

Risking Sanctuary

A Sermon offered by the Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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When my husband Wayne and I were coming back from Costa Rica, we flew into Houston the day after the first travel ban issued by the Trump administration went into effect. I wasn't personally worried, of course; I'm a middle-aged white lady with an American passport. My husband, however, has been, for the last forty years, a legal alien. He's a Canadian citizen with a green card. Now to be honest, I knew that the Houston immigration officials were unlikely to detain him. But I worried nevertheless... What did they have on him? Did they know that he was a left-wing radical hippie type in the Sixties? That he was an outspoken opponent of the death penalty, gun control, the war on drugs, victimization of people living with HIV/AIDS? That he participated in more than one Black Lives Matter rally?

If they wanted to dig deeper, they would surely discover his traffic tickets over the past five years, (mostly speeding to church I would tell them!), and maybe his involvement with the Unitarian Universalist Association could look, well, suspicious. I wondered, if he were a brown-skinned Latino Canadian citizen resident alien, instead of a very white-skinned Icelandic guy, would he have been waived through as easily as he was, or instead stopped, questioned, perhaps taken into a private room, had his luggage searched, subjected to the drug-sniffing dog, and detained for an indefinite period of time? Because we had to go into two lines (one for those with United States passports and those with "other") I was not going to know what happened to him. What if he got delayed and we missed our connecting flight? I lived for a few paranoid minutes with nagging fears.

Of course you know the end of this story; we breezed through the Houston airport, all while watching the news unfold of people being detained at the airport, of lawyers rushing to the airport to assist, of people bringing coffee and donuts and food to the stranded men, women and children on both sides of the border who had the wrong passport from a banned country that day. I felt disoriented

and confused and asked myself: "What country am I living in?"

Maybe you've been asking yourself that question, too. This morning I'm going to take a hard look at the problem of immigration that we're facing right now, both as a nation and here in Wisconsin. This look has to include what faith communities are, or are not, doing in response to the growing crisis. In the end, I'm going to represent our Executive Team in proposing that this congregation vote to become recognized as a Sanctuary congregation here in the Fox Valley.

Let's remember together first the nature of the problem and why we have it. It's easy to get overwhelmed with the statistics we hear about undocumented immigrants living and working in the United States, but here are some reliable facts. Today, this country has about 11.4 million undocumented workers, with more than half of them living in California, Texas, New York and Florida. Seventy-one percent of those undocumented immigrants are from Mexico and Central America, thirteen percent from Asia, six percent from South America, and the rest from all over the world. (Just as a point of statistical interest, among the rest are approximately 50,000 undocumented Irish people living in the United States and about 33 Irish were deported compared to nearly 177,000 Mexicans.) So the first thing we notice about these statistics is that the largest majority of undocumented workers are brown-skinned people, and they are also the largest group being deported.

I can provide you with a lot of statistics that make a compelling case for how these undocumented workers pay state and local taxes. I could tell you that if the 85,000 undocumented immigrants were removed from Wisconsin, the state would lose \$2.6 billion in economic activity, \$1.2

billion in gross state product, and approximately 14,579 jobs.¹

But why, I wondered, is immigration seen as such a problem by those who argue for a more restrictive and punitive immigration policy? The arguments vary, but here is a quick summary of the concerns of those who want to strictly enforce immigration laws. According to Dan Stein of the Federation for American Immigration Reform [FAIR], “What the public wants is 1) a stable population size, 2) a healthy economy, and 3) a sense of national cohesion based on shared values and a common language. [6] These three components should be the basis of a sound immigration policy.”

A sustainable population size and a healthy economy seem to be fairly reasonable objectives; however, it’s the last one, “a sense of national cohesion based on shared values and a common language,” that reveals the truth that lies behind these on-the-surface “sensible” goals. But, when you look more closely at that sentence, “a sense of national cohesion and shared values,” I interpret those as code words for “white, Christian and English only,” and it speaks to the deeper issues of xenophobia and racism.

