

PRAYER for Immigration service

by Bill Graves

April 2008

As we gather here this morning—let us pause for a moment to remember the faces of those caught in the web of human tragedy permeating our system of immigration and let us wash their memory with our love.

We remember the victims of enforcement of immigration laws whose loved ones and providers have been taken from them;

We remember Ana Reyes, featured in last Sunday's Seattle Times-PI, who was arrested in the middle of the night in her Burian apartment last Fall after 17 years in this country picking hops in Yakima and cleaning hotel rooms at Seatac. She was shackled in front of her two young daughters and separated from them. She is currently living in the worst barrios of Mexico City, barely surviving by selling homemade quesadillas and gorditas as a street vendor there.

We remember the faces of 870,000 souls arrested in the United States in 2007, and forcibly deported. Ana Reyes is only one out of 870,000 stories of despair

We remember the farmer and the hotel operator who are dependent upon hiring people without proper documentation like Ana Reyes because they cannot otherwise stay competitive and no one else comes forward to do the work.

We remember those who enforce the immigration laws such as my nephew, Peter Graves. We appreciate the difficult and discouraging and thankless aspects of their job and pray they be made whole and live in peace.

We remember those of us who are torn and tormented, and those who are tempted to join them. May we have the courage and exquisite wisdom to reject vengeance, to restore wholeness, to bring reconciliation.

May we be the messengers of peace and good will. May we be the peacemakers and the life-affirmers and bringers of salvation to this troubled world.

We ask this in the name of all that we deem holy and sustaining.

Amen.

Shelter in the Rain

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Before we continue our service, I was wondering...do any of you plan to run for President of the United States? Or even Mayor of Mount Vernon? I ask that because the subject of immigration is complex and I just might say something here that could get you into trouble given the tenor of the times. So, I think I should take a slight diversion before we talk about immigration.

I'm referring, of course to the recent controversy about Rev. Jeremiah Wright and his parishioner Barak Obama...because it has implications for us and we need to understand our covenant together....

You see, in certain orthodox/hierarchical faiths where edicts are read to the faithful on a Sunday morning, the

clergy does attempt to dictate the beliefs and values of the people in the pews....

but that is not true of those faith communities whose authority structure is congregational...each congregation being independent of any higher authority. Rev. Wright is a UCC, Congregational minister...Obama is absolutely free to disagree with his minister—it's fundamental and it's called freedom of the pew! and his pastor has freedom of the pulpit...that is the way with their denomination, and it is the way with ours. In fact the Congregational Church and the Unitarian Church were one until we had a little squabble about 200 years ago. But both retain this congregational covenant of a free pulpit and a free pew.

The controversy that arose this past month is a result of several factors: 1) ignorance of this covenant and our liberal religious protestant way; 2) a lack of knowledge about the cultural depth and meaning of African American prophetic preaching style born out of protest in the crucible of slavery, lynchings and Jim Crow; and 3) of course, there are obvious political motivations.

It is utterly unconscionable to think that anything I or Amanda might say could be used to tarnish someone in our pews who listens to it. We hope we can take some risks with our sermons. I would not expect you to ever have to defend me or disown me or leave the congregation if you didn't agree with me!

That said, let me know if you are planning to run for office!
[Introduce video and song by Stevie Wonder: "Shelter in the Rain".

Giving shelter in the rain is about offering salvation to human beings in desperate need. I said in the newsletter letter blurb for this sermon: "If we are not a religion of salvation, then I don't know what we are about."

Salvation is a powerful word. Maybe its our ultimate measure of the worth of us as an institution—whether we do or do not offer salvation to people.

The word is derived from two related Latin words *salus* meaning health and *salvus* meaning safety. I invite you when you look at the symbol of our denomination, the flaming chalice, to be reminded that we are an organization that stands for salvation both in the sense of offering health and safety.

Health in the sense of spiritual health or wholeness...as we support each other in the free pursuit of increased wisdom, strength of character, inner and outer peace, courage, patience, and compassion.

Safety in the sense of reaching out to our fellow human beings in need and saying "Come, come whoever you are, you are loved and we will help you just as we would hope for help if we found ourselves on the brink of being crushed.

