



Guest at Your Table 2018-19

Sample Worship Service

JUSTICE ACROSS BORDERS

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) is a 78-year-old human rights organization grounded in UU values and committed to advancing human rights, dismantling systems of oppression, and uplifting and affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all people. Our eye-to-eye partnership model centers the experiences and wisdom of front-line communities, and we partner with grassroots groups around the globe to support those facing human rights abuses, humanitarian crises, and displacement due to climate change.

For thousands of Central Americans making the dangerous journey north to escape gang violence, gender-based assault, and increased militarization, the road away from danger is paved with injustices. Recognizing the difficulty and duration of this journey – and believing that human rights should be recognized before, during, and afterward – this year’s UUSC Guest at Your Table theme for 2018-19 is Justice Across Borders.

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Suggested Hymns

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Recommended Reading

A Promise to People Who Migrate, From the Teachings of Many Faiths
Adapted by Joshua Leach from Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist teachings

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<p>The travelers shall not lodge outside, For I will open my doorway to them When I meet them on the road I will invite the strangers in, And give food to those who hunger, And water to those who thirst, And do good both to the neighbor And to the wayfarer at my side. There will be one law and judgment only For citizen and foreigner alike; Nor shall I oppress the stranger, For I know the hearts of strangers: I too was a stranger, I recall,</p>	<p>When in the land of Egypt. I will not follow the crowd of many, When it seeks to do injustice, Nor make of my caravan a cloister And vessel of despair. This too I promise, that I will: Give kindness to those who suffer, Be a friend to those in need, And assuage the sorrow of others, Conforming not to expectations, But being compassionate always and acting In a spirit of love.</p>
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Asylum

Sermon by The Rev. Angela Herrera

Asylum comes from a Greek term for sanctuary, *ἀσυλο* (asilo). In Greek, the word is made up of root words meaning “without right of seizure, inviolable.”

Sanctuary, *sanctuarium*, comes from the Latin *Sanctus*, meaning sacred, divine, holy, or just; and *arium* a container. A sanctuary is a place that holds what is holy, sacred, divine, or just.

Asylum. Sanctuary. We forget that the two words are sisters. One has retained its religious meaning; the other has become a political term. But they are kindred. To find asylum is to find sanctuary. To be in a sanctuary is to be in asylum. A place where what is holy, including the inherent worth and dignity of a human life, cannot be violated. A place where justice is sacred.

It is no accident that justice is right there with the holy in Latin, reminding us that they are of a piece. In the Christian scriptures, Jesus also links the holy with justice. In the Gospel of Matthew, he warns his followers to watch out for people who interpret the world falsely with their religion. He calls them false prophets. Watch out for false prophets. And he tells listeners how to identify them. He says, “You will know them by their fruits.”ⁱ

If we look at everything else Jesus says, we can guess what he means by fruits. He goes on and on about helping the poor, the afflicted, the stranger. He models it and talks about it. He crosses social boundaries and goes out of his own comfort zone to do it. A holy faith is one that creates a more just, compassionate world.

Other religions also connect the divine with justice and mercy. In the Hebrew Scriptures it is written: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.”ⁱⁱ The Qur’an tells us that we should “serve God... and do good to... those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer that you meet, and those who have nothing.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There is a humanitarian tradition among many nations to provide political sanctuary or asylum, which is when a country agrees to take in a foreigner, protecting the person from unjust arrest or persecution. In

About Rev. Herrera

Rev. Angela Herrera is the Senior Minister at the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Originally from Oregon, Angela was raised in a working class neighborhood in the Willamette Valley where she developed an early passion for social justice.

Angela holds a Master of Divinity degree from Harvard University. She completed a chaplaincy internship at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston and a parish internship at First Parish in Concord, Massachusetts.

She is the author of the Skinner House meditation manual, Reaching for the Sun, and co-creator of Lifting Our Voices: Readings in the Living Tradition.



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recent years, hundreds of thousands of people from Central America have sought refuge in the United States. They have commonly been met at the border with obfuscation, detainment, and rejection.

In 2018, in an effort to dissuade more people from seeking asylum, the US government began separating parents from children and detaining them, sometimes thousands of miles apart, with no means of communication. Hundreds of parents were then deported without their kids and without any idea of how to find them. The American Psychological Association and American Academy of Pediatrics immediately sounded the alarm, citing the overwhelming evidence that institutionalizing children away from their families causes lasting harm.^{iv} Images in the media of children warehoused in masses and without access to affection and holding – even from the strangers caring for them – sparked public outrage. Still, the process of reuniting families has dragged on for months, with no clear end in sight.

