

On Being Sanctuary
A sermon by
The Rev. Bryan Jessup at the
Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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When I think about being Sanctuary for other people, I often think of the Sweet Honey in the Rock song – “Would You Harbor Me” written by Ysaye Barnwell.

Would you harbor me? - Would I harbor you?

Would you harbor a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew - a heretic, convict or spy?
 Would you harbor a runaway woman, or child, a poet, a prophet, a king?
 Would you harbor an exile, or a refugee, a person living with AIDS?

Would you harbor me? - Would I harbor you?

The need for harboring or the need for offering sanctuary to people in our time is born out of the greed, cruelty and violence of the systems that surround us. In those systems, as we know too well, some people are not counted as people. And those who are counted have to comply with systemic expectations and make themselves convenient for those in power or they will lose their protected status too.

In the United States some of those in danger from our system include: people of color, women, gays and lesbians, trans-people, non-binary people, indigenous people, poor people, the homeless, people who are differently-abled, people who struggle with mental illness, Muslims, Jews, Pagans, Atheists, labor activists, environmental activists, immigrants and more.

Around the world those in danger include: ordinary people in war torn countries like Syria and Yemen, many people from minority tribes in Africa, Palestinians in Israel, the Kurds in Turkey, the Chinese in Indonesia, the Uyghurs in China, the Nepalese in Bhutan and more

We live in a world in which it is dangerous to be different from those who hold power. And if you or I become inconvenient for the system we'll be in danger too. If that happens, would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

I think harboring or being sanctuary begins by us harboring and becoming sanctuary for our very own human selves. And that is no small feat. We're surrounded by messages that tell us we're not worthy. We're too old or too young. We're too fat or too skinny. Our hair is too curly or too straight. We're too loud or too quiet. We're too brainy or too stupid. We're too traditional or too progressive.

The fact, of course, is that we are all just human beings in process. We learn (often times very slowly) by trial and error. None of us is perfect. Can we make room for ourselves as human beings anyway?

One of the many lessons that has come to us all from feminist efforts over the last several decades – is the lesson of self-care – body, mind and spirit. It's the lesson of listening to our intuition and embracing our feelings. As the poet Mary Oliver says – it's the lesson of letting the soft animal of ourselves love what it loves.

When we do that, when we start to truly care for ourselves - we can then begin to love our neighbors in the way they need to be loved. And we can begin to form inclusive, beloved communities like this very Fellowship where we become sanctuary for one another in our humanness. When we are sanctuary for one another, we hold one another in times of joy and sorrow. We hold one another in sickness and in health. We hold one another when we are born, when we die and during all the roller-coaster times in between.

The teacher Jesus was talking about us all being sanctuary for one another when he said “As you feed and clothe and care for the neediest among you so you feed and clothe and care for me.” And this isn't just a Christian thing. In many Buddhist countries, monks in maroon and saffron robes beg door to door for food – thus providing ordinary people a reminder of our common human needs and providing them a chance to do something about it. The monks then share the gathered food with vulnerable people who (from all over) come to their temples for safety and nourishment body, mind and spirit. Their street side temples are, indeed, sanctuaries.

The economic and social systems that surround us pit us against one another and encourage us to decide that some people deserve to have their needs met while others just don't because they are foreign or different or somehow defective. All the great religions of the world call for us to resist that cruel condemnation. They remind us that we are all children of God and remind us that the earth itself and all things living upon it are sacred.

Sanctuary begins by honoring ourselves as beings of inherent worth and dignity and by forming communities of mutual support. And Sanctuary continues then when people in various communities organize to work together to shape our world systems away from greed and cruelty and toward the tender care that we all need.

Our congregation here works together with other congregations to support the efforts of True North Organizing and Centro del Pueblo as they work to provide safety for vulnerable immigrants in our mix. And I hardly have to remind you of how vulnerable they are. Hundreds of children separated from their parents. Emergency walls being built to keep brown folks down in their place and to make America White again.

In June of 2016, by consensus, for the second time in its history, this congregation declared its commitment to be a Sanctuary for immigrants.

And we've worked to live up to our commitment. Since that vote in June of 2016 Erik Kirk and others from our congregation worked with Centro del Pueblo to create and pass a ballot measure by which the County of Humboldt would declare the whole county a sanctuary. As you may recall this whole congregation publicly declared its support for the measure and in November of 2018, Measure K - passed.

The Board of True North Organizing Network voted to publicly support that ballot measure and through both True North and Centro del Pueblo this congregation has worked to provide direct support for immigrants who have been detained by ICE.

I am happy to report that in two instances the immigrants who were in danger are now safe and back with their families. But the danger for immigrants is far from over.

The White House is busy about the business of stirring up fear and hate. While Flint, Michigan is still without water, the White House is making sure the deserts have walls. Some members of this congregation have taken themselves through a Rapid Response training offered by True North. That training equips people to bear witness to ICE raids, to film those raids with their cell phones and to be available to help the children and families of immigrants who have been targeted. A Rapid Response training scheduled for our whole congregation for today had to be cancelled. But it will be offered at another time soon to come.

