

The Future and History of the Sanctuary Movement

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A Real and Changing Faith.

That's how I've come to understand Unitarian Universalism.

A real and changing faith—in service to the whole and to the Holy. That is actually my personal faith statement or credo. It is what I live by and it is that to which I aspire.

Each word means many things. Together they create a container large enough to hold our living and diverse faith, and our many and varied ways of living into that faith.

It is this lens which I will use to discuss the topic of today's sermon: Sanctuary and immigration justice.

I will be reflecting upon the Sanctuary movement both within and beyond these walls. We will touch briefly upon highlights of its history, the current state, and where it may be headed.

Understand, my friends, that in talking about this, I am both lifting up a moral imperative facing our global community and I am inviting you to explore more deeply the question of what it means to you to be a Unitarian Universalist. A seeker, a friend or a guest. What does it mean for your Faith to be real and to be alive?

When was the last time that our faith changed you? That our faith became real—used in your day-to-day decision making, thought processes, or way of approaching what lay before you?

Have you noticed that it is in those experiences, when we live out our faith, when it is real, that not only are we changed, but our faith itself changes?

That's one of the many gifts of our liberal religious tradition. We do not say that truth is sealed. We believe that as we live into our faith, we are changed, and therefore it changes, too. This is a living faith.

The second part of my credo—a real and changing faith—in *service to the whole and to the Holy*. Ours is a faith that is in service to others, to our planet, to the interconnected web of existence of which we are a part. We all serve differently due both to our passions and our circumstances. But however it takes form, it is in service to the good of some whole that faith is made real.

And then for me, I add that my faith is also in service to the Holy. Because I need that. Call it what you may, but without some mystery, some awe, nature, love—some power greater than myself—I find it all too much. Too overbearing and exhausting. I need to regularly tap into a renewable source of energy, a connection to the Holy.

The topic of sanctuary, preparing for this sermon today, and learning with you as a congregation, has once again allowed me to experience our faith as a real and changing faith, one that is in service to the whole and to the Holy.

Jim Corbett, a Quaker and long-time advocate and supporter of Central American refugees, defines sanctuary as “protective community with people whose basic human rights are being violated by government officials....” He says that it “incorporates prophetic witness into protective community.”¹ He goes on to describe sanctuary as “an identifying practice of a church that is a fully ecumenical and international community of the faith-formed peoples that assume responsibility for the nonviolent protection of human rights.”²

The contemporary Sanctuary movement has its origins in the refugee crisis of Central Americans in the 1980s when an estimated 1,000,000 people were fleeing their homelands of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua for safety. It was an interfaith movement involving Catholics, Presbyterians, Quakers, Jews, and yes, Unitarian Universalists. Since 2000 the Sanctuary movement has shifted largely from places of worship providing protection to refugees into those same places providing shelter to immigrants in danger of deportation.

Our Unitarian Universalist Association has a deep history of supporting immigrants and refugees. At the first-ever General Assembly in 1961 there was a resolution passed in support of migratory workers.³ Sanctuary and comprehensive immigration reform including stopping Immigration and Customs Enforcement or ICE, raids, and deportations were supported at six subsequent General Assemblies between 1980 and 2007.⁴

In 2013 our association of congregations called immigration a moral issue and most recently in 2015 we voted an Action of Immediate Witness to end immigrant child and family detention.⁵

First Parish in Brookline has been right beside the UUA in working for immigration justice. Jack and Linda Smith, beloved members of First Parish, who currently live in Portland, Oregon are considered by many to be some of the founders of this work here. Jack recently emailed me a timeline of the work that has been done. He started the timeline in the fall of 2010 when the

¹ Corbett, Jim, “The Sanctuary Church” Pendle Hill Pamphlet #270 ebook location 45.

² Ibid. location 134.

³ <http://www.uua.org/immigration/witness/128803.shtml>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://www.uua.org/statements/end-immigrant-child-and-family-detention-now>

UUA held a workshop on immigration Justice. Jack recounts that several members of First Parish attended this including Anne Copeland, Barbara Simonetti, Martha Leader, Anne Gilmore, and of course, Jack and Linda Smith.

From this workshop came the inception of the Immigration Justice Committee in 2011 and the congregational vote to affirm the work of the Immigration Justice Committee including to have First Parish join the Boston New Sanctuary Movement.

Boston New Sanctuary, whose tagline is “Called by our Faiths to Welcome the Stranger,” is an interfaith coalition of religious communities and individuals who are committed to responding to the suffering of immigrants residing in the United States.⁶

Both First Parish and the UUA were some of its earliest members, with our support continuing and increasing by our recent agreement to serve as their fiduciary agent. By this I mean that we hold and distribute their modest funds since they are a coalition. We do the same thing with other causes that we support including our affiliate minister, the Rev. MaryHelen Gunn, and her campus ministry program.

As members of the Boston New Sanctuary movement since 2011, our congregation has signed onto the following pledge. I will read it in its entirety:

NEW SANCTUARY MOVEMENT PLEDGE

We acknowledge that the large-scale immigration of workers and their families to the United States is a complex historical, global and economic phenomenon that has many causes and does not lend itself to simplistic or purely reactive public policy solutions.

We stand together in our faith that everyone, regardless of national origin, has basic common rights, including but not limited to: 1) livelihood; 2) family unity; and 3) physical and emotional safety.

