

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Theme: “Sanctuary”
Sunday, October 7, 2018 10:30am

Sermon **“Will You Harbor Me?”** Rev. Paul Sprecher

The Patriarch Abraham – regarded as the “father” of the three Abrahamic faiths Judaism, Christianity & Islam – was told by God to leave what we now know as Iraq and immigrate to Palestine. In turn, he offers radical hospitality to those traveling through the desert, sanctuary from the heat and hunger that wayfarers suffer, an umbrella in a storm.

The Rabbi’s Midrash says that Abraham kept his tent open on all 4 sides so that he could see and prepare to welcome any wayfarers coming from afar.

The Children of Israel (Abraham’s grandson) became slaves in Egypt. When Moses eventually led them to freedom, they were constantly reminded to welcome the stranger.

Even before arriving in the Promised Land they were told [Exodus 20:21] “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”

Deut. 10:19 19 “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Even before setting down root in the Promised land, the Israelites were instructed to set up another form of sanctuary. Cities of Refuge were designated to protect anyone who might have accidentally killed someone else. If no sanctuary was available, the closest relative of the person who was killed would

be obligated to “take a life for a life” and avenge the death of the member of their own family. But in the case of an accident, such vengeance would be inappropriate – so the Cities of Refuge provided a place of sanctuary until a trial could be held to determine if the supposed killer was in fact culpable.

Our Thought for Contemplation this morning by Naomi Shihab Nye tells us that,

“The Arabs used to say, when a stranger appears at your door, feed him for three days before asking who he is, where he’s come from.... That way, he’ll have strength enough to answer. Or, by then you’ll be such good friends you don’t care...”

So these ancient stories remind us to provide sanctuary, remembering how we also have needed sanctuary.

Of course, Jesus in Matthew 25 declares blessing upon us when we respond to the least of these, strangers whom we welcome. This is the passage that provides the name for the Matthew project at First Parish Taunton, whom we have been supporting with Share the Plate,

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

These ancient imperatives become the foundation for treating churches as sanctuaries from persecution, places that are not to be violated by civil authority. When this is violated, as when Thomas á Becket was slain at the altar of his own cathedral, consequences for offenders could be dire.

The Underground Railroad provided sanctuary for slaves who managed to escape, sometimes in houses, occasionally even in churches. Our own Unitarian hero Theodore Parker famously said that for a time he wrote his sermons with a pistol at the ready to protect a slave whom he was harboring from slave-catchers.

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

Our nation must bear the shame of the times we refused sanctuary to those fleeing persecution and potentially death, as when we turned away Jews fleeing from the Holocaust in Europe. Perhaps the most famous case was that of the *St. Louis*, which set sail from Hamburg on May 13, 1939, with 935 people on board, almost all of whom were Jews. Most had applied for visas to the United States but needed to wait in Cuba – where they had visitor’s visas – until their papers were processed in the US. Cuba changed its visa policy just before the *St. Louis* sailed and almost all of the refugees were refused permission to leave the ship, which then sailed toward Miami in the hopes that the US would accept them. Instead they were turned back and returned to Europe where more than a quarter perished in the Holocaust.¹

The shame of that failure to offer sanctuary haunted Americans after the war, especially when the full destructiveness of the Holocaust became evident.

Unitarian Universalists can be proud that at least some of us worked to provide sanctuary for European Jews. Our Unitarian Service Committee was created through the efforts of Martha & Waitstill Sharp, who left his position as minister

of our congregation in Wellesley Hills to go to Europe and find sanctuary in other countries for as many Jewish children as they could manage. Great Britain was far more generous in welcoming these children than the United States. The image of a blazing chalice was adopted as a way of identifying supplies sent by the Service Committee and it is from there that we have adopted the flaming chalice which we light each week as a symbol of our Unitarian Universalist faith. After the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961, we created the UU Service Committee, which we in this congregation support with our Guest at Your Table donations and with individual memberships in the UUSC.