Our Fellowship building is not equipped to house immigrants in danger right here on site – but several members of the Fellowship have indicated that they are willing to provide safe sanctuary in their homes when and if the need arises. During the 1980s this congregation provided sanctuary for the Santos family from El Salvador. And even now, people in this Fellowship provide safe shelter from the storm for other people they know who are in need.

Providing sanctuary for people against the harsh, systemic violence of the world is now and has always been the job of religion when religion is done right. The social and economic systems that surround us work to divide us against one another. But our “religions done right” refuse to buy into that division. They remind us that all over the planet, humankind is one. And they also remind us that human beings have been migrating around the earth forever.

Jewish and Christian scriptures in particular are full of migration stories: Abraham goes out from Ur to the land of Canaan. Because of drought, Jacob and his family migrate to Egypt. Hundreds of years later they migrate back to Palestine. Then because of war, they are forced to move to Babylon.

On this continent, people have migrated for centuries. The Navajo people, for example, migrated from Canada to the Southwest of what is now the United States around 1400

of the current era. 150 years after their arrival in the Southwest, the Spanish arrived. Both Navajo people and Spanish people alike moved because they needed to move to survive.

All along the Rio Grande River tribes of indigenous people have moved back and forth for centuries. Artificial boundaries and walls set up by white colonizers cannot negate that reality. People move and their moving cannot negate their humanity and right to live.

In the world-view of some of the descendants of the white colonizers who (by warfare and genocide) gained possession of much of America – In their world view... the artificial boundaries set up by their forebears are real. And they divide not only citizens from non-citizens but good people from murderers and rapists. But reality and facts undermine that world view.

Indigenous people were here long before white people came and are still here now. They migrated all over this continent long before white people came and they still do now. White people and citizens of this country commit crimes of violence in this country at a far greater rate than do brown immigrants who cross artificial boundaries to support their families. With modern technology that facilitates communication between people all around the world, we human beings are connecting with one another like we haven't been connected since our ancestors left Africa millions of years ago. And what we are discovering – again- is that we human beings are still family. No one is Alien. We are all siblings of one another and children of God.

With the effects of climate change rising up around us now it is clear that our old game of war and “winner take all nation states” is no longer viable. Many of us human beings are going to have to move. Our old ways of production and consumption are going to have to change. We are going to have to learn to live together, to collaborate together and to provide sanctuary for one another - or none of us are going to survive.

Now if learning to live together seems like a daunting task....it is. But the role of religion done right has always been the daunting task of learning. It has always been the task of transforming the mindset, the behaviors and the cultures of human beings. And the role of religion has always been to center us human beings in the hope that our efforts at transformation will succeed. So I close with some words of encouragement slightly adapted from the Hebrew Prophet Isaiah as he spoke them to the Hebrew people as they returned from Exile in Babylon.

The Spirit of the LORD is on me, and that Spirit has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. It has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and to release from darkness those held in prison.. The Spirit has anointed me to proclaim that now is the time and this is the year of the LORD. It has sent me to comfort all who mourn, and to provide for those who grieve in isolation. It has sent me to bestow on the needy a crown of beauty instead of ashes and to pour on their heads

the oil of joy instead of mourning. It has sent me to give the outcast a garment of praise instead of a cloak of despair.

And if you join me in this healing work you will become oaks of righteousness. You will become a planting of Lord for the display of his mercy. And then you will rebuild ancient ruins and restore places that were long destroyed. You will renew ruined cities. Strangers will be safe among you and they will shepherd your flocks. Foreigners will be safe among you and will work your fields and vineyards. And you will then truly be called priests and the ministers of God. You will feed everyone who is hungry with the wealth of nations, and in abundance of this earth you will find harmony, joy and peace.

Our job here at this Fellowship is to make this kind of Sanctuary real in our own hearts, among us and between us in our homes and here in this congregation (don't forget to fill out and turn in your Caring Circle Volunteer sheet.) - And, of course, it's our job to shape our culture away from greed and violence and toward genuine Sanctuary.

As I close this service today I want to let you know (again) how glad I am to be the minister of a congregation that has committed itself to being Sanctuary. And I invite you now as you are willing and able to stand and join with me in singing Hymn #121 – We'll Build a Land...

Extinguishing the Chalice Closing Words and Closing Song

The Closing Song today will be – Gonna Keep on Movin' Forward

Closing Words –

1. Rise up, you folks of God! Have done with lesser things.
Give heart and mind and soul and strength to serve all living beings
2. Rise up, you folks of God – your neighbors cannot wait
Bring in the day when they shall know the world for them is safe.
3. Rise up, you folks of God – give bravely to the cause
Your strength is equal to the task of ending unjust laws
4. Trust justice and trust love. Let your hearts never cease
To lead you on to healing deeds that build a world of peace.

And now as we depart this place – May we Keep on Movin' Forward