

# **And the Walls Came Tumlin' Down**

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer  
Sunday, September 24, 2017

**First Unitarian Universalist Church**  
Rochester, Minnesota

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## **READINGS**

*The Parable of the Good Samaritan*, according to the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 10

*Partial Clearing* by Judith Terzi, based on a song by Woodie Guthrie

## SERMON

The night in jail was long.

The detainees had no water – the air conditioning turned down to 50 degrees.

There were no blankets. No place to lie down except the cement floor.

The lights were kept on all the time.

Guards banged the steel doors to keep everyone awake.

Several Unitarian Universalist social activists were held in jail overnight for protesting the inhumane treatment of undocumented people in Arizona, under the watch of Sheriff Joe Arpaio – the Sheriff who was known for tactics of humiliation and inhumane treatment of undocumented inmates – as well found guilty of racial profiling in policing.

Some of the protestors were in a cell close to a group of undocumented women who were likely scheduled to be deported to Mexico.

In their *Standing on the Side of Love* yellow t-shirts they found ways to communicate their support to the detainees. *The motioned – “I see you – I love you”*

And whispered *si se puede*, Cesar Chavez’s motto – *yes we can*.

These activists were clear in their role – there’s was of public witness and solidarity – their night in jail, uncomfortable as it was, was not about them.

It never was.

Their discomfort paled in comparison to the experience of the undocumented individuals whose very lives, families, homes, dreams – were at stake.

We are inheritors, bearers of a tradition,  
that has always believed in the centrality of justice –  
that allegiance of the heart,  
commitment of the heart and mind and soul –  
is to just and fair treatment.

Even the street our church is on – *Walden Lane*  
which gives imagery of the tranquil pond near Concord, Massachusetts,  
living a life close to nature and void of noise and stress  
in the teachings of Henry David Thoreau –  
even the seemingly peaceful sentiment of *Walden*  
has a history of civil disobedience.

Thoreau wrote, in his essay, *Civil Disobedience*:

*If injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go. ... If it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.*

*What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn...*

*Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them,  
or shall we endeavor to amend them,  
and obey them until we have succeeded,  
or shall we transgress them at once?*

*As for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the evil [of unjust laws], they take too much time, one's life will be gone.*

*When I converse with the freest of my neighbors, I perceive that,  
whatever they say about the magnitude and seriousness of the [issue of the day],  
and their regard for the public tranquility, the long and the short of the matter is,  
they dread the consequences to their property and families of disobedience to [the government]*

As this congregation is in the midst of voting on a congregational resolution – a resolution that would enable the Board to discern whether to become, or not, a *Sanctuary or Sanctuary-supporting Church*, there have been important conversations happening – good questions, valid concerns, and deep reflection.

For those who have not been able to attend the forums, services, or read the information or asked questions of the task force working on this online, here is a brief summary:

- *If* the congregation votes positively, and *if* the Board discerns that we could be a *Sanctuary* church, we would be then open to requests through Isaiah MN, an interfaith justice organization, to host one individual or one family in our church, facing the threat of deportation. It would not be indefinite, but would be a delaying process as they work with social and legal resources to find ways to stay in the country legally.
- *If* the Board decides to be a *Sanctuary supporting* congregation, we would help provide volunteers or resources for another congregation that would host an individual or family.
- Churches, along with hospitals and schools, are considered, historically and by current policy, as *sensitive locations* – where immigration law enforcement is far less likely to enter and remove a person to be deported. It is not impossible, but unlikely – the fact that we are a church provides some level of refuge.
- This would only be in response to requests through Isaiah – and most importantly, only upon request of an individual or family who would want to do this – knowing the risks involved. Isaiah is engaged in processes to help determine candidates for Sanctuary, meaning they have potential to stay legally, and are likely already connected with resources.
- It would be a practice of public witness – telling their story publically, as this is a practice of lifting up unjust and inhumane laws in the public discourse to help change the system. Legally, then, we would not be harboring someone, as there would be no concealing or hiding. There are various opinions if housing someone in our church is even clearly breaking the law or not – and if so, varying opinions on what laws. We have connected with legal counsel so if we were to pursue this, we would be aware of what we're actually getting in to.
- This is one way, among many, that our church can engage with Immigration Justice.

That's a snapshot.

Within that, people of goodwill may have different opinions about its efficacy, its intent, its consequences.

It would be disingenuous, as your newly called minister, to be unclear about my beliefs about this.