At the risk of oversimplifying a very complex reality, and borrowing these insights from my UU colleagues Rev. Kendyl Gibbon and Rev. Mike Morran, I’m offering three counterarguments, three flaws in the current immigration system: “laws that produce untold human suffering that is completely unnecessary.”

“The first great flaw, perhaps the essential flaw from which all the other flaws derive, is in the way current law fails to allow or account for temporary workers. There are hundreds of thousands of seasonal and temporary workers who come to the U.S. for jobs that few native citizens want, but which for many immigrants are real prosperity. These workers are an essential part of the economy and all of us rely on them.

However, by severely limiting the number and type of workers allowed to enter the country

*legally (workers that companies and the economy need!), the current system makes it inevitable that workers without documentation will immigrate to seek those jobs, **and** that employers will circumvent the law in order to hire them.*

A second major flaw is that we don’t adequately recognize families on either end of the system. The process by which families might come here to work legally is arcane and backlogged to the point of absurdity - decades in many cases. It forces spouses and parents to separate from their families for unspecified periods, and actually prohibits visiting, since migrant workers can’t leave the country without losing their visas, and their families can’t enter.

On the other end, if someone has been here living and working, paying taxes and raising their family, even if they’ve been here for decades, they risk deportation; even if they’re married to a U.S. citizen. Even though our own contradictory system makes it impossible for them to apply, they can be forcibly separated from their lives and families and forcibly deported. This is a Catch-22 for thousands of hardworking families.

Which brings me to the third broken element of existing policy: the arbitrary, random, inhumane and unjust ways in which enforcement takes place. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) use jails and detention centers whether or not someone has committed a crime. Those in detention can be denied bond and deported without a hearing. The system is rampant with stories of how these non-criminals, tens of thousands of people, have been subjected to strip-searching, shackling, solitary confinement, lack of access to telephones, mail and legal resources, and verbal, physical and even sexual abuse. This kind of enforcement completely fails to address the basic issues of immigration, the need for workers, the rights of workers, the health of our communities, or even national security.²

Behind every one of these flaws that point to our broken immigration system, there is a story of a real human being. One such story is unfolding in the basement of the First Unitarian Society church

¹ <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/new-americans-wisconsin>

² Quoted at length from a sermon by Reverend Mike Morran, First Unitarian Church, Denver, CO

in Denver, Colorado, right now. First Unitarian Society of Denver is one to which I have a personal connection; I attended seminary in Denver, was a student associated with the church, worked there as their administrative secretary for a year, and was ordained by that congregation in 1993. The building is in my bones – and now it’s serving as sanctuary for Jeanette Vizguerra.

Jeanette Vizguerra entered this country illegally from Mexico in 1997 with her husband. She has three children and an adult daughter with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status. She has been regularly employed, an activist for immigrant and labor movements, and was a speaker at the church’s worship service. She had requested a stay of deportation, which had been denied. At that point, she decided to take sanctuary in a makeshift bedroom in the basement of the First Unitarian Society of Denver. Vizguerra’s case was determined to be an ICE enforcement priority in response to President Trump’s executive order last month, which extended the scope of enforcement to include those with minor offenses or no convictions at all.

The First Unitarian Society of Denver has joined over four hundred congregations across the country that are offering sanctuary to undocumented residents of their communities who are facing deportation. I was so proud of the First Unitarian congregation, but made the mistake of reading the comments in the section posted below the *Washington Post* news article about Vizguerra. One comment in particular is an example of the long thread of comments that represent the opinion of those who not only oppose sanctuary, but oppose a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants with no criminal record to remain in this country.

This anonymous person wrote: *“This is a very simple situation. Laws cannot be selectively chosen to obey or break. This person is not an undocumented immigrant. That is a term the left invented to portray these people as if all they need are documents, all without following the proper channels to obtain them. This woman is an illegal alien who broke the immigration laws of the United States and must be deported. Then she can follow the laws of our country and seek admittance.”*

Now, I’m a person who respects the law, but I also know that laws are never as easy to interpret and enforce as some claim. Nobody knows better than the lawyers and judges among us that the law is open to interpretation, is influenced by precedent legal decisions, and is always framed by what the Constitution says and larger ethical conversations about how best to create the common good. Everyone at all points on the political spectrum agrees that our current framework of laws around immigration is broken and needs to be changed.

