

“A Day in the Desert”

a sermon by Dan Lillie and Michelle Bloodworth
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at the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque

Hearing the Call

Back in June, an email came across my inbox. It was an invitation to “witness for justice and compassion in the desert” by attending an action called Faith Floods the Desert. I glanced at my calendar, and saw that I was in charge of the Sunday services on the first weekend in August, when the action was scheduled for.

“Oh well,” I thought, and dismissed it.

Except, the idea wouldn’t go away.

So I met with Angela, and told her that I was considering going. We thought through some possibilities together, and were ultimately able to come up with a plan that would free me from my responsibilities on that Sunday. With that barrier removed, I went about rescheduling all of my other commitments. It took a little shuffling, but I was able to make it happen.

Something I Can’t Not Do

Now, I can’t say exactly why this invitation, this calling, felt so important. I’ve been reflecting on it in the context of this month’s theme of vocation, about which Parker Palmer writes, “Vocation at it’s deepest level is... something that I can’t not do, for reasons I’m unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling.”¹

It is this idea of vocation as *something I can’t not do* that resonates with me. Last week, Angela explored how the paid work we do fits into our ideas of identity and vocation. But this particular

¹ Palmer, Parker. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. Jossey-Bass, 1999.

vocation, this call to action in the desert, would be a call *away* from my paid work, not toward it. And yet, it felt like something that I couldn't *not* do.

And so, I answered the call for Faith Floods the Desert.

Context for Faith Floods the Desert

Now, a word on how the Faith Floods the Desert action came to be: Up until earlier this year, No More Deaths, a humanitarian aid organization in Arizona, was generally allowed to go about their work unobstructed by the law enforcement agencies with jurisdiction along the U.S.-Mexico border. But in February, a No More Deaths volunteer was charged with three felony counts for providing “food, water, beds and clean clothes” to two individuals in need. Can you believe these are federal felonies? Who decided we need a law against providing food, water, beds, and clean clothes?

And shortly after this, eight more No More Deaths volunteers were charged with federal misdemeanors for “littering”; the “litter” they allegedly left in the desert was life-saving water and food.

In light of this increased hostility, the Faith Floods the Desert action was organized as a call to bear witness to these injustices;

It was a call to denounce both the mistreatment of migrants and the criminalization of providing humanitarian aid;

And it was a call to act, to deliver life-saving water to the deadly desert.

And so, approximately 60 clergy, faith leaders, and lay leaders showed up to the little town of Ajo, Arizona. We spent all day Saturday learning about the work of No More Deaths, the increasing hostility of law enforcement, and got the details of the action plan for the next day, which would be our day in the desert.

No More Deaths were incredibly thoughtful organizers of this event. They organized local volunteers to prepare and serve our meals. They provided places to stay, or helped us locate accommodations.

They provided a packing list telling us what to bring. The metal fine-toothed comb struck both Michelle and I as oddly specific. We came to learn that the comb is for removing “jumping cactus” from our shoes and clothing.

Most importantly, though, and most impressive is that No More Deaths operates from a place of relationality. They recognize the autonomy of the migrants they meet. Before they do anything, the volunteers ask for permission to provide aid. Then, in the course of receiving aid, if the migrants choose to share, the volunteers listen to the stories and experiences of these people who are trying to cross the desert.

And now, I'd like us to hear Michelle talk about her experience in the Desert.

Michelle's Experience

I have been privileged with many opportunities and choices in my life. Two important ones have been becoming a community psychologist and a becoming a UU. I realize I am lucky that both my vocation and my faith provide principles to guide my work and life. Many of you are familiar with our UU principles but allow me to share a few of community psychology's principles. They include social justice, sharing power, recognizing the ripple effects of our actions, and that multiple levels of analysis are important for our understanding. I mention these principles because like our UU principles, they have become part of who I am and how I engage in the world – and they are important to how I came to journey to the borderlands with Dan.

Listening to one of the founders of my field speak at a conference a few years ago, she left an impression when she said, "If we truly follow community psychology's principles in our work, we shouldn't be surprised if we end up being arrested at some point." She was pointing to the reality that following our principles can place us at odds with those in power and being arrested is one the possible consequences.

When I received an email from the UU College of Social Justice with an invitation to participate in this action in the desert and it cautioned that participants could face arrest - it caught my attention. The idea of participating was certainly intriguing - and scary.

When an opportunity feels scary to me, I try to pay attention. I have found that when I have turned toward opportunities that took me out of my comfort zone and raised my anxiety, I have often had some of the richest and most impactful experiences of my life – I am not yet sure if bungee jumping from a cliff in New Zealand with my teenaged son should be included as such an experience. Turning toward what scares us is not always easy, though, so in this case, I procrastinated. Yet, like Dan, I

continued to be pulled toward saying, “Yes” to this opportunity to be a witness and take action in solidarity with the humanitarian aid workers in Arizona. In the end, I informed my family of my decision and told Dan I would join him on the journey.

