

## “Sanctuary Matters”

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*All your wonders are on display.... Earth-Tamer, Ocean-Pourer, Mountain-Maker, GOD-  
...Drench the plowed fields, soak the dirt clods with rainfall, **bring her to blossom and fruit.***  
(Psalm 65:1, 10 -The Message)

We join in bringing some of the fruit of our summer this morning, offering it in thanks to God. And reflecting on my **own** summer, I've written several different homilies for today... I've wrestled like 'Jacob with the angel' over what to say and how to say it. Some of what I will say may come across as strong, or worse, strident. I do not mean it to be so. What I hope you hear is the clarity of my conviction and that this comes from the depth of my heart... I love this community we call Umstead Park UCC. It is here that we struggle together to be the kin-dom of God with each other and for others. So I begin this morning in a way I normally do *not*...

Let us pray:

Great God of all peoples, be with *us* now and grant us your peace. May we all join in a spirit of honesty and love, grounded in you. Amen.

*(Some of you are thinking, “Wow! This must be serious. Doug is praying!”)*

Summer harvests- I began my summer, late May, with a wedding. One of the honors of being a pastor is officiating at weddings... and most of us ministers take the time to counsel the couples along the way, especially so if they are young (which to me, these days, means under 50... I didn't do all of this with you, lee and Gwen- You're over 50!).

In these 'counseling' situations I like to bring up the story of the woman who complained that her husband, of many decades, never expressed his love for her in actual words. Her husband, pragmatic to the core, replied, “50 years ago when I married Ruth I told her I loved her and if I ever changed my mind, I'd let her know.” Hmmmm...

I also usually work into the counseling the inevitability of conflict. Someone summarized it this way, “If two people always agree, somebody ain't doin' much thinking.”

...which is to say, if we are thinking beings, we will sometimes come from different places.

That's just the reality.

And so, key to healthy relationships, in life, in marriage, and in congregations, is that we speak honestly and with compassion to and for the other. We have an opportunity to do that today.

This summer also I've been quite involved in conversations about immigration. A huge part of that has been a Task Force you, the Congregation, established in July. This Task Force brings the fruit of their summer labor, placing it on the Congregational Meeting agenda this afternoon. We will collectively decide whether to offer sanctuary to a person or family in danger of deportation.

Though it is understandable that some might see this as a *political* statement, I want to be clear that it is not. Rather, it is a manifestation, a living-out, of who we are as the realm of God embodied in the here and now. This is not political. Rather, this is a deeply spiritual issue.

Let me back up. Let me be personal-

When Janice and I bought our house 4 years ago, we knew we needed a new HVAC system, the whole shebang unfortunately, to replace the original. I began to collect quotes from companies. One was from a well-known and respected small business... essentially a father and his grown son who proudly advertised their business as American born and bred. The owner, the father, assessed our needs, took note of the rather tight crawl space (OK really tight crawl space.. sort of slide space) where much of the old duct work was... “You need a bigger company than ours,” he honestly admitted... and then added, “Frankly, one with some Mexicans who will do the grunt work.”

According to the Pew Research Center, there are presently 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. 8 million are in our workforce. They make up more than a quarter of our agricultural labor. 15% of all construction.

**We employ them. We depend on them.** About half are from Mexico. *...and, for well over 90%, with no legal path TO documentation.*

And get this... 2’3rds of the adults among these undocumented ones, have been here for more than 10 years. Many for far more years than that.

<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/27/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s/>

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If you’ve lived someplace for decades, and worked in construction or as a house cleaner, say... chances are good over those years you’ve established a family, too.

**It is these men and women, who have been here for years and established families, that are now suddenly being deported ... with no time allowed to receive due process.**

This is not moral. It is not just. And that is why our offering safety and refuge to a person or family caught in the crosshairs of the system we live in and benefit from is a deeply spiritual act. It is about practicing our faith.

Because otherwise we join those essentially saying- “Oh, we wanted you to work in our yards, to roof our homes and clean our houses. We wanted you to dig the trenches for our cable TV and high-speed internet and to pick and process much of the food we eat (even what we will eat in a few minutes.) But **now**, now we will take you from your children, your families, and send you back. Because you are not like us. You are an illegal alien.”