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

Many of our congregations welcomed refugees fleeing from violence in Central America during the 1970's and 1980's as part of the original Sanctuary movement, including Arlington Street Church in Boston where I served my ministerial internship. Today there is a new sanctuary movement harboring refugees from deportation by ICE. At least four of our congregations have chosen to harbor refugees in danger of deportation over the past few years, including First Unitarian in Denver, All Souls UU in Colorado Springs, the UU Church of Akron, OH, and First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, TX. At least a dozen more of our congregations are preparing themselves to become sanctuaries for refugees.

Rev. Meg Barnhouse, senior minister at First UU in Austin, tells the story of how they came to be a sanctuary congregation:

Sulma Franco, an LGBT activist from Guatemala, needed sanctuary. She and her partner had a food truck here in Austin, and she'd been here four years, meeting regularly with immigration officials as her plea for asylum was processed. She'd had good hope of a visa, but her lawyer messed up the paperwork and she'd ended up in detention for seven months. Her partner had managed somehow to raise the \$15,000 for her bond. With the bond at risk, still with a good chance of being granted a visa, it seemed there was no way her paperwork would be completed within the time she had left: her deportation date was in ten days....

I told the [church] board I felt rushed by this request, pushed, that I didn't like doing things without knowing what I was doing—that I didn't have enough information. None of us liked that. It was scary. We all preferred knowing what we were in for before we decided anything. What would the legal ramifications be? Could she not just stay in someone's home? No, sanctuary was an ancient tradition, dating back centuries, where soldiers would not come into a holy place and drag someone out. A church was the only place that would do....

Suddenly, a man at the end of the table said, "I think we should do it!"

A thoughtful and lively conversation ensued. Each of us struggled more *within* than *with* one another. A man at the other end of the table said, “This fits perfectly with our mission that we say together every Sunday. If we don’t do this, what do we do?”

The minister of a nearby Presbyterian church called to say his congregation wanted to partner with us. The Sunday after Sulma moved in, I ... told [the congregation] about the Presbyterians who were willing to stand with us, and that their minister was preaching about us that very morning, telling his folks that the UUs had “seized the prophetic moment.” When I introduced Sulma to the congregation after the sermon, the people rose as one, applauding in welcome....

Immigration officials, promising she would not be arrested at their office, requested an August meeting in San Antonio. About fifty of us accompanied her. [Several of us] locked arms with her as the others stood in the hot sun singing. The TV cameras were out in force. The three of us, alongside Sulma’s new lawyer, sat as lengthy paperwork got filled out. She was granted a stay of removal. “People all the way to Washington know about this case,” the agent said.

A whoop of triumph arose as we came out, Sulma holding her paperwork high. We celebrated with Tex-Mex food and mariachi music.

We hope that 1,000 churches of all denominations will become sanctuary churches, that 1,000 lawyers will work on the cases, and that the immigration system will feel the pressure of 1,000 sturdy sanctuaries surrounded by busy people of good will who resist the system in order to bring transformation and greater justice.²

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

I am not advocating that we become a sanctuary congregation, but perhaps we should consider supporting a sanctuary congregation in Brockton that proposes to offer sanctuary. And it's worth considering whether we would be willing to harbor someone if an emergency call came to us like the call to our congregation in Austin, unprepared as they were.

As importantly, we should each think about how each of us personally can offer an umbrella as sanctuary from the rain and the storms. And how we as a congregation might do more to be an umbrella, a sanctuary.

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

This is the prayer of Shantideva, an 8th century Indian Buddhist monk.

May I become at all times, both now and forever

A protector of those without protection

A guide for those who have lost their way

A ship for those with oceans to cross

A bridge for those with rivers to cross

A sanctuary for those in danger

A lamp for those without light

A place of refuge for those who lack shelter

And a servant to all in need
For as long as space endures,
And for as long as living beings remain,
Until then may I, too, abide
To dispel the misery of the world.

AMEN

¹ Dara Lind, "How America's rejection of Jews fleeing Nazi Germany haunts our refugee policy today," VOX, Jan 27, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/1/27/14412082/refugees-history-holocaust>

² Meg Barnhouse, "Give me shelter: How my congregation in Austin, Texas, decided to give sanctuary to an LGBT activist facing deportation, UU World, 9/28/2015, <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/deciding-offer-sanctuary>