When governments fail to provide asylum or sanctuary, there is a perhaps even older tradition of churches doing so. The practice dates back to ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Hebrews, and beyond. Often when churches take up the mantle, it is because their nation's government is itself the persecutor or has behaved unjustly. In the 1980s, some churches took up this work in the United States, providing asylum in what came to be known as the Sanctuary Movement. The lessons from that time are relevant to the plight of Central American asylum-seekers today.

The beginnings of the Sanctuary Movement can be traced back to Tucson, Arizona, on a day when a Presbyterian minister named John Fife was asked to visit a local hospital.^{vi} Over a dozen people had just arrived, picked up by Border Patrol in the Sonoran desert with severe dehydration and heat stroke. But the staff had noticed that they weren't just sick; they were traumatized. Could Rev. Fife offer some pastoral care?

When he got there, the people told Fife heartrending stories about violence and persecution in their Central American homelands, especially Guatemala and El Salvador. The political situation had become so dangerous there that the people were forced to leave—to become migrants—crossing international borders in search of safety.

In Mexico, the migrants had encountered smugglers who promised to bring them across the US border. They crossed through mountainous terrain, walking all through the night... only to find themselves in the desert. As the sun rose, the temperature reached 115 degrees. There was very little shade—only a few scrubby bushes. There were no towns. Just sun. Sand. Scrub. Cactus.

The migrants told Fife that they were only half of their original group. Another dozen had died as they were walking on that first day.

Fife decided to help the group apply for political asylum. President Carter had signed the Refugee Act of 1980 declaring that asylum was for anyone with a legitimate fear of persecution or violence in their home country, whether due to their race, ethnicity, political, religious, or social group. Anyone who needed it could



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apply, and asylum was supposed to be granted on humanitarian, not political, grounds.

The case seemed clear, and Fife expected the process to be straightforward. But what he found was that while the US approved asylum requests for people from communist countries, it often denied requests from Central Americans, sometimes delivering people right back into the violence within days of their hearing.

It wasn't hard to see that political motivations were at work. Not only did the US have a point to make in accepting asylum seekers from communist countries, it had a point to *avoid* in denying asylum seekers from Central America. The truth was that the US was actively supporting the leaders of the violent regimes there. To accept asylum seekers would mean acknowledging that the US was supporting human rights violations.

Rather than allowing the government to deport those travelers for political reasons, which could lead to their deaths, Fife took them into his church. His actions attracted the public's attention, raising awareness of the government's moral failure. In turn, more churches got involved—five-hundred at the movement's height, including some Unitarian Universalist congregations.

At one point, the government sent two undercover operatives into John Fife's church. Fife recalls that the operatives stood out from the beginning—they were rougher than most church volunteers, and seemed to have an awful lot of experience on the border. It turned out they were former *coyotes*, human smugglers whom our government had arrested and then offered a deal. If they'd wear a wire and help get the leaders of the Sanctuary Movement arrested, the government would let the *coyotes* go free.

On the morning of his arrest, a sleeping Fife heard loud banging on his door. When he got up and opened it, there stood two uniformed immigration officials. His first thought, he says, was the group of migrants inside his church just across the street. So... he made the agents coffee. And read their indictment line for line. And stalled. And stalled. But eventually, sixty-three migrants were arrested and sixteen leaders indicted.

At first the leaders looked forward to their day in court. They had acted on clear religious teachings to care for the stranger, the wayfarer, the person facing unjust persecution. Equally importantly, the way they saw it, they weren't the law-breakers—the government was, for ignoring the Refugee Act. The trial would be a chance to make that clear. But they suffered a major setback when the federal judge in charge decided to bar any discussion of several topics. The topics were: the United States refugee law, international refugee law, conditions in El Salvador, conditions in Guatemala, or religious faith.

Fife's lawyer compared the situation to one in which a man's car breaks down on the road on a winter night when it is forty degrees below zero, and he walks to the only house around, finds it locked, and breaks in to get warm. And then he is charged with breaking and entering, with none of that story allowed in court. Without the context, Fife and his group were sure to lose.



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Sure enough, they were found guilty. Fife went home and organized his congregation to deal with his imprisonment. But then, to everyone's surprise and possibly due to public pressure, that same judge gave them only five years probation and no jail time. Fife went right back to providing sanctuary again... just as he told the judge he would.

At that point, the government decided to move on. They arrested a man and a woman for providing sanctuary in Albuquerque. This time a jury found them not guilty. Between those two outcomes, the Sanctuary Movement retained its strength and continued for some time.

Today, with migrants traversing the world, displaced by human-made and natural disasters, our country and others appear to have again traded a timeless and hallowed ethic of compassion, for politics and policies of xenophobia, racism, and exclusion.