We witness the violation of these rights under current immigration policy, particularly in the separation of children from their parents due to unjust detentions and deportations, and in the exploitation of immigrant workers. We are deeply grieved by the violence done to families through immigration raids. We cannot in good conscience ignore such suffering and injustice.

Therefore, We Covenant To:

1. Take a public, moral stand for immigrants’ rights

⁶ <http://www.bostonnewsanctuary.org/about/pledge/>

2. Reveal, through education and advocacy, the actual suffering of immigrant workers and families under current and proposed legislation
3. Join other faith communities in campaigns to reduce hate, workplace discrimination, and unjust deportation⁷

Our global community is facing the largest refugee crisis since World War II. Sixty million people are displaced from their homes and homelands due to violence, twenty million of them are refugees.⁸ Deportations and the risk of deportation are real. Just yesterday Reuters news released this announcement: “U.S. immigration officials are planning a month-long series of raids in May and June to deport hundreds of Central American mothers and children ... likely ... the largest deportation sweep targeting immigrant families by the administration of President Barack Obama this year.”⁹

Immigration is a complicated issue and a political hot button. It is also a human rights issue to which religious communities such as ours are called to respond.

First Parish has done remarkable work in this area of immigration justice. The Reverend Maria Cristina’s spiritual and social justice leadership has opened doors and hearts in phenomenal ways. We have developed partnerships with Centro Presente and the Chelsea Collaborative, both an advocacy and a direct-service organization working for the rights of immigrants.

Members of our congregation including Ann Gilmore, Ellen Blaney, and Susan Larrabee went through training and now go regularly to the Suffolk Immigration Detention Center to offer spiritual caregiving visits with people being held in the detention center. You’ve gone to vigils and offered your moral and financial support.

Later after the service there will be the third of three congregational discussions that have been held this spring regarding immigration justice. Today’s conversation focuses on what it means to provide Sanctuary and the full range of possibilities from supporting or partnering with others doing this work to considering providing sanctuary ourselves.

Why, you might wonder, would we do this now during the interim period? Isn’t there already a lot going on? Don’t we have work to do together, questions to answer about who you want to be in the future, a 300th anniversary to plan? I mean, don’t you want to wait until you have your next called minister?

⁷ <http://www.bostonnewsanctuary.org/about/pledge/>

⁸ <http://www.refugeesarewelcome.org/>

⁹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-deportation-exclusive-idUSKCN0Y32J1>

Well, that will happen two years from now, your calling of a settled minister, and yes, there is a lot to do over the next two years.

And—we have a real and changing faith. A faith that serves the whole and the Holy. When there is a need and we are called as a denomination and a congregation, we respond.

Immigration is a moral issue. It is also a theological imperative to which we are called to respond. Advocating and partnering to protect those at risk of deportation. Caring and standing up for those who are being held at detention centers whose human rights are being so violated that nearly half of the people being held are documented as having ‘complex trauma disorder.’¹⁰

A recent study entitled “No Safe Haven Here” documents through extensive interviews and other research that the trauma experienced by individuals fleeing violence in their countries does not stop but is rather continued upon their arrival and time spent in detention centers.¹¹

These are not things which wait until we have finished our interim work. Rather it is by doing this work together, along with our other work that you will come to find clearly the answer to who First Parish is and who you want to be. The process by which we are undertaking this issue will speak volumes to any and all ministers who are interested in serving as your next called minister.

By supporting this issue, it doesn’t mean that everyone has to get involved, nor should we. As I always say, follow your passion and your heart. We each have gifts and interests that this congregation needs. We need worship and we need to worship together. If you are at a time where you need our faith to change you, to sustain you, to serve you, then please, open your heart and let it in. We are here for you.

We can however all be allies, we can be aware and supportive of our First Parish siblings who are following their hearts by doing this work. We can honor them and thank them. We can see how what they serve is for the good of the whole and the Holy.

This work, and all of our work regardless of its content, if we approach it as service, has the possibility to be transformative. As Rachel Remen said in our reading this morning: “We may help or fix many things in our lives, but when we serve, we are always in the service of wholeness.”¹²

¹⁰ <http://www.uusc.org/new-report-complex-trauma-disorder-in-detained-refugee-mothers-children>

¹¹ <http://www.uusc.org/new-report-complex-trauma-disorder-in-detained-refugee-mothers-children>

¹² Remen, Rachel-Naomi, “Serving is Different From Helping and Fixing”, Mar 18, 2013.

Immigration justice as a theological and moral issue is underpinned by our first principle, which is to respect the worth and dignity of every human being. The foundation of this principle is found in our Universalist heritage—the belief that if there is a heaven, all people will go there. That all people are worthy of being saved. Of being loved.

The Rev. Rob Hardies, Senior Minister of All Souls, one of our congregations in Washington, DC, says this: “One of our greatest assets is our gospel—the gospel of Universalism, of God’s love for all people. I serve a church called All Souls, which kind of says it all. Can you imagine a church that called itself “Some Souls Church”? But isn’t that the de facto name of the dominant religious culture in America? The religious right worships a God of some souls, a God who plays favorites, a God who picks and chooses.

The good news that we Unitarian Universalists have to share—is that a God who picks and chooses is no God at all. It is an idol. Against this spurious faith we must preach the old Universalist gospel of a love that invites all souls to the welcome table, not some.”¹³

I do believe that ours is a real and changing faith in service to the whole and to the Holy. May you find your way to experience our faith in each and every season of your life. Blessings to you and to us all for the journey ahead. Wherever it may take us.

Amen and Blessed Be.

¹³ <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/willing-be-changed>