law—it's just a preference that presidents have agreed to. So far. That could change.

To prepare ourselves for that possibility, our Board wanted to make sure we knew our rights.

The Board also formed a task force to investigate what First Unitarian needed to know about providing sanctuary, and how we could be prepared in case help was urgently needed.

⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/>

⁹ Info from a personal interview with ACLU attorney Kristin Love. April 12, 2017

The task force did hours of research, hosted meetings and learning sessions, gathered names of interested volunteers, and attended events in the wider community. In the process, they learned about the concept of “Expanded Sanctuary.”

First Unitarian is an “Expanded Sanctuary” congregation.

That means we are actively supporting a Sanctuary congregation in town, the Friends Meeting House—the Board issued a statement about that too and many UUs have volunteered in person—and we have programs that serve all, including outreach programs and these Sunday services, regardless of whether a person is documented.

Now, we do not ask about anyone’s immigration status—I hope you won’t either—and we do not keep any records about such things. That way, nothing we have could be used against the people in this community.

In order to protect the people we are already serving, we’ve elected not to provide sanctuary in the sense of having someone live inside our church. At least, not for now. Hosting someone on a long term basis would definitely attract the attention of ICE agents... and we’ve realized how much that would undermine the safety of any undocumented people who may participate in our Sunday services, ESL, After school tutoring, Family Promise, Food Pantry, and other programs.

Next, we are establishing a citizenship scholarship fund. Although not all people have access to the path to citizenship, when someone does, it makes a huge difference in their life and the lives of their family members. When one adult in a family becomes a citizen, it not only creates security for that person, it also opens a pathway for them to apply for legal status for any spouses, children, and other relatives.

But becoming a citizen is expensive. There are fees, time off work and childcare needed to meet with officials. Sometimes an immigration lawyer has to be hired. And then, at the end, there is a \$725 fee just to formally apply. That’s a lot of money. So today we are launching a scholarship fund to cover that for students of our ESL program. Our goal is to raise \$2175 to help pay for 3 application fees. We still had a little bit of money left over from a past immigration project, so another fee has already been funded!

There is a table in the social hall where, if you’d like to help a neighbor in this way, you can make a donation by cash, check, or credit card.

At that same table, you can also sign up to volunteer with the Faith Coalition for Immigrant Justice, doing things like:

- Accompanying people to court discourage ICE from deporting them
- Showing up as a protester or observer at an immigration raid, so the government knows that any sneaky tactics or aggression is being witnessed and so that

-We may be able to slow ICE down and make sure attorneys are present to talk with people.

-And you can volunteer to support the Friends Meeting House in its role as a sanctuary congregation

And you can learn how to donate money to the Faith Coalition for Immigrant Justice, which coordinates it all.

Remember when I mentioned that a man was arrested in Albuquerque for providing sanctuary in the 1980's? Well, he was a pastor and his son is now the director of the New Mexico Faith Coalition for Immigrant Justice. Let's champion their work for the wayfarer, for the neighbor, for the fathers and mothers, for Love.