We are again seeing an exodus of migrants fleeing from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras; a stream of asylum-seekers bigger than anything since the 1980s. And again, the US government is ignoring humanitarian laws. Not only is asylum denied to the vast majority of applicants, the US has also begun pursuing criminal prosecution against people who cross the US - Mexico border seeking asylum. No due process. No right to an attorney. Migrants, including children, are locked up, most often for a long time. Eighty percent of immigrants are held in jail-like detention centers for over a year, and fifty percent are detained for over two years. In many cases, immigrants with strong asylum cases, but who are unable to bear the prison-like conditions any longer while their cases drag on and on, choose deportation. They choose to head back into danger because we have taken away their freedom.

Is that really a choice?

In June, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions said, "If people don't want to be separated from their children, they should not bring them with them."^{vii} Sessions speaks of fleeing for your life as if it is a choice, and of granting asylum as if it is a favor. In reality, migrants have the right under both US and international laws to seek protection.

The horrors of family separation today recall the heart-wrenching stories of Jewish parents sending their children away on the limited spaces on ships headed for safety from the Nazis. In a world that was turning its back on refugees, there were literally not enough seats for the whole family to survive. Back then, parents were making the "choice" to separate from their children because of the world's passive response. Today, the U.S. has been actively doing it for them.

Just as it did in the 1980s, and just as it did in 1939 when it turned away a ship named the St. Louis carrying 900 Jewish refugees, the US is violating asylum-seekers' rights—and our own laws—by not providing them with due process, and is instead misleading and terrorizing men, women, and children.^{viii}

For the last ten years, the government has actively set out to deter immigration by stepping up



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enforcement and criminalization. This year's actions are part of that. But what the cold logic of these tactics fails to recognize is that our Central American “neighbors who are strangers”— these wayfarers— cannot stay in their homelands. They are in imminent, constant danger of violence and death. The United States' efforts to torment and reject them does not change the fact that they need refuge, safety, asylum, sanctuary.

What would it take for you leave your home, job, friends, church, extended family, culture, and everything familiar to you, and flee to an uncertain, unknown future in a foreign country, with no guarantee of safety or shelter? To risk being separated from your children or jailed?

The poet Warsan Shire writes

*no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark^{ix}*

Central Americans seeking asylum at the border have lost livelihoods, have lost loved ones, have been the victims of violence or the threat of it, and many are looking for refuge with family members in the US. Where would you go if home were the mouth of a shark? Where would you send children, and what risks would you take to save their lives?

In truth, what it would take for the US to no longer be seen as a possible refuge is for our government and citizens to become as dangerous, deadly, and terrifying as a Central American gang or a drug cartel. That is the logical underpinning of a state police response that treats refugees like criminals and their children—their little two-year-olds and eight-year-olds and vulnerable adolescents— as though they are a danger, rather than as people who are *in* danger.

It is especially shameful for the US to do so when our country's own actions in the 1980s – meddling with elections and supporting brutal dictatorships for political and economic gain – helped breed the violence and instability that thousands are fleeing in Central America today. Recent surges in migration are not “isolated events,” says Roberto Suro, founding director of the Pew Hispanic Center.^x They are “desperate developments” in a decades-long pattern. The US has a spiritual, humanitarian, legal, historical, and moral obligation to respond with compassion.

Suro also points out that the \$44 billion President Trump wants for immigration enforcement, detention, and the border wall is almost equal to the combined gross domestic product of Honduras and El Salvador. If a portion of that money were instead applied to creating economic opportunity and addressing root causes of violence, it could help some migrants to stay in their home country, with neighbors, friends, and family, and be part of that country's growth toward peace and prosperity—surely the most desirable outcome. Similarly, Americans should be asking how else we could be spending the two billion taxpayer dollars used to detain forty-thousand immigrants in privately-run, for-profit detention centers each year. How about psychosocial aid for asylum-seekers who have survived trauma? Perhaps we could use it to help families who have been separated find one other. We could use it to help families who have left everything



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behind to escape danger navigate a new legal system and integrate into an unfamiliar society.

There is enough—enough space, enough resources, enough time—to provide asylum to those in need. As the story of the Sanctuary Movement’s origins exemplifies, just as long as people have been turning away those in need, there have been people providing help.

Our UU tradition, like many other faiths, has a long history of providing sanctuary and support to those in need, particularly when governments are exacerbating problems or turning a blind eye. At the dawn of World War II, our denomination created the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee to help Jews and political dissidents escape Nazi Germany. One of UUSC’s projects on-the-ground in Europe was to accompany a ship full of children being sent to safety by parents who knew they would most likely not survive to see them again.