While the Board is, rightly so, unable to take a public stance on a resolution during the voting – as your minister, and by the nature of the free pulpit, I am charged, and called, to speak the truth, as I understand it, in love.

You know what – I don't want to go to jail. I don't think anyone wishes for that. Not just for myself, but for my family. But you know what else – it's not about me.

It's not even about this church –  
it's about marginalized communities that are crying out for help  
it's about privileged individuals and institutions that have resources to leverage  
it's about a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person –

Regardless of the outcome of the vote,  
it is clear that this church, and our tradition,  
have and will continue to work for a more just and beautiful world –  
in a thousand ways to provide Sanctuary in the largest sense –

Sanctuary for the body, mind, soul –  
for many marginalized communities and individuals –  
to be bold in our support of those who are under the weight of systemic oppression  
because of their skin color, their gender identity, their sexual orientation,  
their ethnic heritage, their religious belief –

This whole conversation  
around this old, ancient religious teaching  
of *love thy neighbor as thyself* –  
is about noticing the stranger, noticing whomever,  
at this moment and at this time,  
is lying in the gutter in need of compassion –  
it's about searching deep within and asking ourselves  
-what can we offer to the bending  
of the moral arc of the universe toward justice.

That phrase – the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice –  
is from Unitarian Theodore Parker – and was picked up and made famous  
by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. King, in his speech entitled, *The Knock at Midnight*, has a powerful reminder  
of what the church is called to. He writes,

*In many instances the church has so aligned itself with the privileged classes  
and so defended the status quo that it has been unwilling  
to answer the knock at midnight.*

*The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state,  
but rather the conscience of the state.*

*It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool.*

*If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant  
social club without moral or spiritual authority.*

*If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace  
and for economic and racial justice,  
it will forfeit the loyalty of millions  
and cause men everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will.*

*But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo,  
and, recovering its great historic mission,  
will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace,  
People far and near will know the church as a great fellowship of love  
that provides light and bread for lonely travellers at midnight.*

Where was it  
where we first fell into the delusion  
of our separateness. Of our “other-ness”

Was it somewhere between the Tigris and the Euphrates,  
or at the Rio Grande – or near the Mississippi.  
Somewhere down from the tower of babel,  
we fell into the first sin – of fearing difference.  
And we began to build walls.

In the dry air and hot sun,  
families longing for life and freedom,  
for food on the table and safety for their children,  
cross the desert.

The ancient texts remind us  
and the justice workers remind us  
and the modern poets remind us  
that it is in the desert  
where God has a history of travelling  
hand in hand with the oppressed  
searching for life, survival, hope.

The desert is also a condition of the heart –  
the hardened heart of indifference, intolerance, apathy.

And the walls that we place to seemingly protect ourselves  
we soon realize  
are prison walls  
locking us in our golden cages  
of privilege – isolating us from the fabric of life  
from our kindred – which is all people.

We’ve built walls of prejudice, fear,  
and a delusional false sense of rightful ownership –  
as if we all aren’t guests on any land we inhabit.

Heaven has no borders.  
When we forget this, we set up the gates of hell.

Kao Kalia Yang, a Hmong American and author of *The Latecomer*, writes about what home means – how identity is more fluid than the borders that humanity has placed to separate.

What is home – to the immigrant, the refugee –  
what is home – to the poor, the outcast, the neglected.

While the Hmong experience in Minnesota is not the same as the experience of Mexican and Latino people – there are so many similarities – around identity, around land, around belonging. Yang writes,

*Hmong is an ethnic minority. We don't have a country.  
We are here looking for a home.*

*They walked away from a land that they loved – the land holding their brother, the land holding the grave of their father.*

*My father was hit to the ground by a soldier in the refugee camp. He said later, "It was the first time I felt like I would never find a place like the village I was born. I kept thinking I am a man, too – I have a wife and a child. But it didn't matter because we had no home anymore."*

*The Hmong had been like the land, fertile and green, waiting for new growth. Because we were an old people, our lands had grown wild. In this camp, our big trees would be cut down, our large stones thrown out, and new seeds would be planted. The Hmong people were pushed together, pushed apart, pushed out.*

*I knew that long ago, my family had lived on such mountains. I knew that my grandfather had been buried on such mountains. I knew that my grandmother had been born on such mountains. The mountains were our faraway, long-ago homes. I wondered if one day I would walk upon them.*

