

***El Santuario***  
**Reverend Cyndi Simpson**  
**A sermon given at the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, on May 14, 2017**

Our worship theme this month is *Our Future*. In some way or another, each of this month's services will address various futures for this congregation. Some of these futures are here already in some ways. Some futures are dreams and aspirations and hopes. Projected here you see one image of the Future I find very attractive: it shows diversity of all kinds and abundance.

Today I am speaking on the concept of Sanctuary. In Spanish, it is *el santuario*. This congregation is considering becoming involved in the local sanctuary movement that is forming – the Omaha Area Sanctuary Network. The Social Justice Committee will be discussing Sanctuary next week, along with other issues. However, this concern around Sanctuary is larger than the Social Justice Committee. If we reach consensus on being part of the New Sanctuary Movement, there will be many wonderful and spiritually fulfilling ministries for all of us to engage.

We will begin with a short video on Sanctuary: "Sanctuary Rising." [View video](#)

**Why Sanctuary?**

Before I can get into what Sanctuary is, I have to get into the 'why.' And that is much too big an issue for one sermon or fifteen! In a nutshell: our immigration system is broken, it is corrupt and it is unbelievably complex for no good reason. It can take decades for people to move through the immigration system legally. Decades during which they may be separated from immediate family members.

Detentions and deportations of undocumented immigrants also have increased in direct proportion to the presence and operation of privately-owned detention centers. Just as mass incarceration has been a result and a cause of a privatized prison system for lawbreakers, the private prison industry has taken over the detention system under contract with the Federal government. In many cases, the Federal government is required by their contracts with private prisons to *guarantee* a certain number of detainees for each prison. If the number drops below a certain amount, the government must pay penalties.

People languish in the detention centers for months and years, separated from their family members. While the wheels of our immigration system move so slowly. Detainees – the vast majority of whom have committed no crime – are kept in substandard conditions with **inadequate** medical care, translation services, food, spiritual resources and recreation. In some places, they are kept in cages outside when it is over 100 degrees and in unheated or even air-conditioned cells when it is freezing. They are often beaten and abused in other ways during their arrests and incarceration.

Detention and deportation is a **business**, a **for-profit business** that depends on having a never-ending stream of immigrants. And having elected officials willing to pass laws to increase the numbers of detainees. There is not time for me to unpack all that. Right now, I'm assuming the complete failure of our immigration system for the purpose of talking to you about Sanctuary.

I will say right now that our immigration system is inhumane and unjust and a disgrace to this nation. As people of faith, we are called to resist and disrupt and work for change in this system. As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to the work of Sanctuary by our First principle: to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people. We are called by our Second principle: justice, equity and compassion in human relations. And we are called by our Sixth principle: the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

Our call to provide Sanctuary as religious people is well captured by the Vision Statement of the New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia on the front of your Order of Service. Let's read it together:  
*We work together to bend the arc of the moral universe towards justice and transform our communities into a place where immigrants, families, friends, and neighbors are safe, respected, and welcomed; where economic, spiritual, and emotional wholeness are realized; and where borders and divisions disappear as we build a community welcoming to everyone.*

--Vision Statement of the New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia, 2017

### **What is Sanctuary?**

A bit of history. (From *Sanctuary Not Deportation: A Faithful Witness to Building Welcoming Communities.*)  
*Sanctuary is one of the most ancient traditions that we have as a people of faith. The ancient Hebrew people allowed temples and even whole cities to declare themselves places of refuge for persons accused of a crime, a practice that allowed those wrongfully accused or facing unjust punishment to escape swift and harsh retribution until the matter could be resolved. In the late Roman Empire fugitives could find refuge in the precincts of Christian churches. Later during the medieval period, churches in England were recognized sanctuaries, offering safe haven for a temporary period to accused wrong doers.*

*In the United States the first practical provision of anything like sanctuary occurred in the years before the Civil War. The Underground Railroad came into being to help enslaved people flee the South and find safety in many congregations and homes throughout the country. In the early 1970s faith communities opened their doors to conscientious objectors who'd been drafted into the Vietnam War.*

*When refugees from the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador began to flee to the United States in the late 1970s, the U.S. government did not recognize them as political refugees seeking asylum. Many were deported and received in their countries by death squads, and murdered immediately. From this dire injustice, the Sanctuary Movement was born. It peaked with over 500 congregations establishing an underground railroad whereby asylum seekers, moved through the United States to safe houses and safe congregations in Canada.*

*The Sanctuary Movement sought to remind the United States government of our core national values and to hold up the truth that the US was **directly** supporting the dictatorships and death squads of Central America with arms, money and training[to oppress their own citizens]. The Sanctuary Movement won the inclusion of Central Americans in our asylum laws as part of the 1986 immigration reform law. It is because of courageous truth tellers from Central America and the Sanctuary Movement who followed them that Central Americans today have the legal right to claim asylum.*

*Drawing on this tradition, communities of faith have once again seen the need to declare Sanctuary for immigrants as the rise of deportations continues to separate families. In the 1980s we were compelled by the call to welcome the stranger, as we opened our doors to newly arriving refugees and immigrants.*

**Now** we are moved by the call to love our neighbors as ourselves, as those who are entering into Sanctuary are most often **long term members of our communities** - our [long-time] neighbors.