Since its founding in 1940, UUSC has continued to support those forced to leave their homes because of violence, political crisis, natural disaster, poverty, and climate change. Since the 1970s, supporting the rights of Central Americans has been one of UUSC’s consistent human rights priorities. UUSC operates through grassroots partnerships, standing with and assisting local leaders. Together, they not only provide relief during short-term crises, they also work for systemic change to prevent future harm.

One of UUSC’s current partners is Freedom for Immigrants, a group that oversees more than 1,500 volunteers visiting forty-three immigration detention centers to provide one-on-one companionship and help. Freedom for Immigrants also works at the legislative level, with the goal of ending immigration detainment once and for all, and keeps immigrant men, women, and children in view through storytelling and film. And they run a national hotline for people ensnared in U.S. immigration detention. The hotline relieves isolation, provides attorney referrals, and tracks and reports human rights abuses.

Each year, UUs have the opportunity to like their faith with justice through UUSC’s Guest at Your Table program. It is a way to “remember those who are in prison,” as it is written in the Hebrew Scriptures. A way of being with our neighbors in spirit. A way of reaching beyond our congregations, and supporting and insisting on the kind of sanctuary that is a human right.

Together we make a far greater impact than any one person or congregation could do alone. Won’t you join us?



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References

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ⁱⁱⁱVerse 4:36

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^{vi}Details of this story from "Church (Sanctuary, Part 1)." Podcast. 99% Invisible, Delaney Hall, 28 Feb. 2017, 99percentinvisible.org/episode/church-sanctuary-part-1/.

^{vii}Rosenberg, Eli. "Sessions Defends Separating Immigrant Parents and Children: 'We've Got to Get This Message out'." The Washington Post, WP Company, 5 June 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2018/06/05/sessions-defends-separating-immigrant-parents-and-children-weve-got-to-get-this-message-out/?utm_term=.9e50ce07ea3f.

^{viii}Murphy, Brian. "The US Rejected a Ship of Jewish Refugees, and a Twitter Bot Is Telling Their Stories." Miami Herald, Miami Herald, 27 Jan. 2017, 11:27pm, www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/national/article129147134.html.

^{ix}From Shire's poem "Home," <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/home-433/>

^xSuro, Roberto. "We Need to Offer More Than Asylum." The New York Times, The New York Times, 14 July 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/07/14/opinion/sunday/migration-asylum-trump.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad.



Moment for All Ages

by Carly Cronon, UUSC

Today, I want to share a story about a young woman, named Valentina, who is from El Salvador. El Salvador is a small country – smaller than almost all of the states in the United States – that is located south of here and of Mexico.

About a year ago, Valentina began to feel unsafe in her neighborhood, even when she was at home. People were being mean and saying frightening things to her. Valentina grew scared, so scared, that she wanted to leave her home, and her country, to be far enough away from the people she was afraid of.

As you may know, different countries in the world have different rules about who can come into the country and for how long – like if you go on vacation in a different country – but there are some rules that are true no matter where you go. One of these rules is: if you are afraid and in danger, you are allowed to leave where you are and go into another country for safety.

Valentina knew this, so she decided to come here to the United States to be safe. She wanted to go to California.

But as it turns out, Valentina's trip wasn't going to be easy. From El Salvador to California, it is about 3,000 miles. Imagine driving from one end of the United States to another, like from San Francisco to New York City. That's how far Valentina had to go. On top of this, Valentina didn't have much money or any relatives and friends to stay with along the way.

Thankfully, Valentina met a lot of new people who helped her. They gave her food, water, and places to sleep. They let her shower and gave her clean clothes. Since Valentina speaks Spanish and not English, they helped with translation once she arrived in California. They also gave her tidbits of advice and guidance throughout her journey, which was especially helpful because the process for coming into a new country to ask for safety can be complicated.

A lot of these new people who helped Valentina get to California were Unitarian Universalists. Unitarian Universalists understood that what Valentina was going through was difficult and lonely, so many of them, across the country, went to their families and friends to raise money, find help, and support the people who were directly providing Valentina with food, water, and the other things she needed along her journey.

Just like we did when we helped support Valentina, we can work together to make a difference, even when someone is out of the country or far away. Because people who are afraid deserve to be protected and feel safe, no matter where they are. That is how Unitarian Universalists helped Valentina come to California. And now that Valentina has made it, she is helping other people hoping to find a home here, too. Thanks for listening.

About Carly

UUSC's Associate for Congregational Giving Programs, Carly plays a critical role in connecting UUSC with congregations throughout the United States. A lifelong UU, Carly received her bachelor's degree in English, creative writing, and education from Colby College.