*English was hard on my tongue. I was learning the meanings of words and how to write them, but my voice sounded different to me in English.*

*A new chapter of our lives unfolded as we strived to become Americans. We sank our roots deep into the land, took stake in the ground, and prayed to the moon that one day the wind would carry us into a new stronger home that could not be taken away, that would not fall down on us, that would hold us safe and warm.*



*There was a clear division: the Hmong heart  
(the part that held the hands of my mom and dad and grandma protectively every  
time we encountered the outside world, the part that cried because Hmong people  
didn't have a home, the part that listened to Hmong songs and fluttered about  
looking for clean air and crisp mountains in flat St. Paul)  
or the American heart  
(the part that was lonely for the outside world, that stood by and watched the  
fluency of other parents with their boys and girls; children who lingered in the  
clubs and sports teams after school waiting to be picked up later by parents who  
could.)*

*My father said, "It is very important that you tell this part of our story: the Hmong  
came to America without a homeland. Even in the very beginning, we knew that  
we were looking for a home. Other people, in moments of sadness and despair,  
can look to a place in the world: where they might belong. We are not like that. I  
knew that our chance was here. Our chance to share in a new place and a new  
home."*

For Kao Kalia Yang,  
for Rosalita and Juan,  
for parents and children, sisters and brothers –  
for workers and builders and dreamers –  
for so many, *lonely travellers at midnight*  
because of the circumstances of where they came from,  
because of the life they have built out of hope and need,  
because this land, this place,  
which has treated them as other and stranger  
is the only place they have ever known  
the only place that has felt like it could be, might be, home –  
for so many  
the choice is so clear:  
it is better to risk life and liberty,  
to risk breaking the law –  
because it is suffocating our chances  
at any life worth living at all.

When the hard heart is watered with empathy  
and the closed soul soaked in compassion  
the rigid borders dissolve.

Something happens  
when we begin to feel,  
even a tiny bit,  
the hot desert sun  
and feel the weeping of parents for their children  
and feel the heartache of longing for a different life  
Something happens  
when we remember the "other" is actually in our midst -  
earning paychecks and buying diapers,  
studying physics and writing poetry,  
living the dream of their ancestors  
against a waiting line longer than their chance of survival.  
Something happens  
when the people remember they are family  
and we have the tools we need  
like Joshua at Jericho to dance down the wall -

And so the wall came down  
and children embraced their parents  
and the people found dignified work  
and the hardened heart melted into love –  
yes, when the people remember who they are  
and that heaven and justice is ours to create  
then the walls come tumbling down  
crumble to dust  
from the dancing rhythm  
of the songs, the poems, the common work  
of love made flesh – enough love to save us all.

*Danny Bryck, part of a coalition of Jewish people of color, wrote these words, entitled, "If You Could Go Back..."*

I know, I know  
If you could go back you  
would walk with Jesus  
You would march with King  
Maybe assassinate Hitler  
At least hide Jews in your basement  
It would all be clear to you

But people then, just like you  
were baffled, had bills  
to pay and children they didn't  
understand and they too  
were so desperate for normalcy  
they made anything normal,  
and they hid in their houses  
and watched it on television,  
and wrung their hands, or didn't,  
Because they were afraid,  
and their parents sick, and their job pays shit  
and what's with those kids sitting down in the highway,  
and chaining themselves to buildings,  
what's their problem?

That kid - That's King.  
And this is Selma.  
And Berlin.  
And Jerusalem.  
And now is when they need you to be brave.  
Now  
is when we need you to go back  
and give up the things you're chained to  
and make it look so easy in your  
grandkids' history books  
Now - right now -  
is when, someday in the future  
it will all be clear  
to them.

How is it ethical -  
in a country created on stolen land  
built on the backs of enslaved people  
how is it ethical in any moral code -  
to build walls  
and enforce borders  
so rigidly, so inhumanely,  
that people  
and their stories  
and their lives and their dreams –  
are expendable, insignificant, too costly –  
too complicated –  
that we become,  
in the words of Dr. King speaking about the white moderate –  
*more committed to order than to justice.*

The question from ancient scripture  
no matter how you have voted on the resolution  
is a moral question, an ethical question – more than political -  
behold, says the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee,  
behold, I stand at the door at midnight,  
and knock,  
in what ways are we ready  
to lift up our gates  
and say to the lonely traveler at midnight –  
“come, share our bread.  
You are welcome here.”