*In 2007, an initiative known as the New Sanctuary Movement took shape with coalitions of congregations in major cities throughout the country. As workplace and neighborhood raids escalated, these congregations opened their doors to provide refuge to those facing deportation. Raids and deportations increased hugely under the Obama Administration.*

*In 2012, almost a half-million people were deported. During the 2014 influx of Central American refugees seeking asylum, the Obama Administration committed even more strongly to deporting these men, women and children who came here for safety, [as you heard in the story of Erika, Jorge, Kevin and Samira]. And in 2015, Sanctuary congregations and their allies stopped thousands of deportations through case-by-case advocacy.*

So here we are in 2017. As promised during the current President's campaign, deportations of immigrants and refugees have increased. In the first 4 months of 2017, thousands of new Immigrant and Customs Enforcement Officers have been hired. The Administration seeks to increase the number of ICE officers by 15,000-20,000. Deportations are up 33% more over the very high rates of the Obama Administration.

What is much worse now is that far from targeting criminals or other people who behave undesirably, people are being deported who were supposed to be protected, including people who were brought here as children and protected by the DREAM Act. The DREAM Act allowed these children to get on a path to permanent residency. We are deporting young people to countries they left as infants and young children, countries where they have no ties, no connections and no homes. Countries where they may not even speak the language.

We are deporting people who have been here for decades, people who've been working hard and making economic and other contributions to the communities where they live. People whose labor is very much needed in many sectors. People who have spouses and children who are American citizens. Our neighbors, here in Omaha and all over the country.

So, what is it that a Sanctuary movement can do?

First, Sanctuary is actual, physical shelter within a religious community. Right now, it is the current policy of ICE not to arrest people in so-called "sensitive locations." These include: religious communities, hospitals, schools, universities and such events as funerals and weddings that may be held away from a religious community. As I have learned, ICE hates publicity and attention. So by sheltering people who have immigration cases, we protect them from being detained or deported while their case is being addressed.

Second, Sanctuary can mean providing support to those in Sanctuary and their immediate families, even if a congregation cannot provide physical sanctuary. When someone is in sanctuary, their needs are great. They have to be housed, clothed, fed and sheltered in all ways. They need visitation and company and entertainment and spiritual support for their entire well-being. If the person in sanctuary is a main breadwinner for the family, the immediately family may also need assistance. Accompanying the person in sanctuary to court dates or other required meetings is also critical. Legal and public advocacy is required and must be supported.

Third, Sanctuary by its very nature advocates for changes in our rotten immigration system at all levels. By advocating for individual cases, sanctuary helps to change the system itself. Sanctuary advocates and allies also can make concrete proposals for changes in laws at the local, state and national level that affect undocumented immigrants.

Finally, a frequent component of Sanctuary is to disrupt ICE raids as they happen at homes or workplaces, known as Sanctuary in the Streets. This is nonviolent direct action, where advocates try to bring media attention to the raid and also disrupt the carrying out of the raid in nonviolent ways, such as circling ICE vehicles with singing, praying bodies so that the vehicle cannot move. Or by surrounding a house so ICE officers cannot get through.

That is the work of Sanctuary. Not all congregations choose to do all of it. And certainly it is all better done in collaboration with many religious communities and other allies.

In the coming weeks, I will provide more resources for learning about Sanctuary and what it could mean for us as a congregation. I am also available to speak to any committee or group here that is interested in learning more. It is my hope that this congregation can discern its way to participating in the New Sanctuary Movement here in Omaha. I hope that we can be an active partner in the Omaha Area Sanctuary Network.

As Erika and Jorge's case showed us – we are needed now, right now.

So, given our worship theme of Our Future for this month, what is the aspect of Sanctuary that relates to Our Future? I understand this in several ways:

- At the national level, the reality is that Our Future holds immigration, as it always has. It's happening, it always will happen and our nation is becoming more beautifully diverse as a result.
- As well, I see Sanctuary as a vital aspect of our Developmental ministry process. Which is a process to take the congregation to the future you have said you desire. Our process of culture change. One of our goals is **WELCOME: *That Second Unitarian is a welcoming and engaging congregation for newcomers and members.*** Being part of the New Sanctuary movement would be an active and faithful approach to being such a welcoming and engaging congregation!

Your spiritual homework for the next weeks and months is to learn about Sanctuary and why it is necessary. Why it is part of the Resistance in which our nation is engaging. Why it is a direct living out of our Unitarian Universalist Principles.

I close with the New Sanctuary Pledge that many religious communities and individuals have chosen to make:

*As people of faith and people of conscience, we pledge to resist the newly elected administration's policy proposals to target and deport millions of undocumented immigrants and discriminate against marginalized communities. We will open up our congregations and communities as sanctuary spaces for those targeted by hate, and work alongside our friends, families, and neighbors to ensure the dignity and human rights of all people.*

I hope that at some point in the future we can make this pledge together. We can do this! We are needed as people and our Unitarian Universalist faith is needed to make our country a paradise for all, including those who have come here to create better lives for themselves and whose presence has and will enrich our nation so greatly in every way.

So may it be. Blessed be.