

Making Room at the Inn
The Sanctuary Movement Today and What it Means for our Church
By
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July 16, 2017

This past January, just five days in office, Donald Trump fulfilled a campaign promise by signing an executive order tripling the number of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, officers, from just over 5,000, to more than 15,000, for the sole purpose of arresting anyone suspected of being here illegally, especially from Mexico, which Trump seems to think is the name of the entire continent South of the Border. “When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best,” he said, “They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with [them]. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists.” He also promised his new ICE officers would only go after those he’s repeatedly called, “bad hombres.” Yet the nationwide raids immediately following his executive order have swept up many people with no criminal records at all. According to a *Newsweek* report, for instance, a simultaneous sweep in Texas, Colorado, Oklahoma, New York, and D.C. last April, resulted in the arrests of over 90 people without records, and several others with only minor offenses. As of May, according to the *Washington Post*, the number of such arrests was up 33 percent more than at the same time last year.¹ No wonder the number of churches involved in the modern Sanctuary Movement has doubled to more than 800 since Trump took office.

But let’s back up, because this story doesn’t start with Trump. In fact, according to a recent article in *The Guardian*, today’s Church Sanctuary Movement began during the Obama Administration. Although he also enacted DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, giving the children of unauthorized immigrants, the Dreamers brought to the U.S. at an early age, protection against deportation, and two years later, in 2014, signed an executive order also protecting more than five million of their parents from being deported, President Obama was also criticized for being the “Deporter in Chief.” Whether you agree he inherited an already aggressive deportation system from the Bush Administration that took him a while to change, and that the number of apprehensions and removals eventually decreased under Obama, or think he should have done more sooner to relieve the plight of undocumented residents, it is a fact that the current Church Sanctuary Movement began during the Obama Administration in response to his policies. Many would argue he would not have passed DACA or DAPA were it not for the Sanctuary Movement and the pressure it put on him to do so.

But let’s back up again, because it doesn’t really start with Obama either. As another recent article, this one in *The Nation*, explains, “Today’s sanctuary movement is being revived by many of the same communities of faith that in the 1980s transported and sheltered up to 500,000 refugees fleeing US-trained-and-funded death squads in El Salvador, Honduras, and

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/03/this-is-how-trumps-deportations-differ-from-obamas/?utm_term=.79655e024c54

Guatemala. At the movement's height, more than 500 congregations nationwide hosted refugees and operated an underground railroad that moved migrants from Mexico to cities all over the United States and as far north as Canada."² The article also reminds us that the U.S. government spied on the movement's leaders and indicted 16 activists, "including three nuns, two priests, and a minister,"³ before it was successfully sued and forced to stop discriminating against those seeking asylum from the horrors it had itself created in their Central America homelands.

But let's back up even more, because, even though that's its official start, the Church Sanctuary Movement doesn't really begin then either. The notion that houses of worship can legally shelter those pursued by the authorities dates all the way back to Medieval England when both secular and Church laws allowed fugitives to seek asylum on Church property for up to 40 days while they negotiated with the authorities. Although it usually resulted in their exile, and giving up everything they had, these sanctuary laws saved their lives. Although it was made illegal for the Church to shelter felons in the late 17th century, the tradition of providing sanctuary to political refugees and other vulnerable asylum seekers in churches, mosques, and temples continues to be respected to this day, even here in the U.S., which is why, in light of Trump's xenophobic policies, the number of religious communities getting involved in the Sanctuary Movement is rapidly rising.

But let's back way up, because the Church Sanctuary movement, goes all the way back to a couple of Christian stories. The first involves Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem to register for the census, as Roman law required them to do. While there, Mary goes into labor and is forced to give birth to Jesus in a manger because, they are told, there's no room at the Inn. Although this is very likely a purely fictional account, it suggests that Jesus and his family were unwanted and unwelcome, and it is, therefore, especially important that his followers make room for strangers, for the poor, the vulnerable, and for anyone else seeking shelter. As the Christian scripture says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it."⁴

The other story, which I'm sure is also entirely fictional, though no less poignant, has Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt with baby Jesus because paranoid King Herod has issued a decree to kill all newborn sons. It's interesting the narrative has a Jewish family seeking refuge in Egypt, the land their oppressed and enslaved ancestors once had a terrible time escaping. But the real point of the story is probably to allow Jesus the opportunity to make the same journey from Egypt to the Promised Land a few years later, after Herod's death. After all, the whole point of the *Gospel of Matthew*, in which this narrative appears, is about portraying Jesus as a Moses-like figure to Jews. Like Moses, the authorities seek to kill him as an infant. Like Moses, he journeys from Egypt to the Promised land. Like Moses, who comes off a mountain with the Ten Commandments, Jesus comes off a mountain to proclaim eight beatitudes. *Matthew* even has Moses return from the dead to speak with Jesus in the miraculous story of his Transfiguration.