Examining the current legal framework for immigration invites us to answer the larger question: what benefits a culture? Cultural divisions among us rear their heads, as fiscal conservatives claim that immigrants are a drain on the economy, and social conservatives worry about immigrants changing the culture of the United States in ways that sound an awful lot like a desire for white homogeneity. Liberals deny that there is any drain on economics and flat out reject the belief that somehow the culture that immigrants bring to this country diminishes who “we” are.

What opponents to immigration reform seem to miss is that most Americans have become accustomed to appropriating other foods, customs and cultures when it suits “our” desires. Yet some still insist that the workforce that brought these cultural assets among us stay in their own countries. My colleague the Reverend Jay Leach put it this way: “We live in a global economy, but can you make a moral case, a moral case, for encouraging mobile capital and an immobile workforce? How does one morally defend a system that says if you already have resources, you are free to make money anywhere in the world, but if you are just a worker, you are confined to your own national borders? Do we think globally, do we act globally, do we do our ethics globally?”

We enjoy *huevos rancheros* for breakfast, Chinese take out for lunch, and Thai food for dinner. We’re grateful to have strawberries in February and to find a great deal on that leather coat from Marshalls, made in Vietnam or the Philippines or Honduras. On our feet are shoes made in China, our linens from India, our rugs created by the small fingers of children in Pakistan. So the current immigration crisis is not just about the migrant

worker milking cows on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, or picking almonds in California, but is much bigger and more complex than the simple response “She’s breaking the law, deport her now.” We must not confuse what is moral with what is legal, for they are not the same things. Consider the fact that the forced removal of Native Americans from their land and onto reservations was “legal”; the capture, importation and slavery of African people was once “legal”; the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II was “legal.” It takes moral force to confront and change laws which are morally bankrupt and should be declared illegal.

At this year’s annual meeting, the Governing Board will place on the agenda a recommendation that the Fellowship become a Sanctuary congregation. Even though your Executive Team first brought this proposal to the Board, this movement has not been instigated by your ministers, but by members of the congregation. After the story in First Unitarian broke, both Leah and I received emails from some of you wondering, “What are we going to do about this?” One said, “We say we’re supposed to ‘lead in social justice.’ How are we doing that?” I’ve spoken with colleagues in the Appleton area, some of whom are having these conversations in their congregations as well. One minister is suggesting that the local churches willing to provide sanctuary join together to rent a home or a structure in the community, where we can provide shelter AND weekly worship, which is one of the criteria established by current ICE policy to define a “sensitive” location where ICE is reluctant to enter. Another is clear that they can’t physically lend their building, but are asking themselves how to lend support.

In the Mission statement work that the Governing Board initiated this past January, many of you referred to the Fellowship as your “sanctuary,” your refuge—a place for you to gain strength for the journey, to be held and supported and nurtured and challenged and loved all at the same time, without fear of deportation back to the church of your childhood or to a purely secular life. You literally built a “sanctuary” here—this very room in which we now sit, as a place set aside, a place of beauty where your moral core is given fuel and your spirit renewed.

Last month, your Governing Board voted to support the efforts of the Sanctuary Team to educate this congregation about what it would mean to provide sanctuary to a person or family facing deportation. Your leadership recognizes that taking a stand as a “Sanctuary” would be a big leap for this congregation, but we have some time to talk together about the implications, and then we will move to a decision by vote at our Annual Meeting. Regardless of where the vote lands on June 5, those who are leading this effort believe that the conversation is important, and the opportunity for each one of you to reflect on what “sanctuary” means for you is essential as we walk together, sharing the sanctuary of the heart we have found in this place, and imagining what that could mean for providing a real, tangible sanctuary to the “other, the stranger, the undocumented.” It is a leap of faith to be sure, but most things worth doing are. May we prayerfully and mindfully consider taking this leap together. May it be so.

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