If you took the class I offered last Fall for new members you might have heard me talk about the historical stories behind our flaming chalice but they bear repeating as we get ready to consider whether we want to be a part of this "New Sanctuary Movement".

The chalice reminds us of the story of Jan Huss, who in the 14th century, at a time when and most other rites of the church were available only to a select clergy, dared to take the chalice of holy communion outside of the cathedral in Prague and offer it to the common people. He offered salvation. For that he was burned at the stake.

And, we know that the flaming chalice first became identified with Unitarians when it was used as the symbol of an underground railway our service committee set up to rescue those that the German Nazis would harm viciously because of who they were, the Jews, and Gypsies and homosexuals and religious minorities. You can only imagine what the symbol of salvation the flaming chalice meant to those people: A beacon of life and love cradling them over the abyss of hate and death. There but for chance and the grace of God go I.

So, you see, we are a religion that's about salvation. I know that our Christian brethren also make regular use of that word proudly and piously. I know a few of them are involved in the New Sanctuary Movement and those I salute. However, I have searched the web trying to find sermons by their religious leaders on the topic of immigrant rights and I'll tell you there aren't many. That seems to me a little curious since the topic is hot right now and also because the Bible is full of utterances on the subject.

For example Leviticus 19:34 says: "The alien who resides among you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt...." It would seem like pulpits across America would proclaim the obvious parallel: The Hebrews had come from slavery in Egypt and know what it was like to be exploited and taken advantage of but now had land and wealth. Ring any bells? Almost all of us are descendents of immigrants seeking salvation from oppression.

So there is a gap, a void here, a massive human tragedy largely being looked at intentionally with a blind eye. It is a place crying for an infusion of love that requires courage to enter. It is a place we are called to enter.

Because of our Universalist faith that denies orthodox doctrines that say there's only one way to be saved, and because of our Unitarian faith that we are all One, and nothing is saved unless all is saved, we often find ourselves defending the value of the many against the tyranny of the one.

Our UU faith should give us pause when we hear politicians declare that the choices are simple, the dichotomies clear. The view that immigration is a battle of us against them, the chosen few against the unrefined multitude is naïve and dangerous. It threatens to turn us into a police state protected by a new iron curtain. And, it fails to recognize the reality that our economic vigor is dependent on imported labor doing the jobs Americans don't want.

We sense that injustice anywhere leads inexorably to injustice everywhere. If we have in our midst a class of people without rights or voice or legal protection its like a cancer that eats at our whole society. If a certain group can be exploited, than the whole is infected. Recall Richard's reading that opened this service with "And then they came for me."

On the other end of the spectrum the question eventually comes down to how far our obligations as compassionate human beings extend. Our open hearts must be tempered by realism. If everyone were free to come to America who wishes to do so, there would soon be nothing left worth coming to.

I don't pretend to know exactly what the best immigration law and policy ought to be. But I do know that the nation cannot be harmed and certainly will be helped by our infusion of love and compassion into the arena.

One of my core religious values is the redemptive power of love as taught by Gandhi, MLK, Thomas Merton (who is the focus of my sermon in two weeks), the Dali Lama (who is appearing right now in Seattle), and others. It teaches me that while our primary allegiance and support must be with the oppressed, in the long run our best hope of making a difference is always through engaging those with whom we disagree with a dialogue of love rather than an attitude filled with the same kind of fear and hate that leads to the violence and oppression we seek to confront.

The writer, Zora Neale Hurston, spoke truth when she said, “Love makes your soul crawl out of its hiding place.”

It is time to crawl from our hiding places and get on with the ministry of salvation, of growing souls and bringing peace and justice to our lives and the world. As my friend Peter Luton says: “We incarnate a powerful, hopeful, life-giving vision for the world in all its beauty and tragedy. We meet. We embrace. We hope. We heal. We love.”

Amen and may it be so.

Now I’d like to yield the pulpit for a few remarks by Jim Justice of the Skagit Immigrant Rights Council.

Closing words:

May the Love which overcomes all differences,
Which heals all wound,
Which puts to flight all fears,
Which reconciles all who are separated,
Be in us and among us
Now and always.

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