² <https://www.thenation.com/article/inside-new-sanctuary-movement-thats-protecting-immigrants-ice/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hebrews 13:2

But let's back up even farther, because, by linking Jesus to Moses, we are reminded the sanctuary movement goes back to a time long before both Jesus and the Jews, to a time when a group of escaped slaves fled their Egyptian captors and wandered through the desert an entire generation in pursuit of a better life elsewhere. (Wondering through the desert in pursuit of a better life—remind you of anyone we know?) Whether Moses was a historic figure or not, most scholars would agree the Exodus story is, at least, based upon an actual group of slaves, the *Karibu*, or “Hebrews,” who eventually made it from Egypt to the rugged hill country that is today known as Israel and Palestine, where their legend became part of the merged story belonging to other tribes of refugees who had also fled there to escape economic and political oppression. This, there can be little doubt, is the reason Jews are supposed to extend hospitality to strangers. As is written in Exodus itself, “You are not to wrong or oppress an alien, because you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”⁵

Although the Exodus story dates back 600 years BCE, we must step further back yet, to recognize this tradition of welcoming and being kind to foreigners, aliens, strangers, or whatever term we use, is universal in all the major religions. Sikhism says, “All jealousies have vanished in the society of the Saints. All are my friends now, there being no enemy or stranger.”⁶ Hinduism says, “Let us have concord with our own people, let us have concord with people who are strangers to us; [for] the divine Twins create between us and the strangers a unity of hearts.”⁷ A Buddhist Sutra says, “Although there are northern men and southern men, north and south make no difference to their Buddha nature,” which is why Islam says, “For the white to lord over the black, the Arab over the non-Arab, the rich over the poor, the strong over weak or men over women is out of place and wrong.”⁸ The Japanese, *Ofudesaki*, tells us, “All the people of the whole world are equally brothers and sisters. There is no one who is an utter stranger.”⁹ Or, as Chief Joseph said, “All [people] were made by the Great Spirit Chief. They are all brothers [and sisters]. The Earth is the Mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it...”¹⁰

Gandhi once said, “I know of no greater sin than to oppress the innocent in the name of God,”¹¹ which, tragically, is a sin religion has committed all too often, but, at its best, religion reflects the deeper recognition that humanity is one and, in truth, there can be no strangers among us. The Apostle Paul said, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus,”¹² no ethnic, no economic, no gender differences among us, that is. And, in our own faith tradition, the first American woman ordained by a major denomination, Universalist minister Olympia Brown,

⁵ Exodus 22:21

⁶ Karnara, M.5, p. 1299

⁷ 7.52.1-2

⁸ Hadith of Ibn Majah

⁹ Tenrikyo, *Ofudesaki*, 13.43-45

¹⁰ Freedman, Russell, *Indian Chiefs*, Scholastic Inc., New York, NY, 1987, p. 111.

¹¹ Gandhi, Mohandas K., *All Men Are Brothers*, Continuum, New York, NY, 1982, p. 73.

¹² Galatians 3:28.

said, "Every nation must learn that the people of all nations are children of God, and must share the wealth of the world,"¹³

The Hebrew word, *Yeshuah*, which we pronounce as, "Jesus," mean, "salvation." But it doesn't refer to the salvation of individual souls. Rather, as Gerald May says in his book, *The Awakened Heart*, it connotes, "space and the freedom and security which is gained by the removal of constriction."¹⁴ In short, this Jewish notion of salvation, and, what ought to be the purpose of all religion, is making space, making room, so that no one in need ever has to hear, "I'm sorry, there's no room at the Inn," or, "There's no room for you, you're not welcome, you don't belong here." For, as we have seen, the heart of every religion, going back thousands of years, admonishes us to be kind, and compassionate, and welcoming toward strangers.

Many years ago, as the Latino population in California was poised to exceed the number of whites, I was speaking with an anxious white fellow there who told me he was concerned that "our culture" was going to disappear. I said, "You know, if in a hundred years there are no white people in California, there will still be people in California. If there is no white culture, there will still be human culture in California." I responded this way because in my religion we may celebrate our differences and our individual uniqueness, but we are still one, one race, one humanity, and there can be no strangers among us, nobody who doesn't belong, nobody who doesn't deserve justice, or kindness, or to make a living, or have a home, or access to affordable healthcare, or quality education, or to be considered a world citizen wherever they go on this small blue globe, with, as Chief Joseph said, "equal rights upon it."

This is why, because of our religion, because of who we are as Unitarian Universalists, last month our Board of Trustees passed a resolution pledging our church's support for today's Sanctuary Movement, "offering," as the resolution states, "our moral, financial, and other assistance to individuals and families threatened with immoral deportation," and, if it ever becomes necessary in Spokane, to, "consider creating physical sanctuary space to help meet the needs for those seeking sanctuary." Whether they are immigrant families from south of the border, of Muslim families fearing for their lives, or transgender or gay persons needing a safe place, or desperate war refugees fleeing violence, or draftees refusing to fight in unjust wars, or African Americans disproportionately criminalized because of the color of their skin, our religion requires us to offer sanctuary, not only here, in this space if necessary, but through our deeds in the wider world, by expanding our sanctuary, by ever widening our circle of inclusion through our efforts to dismantle systems of injustice everywhere.

[Today, shortly after our service, church members Jerry White and Doug Huigen, authors of our Board of Trustee's resolution, are going to lead a conversation about it and the Sanctuary Movement. The conversation will include a very special guest, Luisa Orellana Westbrook, whose family was given sanctuary here in Spokane in the 1980s, as her family fled El Salvador, shortly after her father was taken by soldiers and never seen again. Luisa will be at the meeting in our Chapel, but, for now, I'm going to yield the rest of my sermon time to

¹³ "Words and Deeds of Prophetic Women and Men" (Living Traditions we Share, Part 2) Rev. L. Mills, Jr. Presented before the UUTC Congregation, October 16, 2005.

¹⁴ See Michael Schut, ed., *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life*, The Morehouse Group, Denver, CO, 1999, 2001, p.42.

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allow her a few moments to introduce herself and tell you just a bit more about her story now.]