On Sunday, the day we were to travel into the desert, I awoke before 5am, after a somewhat fitful night’s sleep, dressed, and gathered my gear. While I was prepared with all the necessary training, clothing and water, I felt uneasy not knowing what we would face with respect to confrontations with law enforcement and the physical elements. Temperatures were expected to reach 116 degrees that day and I just didn’t know how my body would handle carrying gallons of water into the desert in that kind of heat.

During the hour long drive to our destination, some in my van carried on conversations, while others looked out the windows at the beautiful but harsh landscape, contemplating what lay before us. With sharpies, we wrote messages of hope and peace on our water jugs and we sang.

As we got closer to our destination, we encountered National Park Service agents, who had been alerted to our planned action and were expecting us. They didn’t look like the rangers I was familiar with from vacationing at Yosemite. They were well armed law enforcement. The agents asked to see the permits each of us were required to obtain online prior to the weekend’s action. They courteously reviewed and recorded each of our identifying information, then said we could continue on our way. We were later told that the agents’ courteous manner was quite different from the hostility and intimidation they typically directed toward the volunteers.

When we arrived at our destination, we exited our vans and started to form a human water chain with 40 of us standing side-by-side (*show with arms*) with a distance of about 10 feet between each of us. The plan was for us to walk a short distance and have anyone who was not able, or did not wish to, go further place their water and return to the vans. Everyone else would continue to walk for 30 min and then place our water. After quite a bit of time and effort, our long line was formed and we slowly began to walk forward together. It was challenging for this many people to walk at the same pace and we were frequently asked to slow down or stop to allow the line to reform. It felt like we were moving at a snail’s pace and the temperature was continuing to climb. It was not long before one and then two people from our group started experiencing distress from the heat. Our entire group stood in place while volunteers assisted these individuals. Standing still in the scorching sun with two gallons of water in my pack was the hardest part as there was no place to sit and no shade. As I stood there with the external temperature rising, I could feel my internal temperature, fear and frustration rising as well. I drank and poured water over my head but this only helped a little. I kept looking out across the

inhospitable desert and thinking of the migrants out there at that very moment, many having been traveling for days or weeks. I knew no one would undertake this journey unless they felt they had no other option.

News that it was time to place our water jugs came as a relief as I was increasingly concerned that if I remained in the sun and heat much longer I would become ill. We started our walk back and when the vehicles finally came into sight, I felt relief. Those last 100 yards were not easy, though. Upon reaching the van, I was given ice to rub on my face and neck to help cool down. Climbing into the air conditioning, I felt some relief but it took quite a while before I felt anywhere close to normal. Many hours later as I lay trying to fall asleep, I could still feel heat radiating from my skin as if I had been burned.

As hard as the experience was emotionally and physically, the weekend gave me many gifts. One gift has been a greater understand of the multiple factors that have lead us to this current crisis of death in the desert – with over 7000 remains having been found since 2001. I learned of policy referred to as “Prevention Through Deterrence” that since the mid-1990s, has led to crackdowns in urban areas forcing migrants to travel along more remote and dangerous routes - such as the areas Dan and I placed water.

Soon after I returned home, I heard from an old friend who had seen Facebook posts about my experience. She shared with me that her cousin, Jaime, a father of four American-born children, had returned to Mexico to renew his 10-year visa, but his renewal was rejected. With no other recourse available, he called his family to let them know he had hired a “coyote”, or guide, to help him cross the desert and it would take 3-5 days. Then they heard nothing. Finally, the family was able to speak to someone who had been traveling with Jaime. The picture he painted was heartbreaking. Jaime’s feet became injured during the crossing and he was lagging behind the group. On the sixth day, the guides left him about 60 miles east of Ajo, with a gallon of water. Temperatures reached 106 that day. His remains were found four days later by tribal police in the area.

I ASK YOU, WHAT WOULD YOU DO IN JAIME’S SITUATION? TO WHAT LENGTHS WOULD YOU GO TO GET BACK TO YOUR FAMILY? YOUR COMMUNITY? YOUR HOME?

PLEASE TURN TO YOUR NEIGHBOR AND SHARE YOUR ANSWERS.

Dan's Experience

It can be hard to imagine being in the shoes of migrants, but I'll tell you one thing: it's a lot easier to imagine when you're standing out there in the desert.

Our group of 60 Faith Floods the Desert participants was split into two "missions": the first, which Michelle went on, was called Devil's Highway, and the strategy they used, which Michelle told you about, was a water line.

I went to the other one, called Charlie Bell Pass. The idea for this one was to drive as close as possible to a highly- trafficked migrant passage, and then hike the rest of the way (which was just a little over a mile) to a place where we knew migrants would find our water, and drop as many gallons as possible there. Hike in a mile, and then back out. No sweat.

Actually, there was sweat. A LOT of sweat.

The location we were going to required a permit, which everyone in our group had obtained online prior to the action. In the permit application, we were required to sign that we agreed not to litter, and not to leave anything in the desert, specifically naming water, food, clothing, shoes, and blankets- the very things that might save lives. Again, this is what the specific targeting and criminalization of aid look like.

As our small convoy of trucks made its way along the only road to our destination, we encountered a team of armed rangers waiting to greet us and check our permits.

They were conspicuously polite to us; which, according to our No More Deaths guides, was drastically different from how they normally act. I'm not sure if their attitude adjustment was due to the religious vestments we were wearing, or the presence of no fewer than four professional journalists pointing cameras at them.

After recording all of our names from the permits, we were allowed to proceed.

When we reached the end of the road, we got out of the trucks, grabbed as many gallons of water as we could carry, and headed towards our destination on foot.

Being from Albuquerque, I thought I knew how to handle desert heat. After all, it's a dry heat, right? Not like the humid heat in other parts of the country. This was still the southwest; how different could it be?

The Arizona desert was another kind of hot. Dry, yes. But even a dry heat, when it gets to 110 degrees, has a saturated feeling to the air, like the heat actually has some weight to it. And so, the heat itself felt like a few pounds to carry. Add that to the gallon of water each of us was carrying for our own consumption, plus the two or three more gallons that we were delivering to the drop point. At 8 pounds per gallon, it starts to add up.

Although it was just over a mile, it took about an hour to reach the drop point, a place called Charlie Bell pass. There was a beacon there; a bittersweet symbol in the desert. For migrants facing injury or illness, they could go to this beacon, signal it, and aid (in the form of law enforcement) would arrive. Their lives would be saved, but they would be deported.

And so, we dropped off half of our gallons here, at this beacon, knowing that migrants would be able to find the water here.

And then, because the beacon is such a monitored location, we also headed off the trail another quarter mile or so to place the other half of our gallons along the hillside, in the sparse shade of the low brush. This way migrants wishing to avoid the beacon could still find life-saving water for their dangerous trek.

Then we sang together, refilling our spiritual canteens before hiking back to the trucks.

When we got back to where our vehicles were parked, a park ranger truck was sitting there, and the occupants were watching us; but they didn't stop us, or question us other than to ask if we were all doing okay. "It's a hot one today. Is everyone drinking enough water?" We assured them that we were.

Then we loaded back into the air-conditioned trucks, and drove back to town.

Charges Coming?

As of today, we still do not know if we will be charged with federal misdemeanors, for littering in the desert. No More Deaths told us that the eight volunteers who have been charged with federal misdemeanors (for doing what we had just done) were not arrested on the spot. Rather, their notification of charges came in the mail, months later. And because our permits were checked, this was a possibility for us as well.

And so, we wait. If we do get charged, we have been asked not to pay the fines, but contest the charges on moral grounds. As people of faith, we have rights to religious liberty, to practice our religion by doing the sacred work of saving lives.

Here, There, and Everywhere

Now, Michelle and I traveled to Arizona to see the awful effects of our broken immigration system firsthand along the border. But immigration is not only a problem there. While the challenges in Ajo, Arizona may look different than here in Albuquerque, the reality is, our government's harmful immigration policies are harmful everywhere. The fight for immigrant justice is real, and you don't have to go to the border to get involved.

Did you know that First Unitarian has its very own Immigrant Justice Task Force?

They are a high-functioning, well-organized group doing important work on immigration issues right here in Albuquerque.

For example, did you know that there are currently two people in Albuquerque living in sanctuary? That is, living in churches to be protected from ICE? And did you know that teams of volunteers from our church provides support by accompanying these two people for a 24-hour period every week?

This is only one possible way you might get involved. The Immigrant Justice Task Force has a few teams that are looking for members.

To find out all that they are working on, they have a table in the Social Hall that you can visit after the service. Members of the Task Force will gladly answer questions about their work and talk about ways to get involved and opportunities to offer support.

And if you are looking for a really low-commitment way to fight the unjust system that has led to thousands of deaths, you can sign on to two letters in support of the No More Deaths organization.

One letter is to land managers in Arizona, encouraging them to grant civilian access to aid workers, and to remove the restrictions against leaving water, food, blankets, clothing, and other forms of aid.

The other letter is to the Arizona District Attorney, encouraging them to Drop the Charges against the nine humanitarian aid workers facing ridiculous and immoral federal charges.

You can sign both of these letters at the Immigrant Justice Task Force table in the Social Hall.

Please do what you can to fight this unjust system that is literally killing people. If nothing else; please sign the letters. Because the values of our shared faith tell us that saving lives is never illegal.

May we make it so.