Is that *our* voice?

Previous justice work has won the opportunity for churches to be designated by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) ... churches to be designated as sensitive locations where undocumented persons will not be approached. Will we grasp that opportunity?

Over the years when we, as a Congregation, have come to challenging points of decision we have asked one question- How does our Covenant inform us?

...Caring for the marginalized,

...being allies with the stranger,

...recognizing **all** persons as children of God **springs from the ground of who we are. These values are in the very bones of our being, in our DNA, woven into the fabric of the cloth this community.**

Look at the quilt(s) made... How long ago Marcia- 15 years ago?

Phrases from the Covenant... welcome fully, global citizens, justice and peace.  
When people officially join us we ask one question: Do you affirm this Covenant as your own?

There are some who ask that we study this situation more. "Perhaps we are moving too quickly," they offer.

I cannot help but hear, in the back of my brain, the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. to a group of white clergymen in Birmingham 54 years ago. He penned these words, you remember, from jail... "For years now," King said, "I have heard the word 'Wait!' ... This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.'" -MLK

So I ask today... What more do we need to *know*?

Rollin Russell, former Southern Conference Minister, was once at a sister congregation sitting up front in worship (you know how many churches have the ministers facing the congregation?) ... sitting there as a guest of that congregation when Denise Smelley, the minister who was to preach in 10 minutes leaned over and whispered, "Pray for me Rollin. I left my notes on my desk." "Pray for you?!" Rollin replied, "Hell... I'll go get them!"

Last month, Hurricane Harvey commanded the center of our attention. We watched while Houston struggled to cope with the rains that flooded their lives. One furniture store owner was celebrated when he threw open the doors of his business for shelter. One prominent minister, however, became the butt of jokes when he offered only prayers for the victims. As the storm brought record-breaking rain that catastrophically flooded coastal Texas, this minister tweeted -

*"Victoria & I are praying for everyone affected by Hurricane Harvey. Please join us as we pray for the safety of our Texas friends & family."*

3 days later, after a barrage of social media shamed him, he tweeted again-

*Victoria and I care deeply about our fellow Houstonians. Lakewood's doors are open and we are receiving anyone who needs shelter.*

So let's give the pastor and church the benefit of the doubt. Let's say it just 'took a while' for it to *dawn* on them that THEY could do more than pray... that THEY **were** the shelter people needed. And when this became *clear* to them, they did what every disciple of the God who is the God of All would hopefully do in such a crisis... They opened their doors.

There are, today, more crises than **natural** ones...hurricanes and earthquakes. There are, more tragic, crises caused only by **humans**... by us.

Thousands of families, not in distant places, not because of tectonic shifts or raging weather... fathers in our own communities are being forcibly taken from their children, grandmothers (Juana Ortega in Greensboro.) taken suddenly from her grandchildren.

No! Not Juana from her grandchildren. Juana is in a church... in a place of safety while her lawyers work her case. Juana is an exception. She is **with** her grandchildren because the congregation of St. Barnabus Episcopal offered her sanctuary.

Are we comfortable offering others in danger of deportation only our prayers when we have the ability to offer them safety?... offer shelter while her lawyers follow due process and her advocates lobby legislators to pass law that actually makes sense... law that reflects the economic and social reality that we have lived in all our lives.

This is a spiritual matter for us. It may have dawned on us slowly, but the seeds of discomfort AND compassion are welling up within us.

Perhaps you've seen one of the powerful statements of the summer making its way through the internet. This is how it reads:

If you've ever wondered what you *would* have done during slavery, or during the Holocaust, or the Civil Rights movement ...*You're doing it now*.

I share quickly one last personal summer's experience. I asked permission from my daughter to share this part because it was late this summer that she informed me... I would be a grandfather.

So now I'm thinking ... some future summer, I want to be able to say to my grandchild... that I did not live during slavery, or the Holocaust, or much of the Civil Rights movement ... but when a church I belonged to had the opportunity to be allies with undocumented immigrants caught in the crossfire of an unjust system, we did what we could.

I pray this summer bears such a harvest.

Would you pray with me now, the last verse of Eleanor's prayer. It's found in the bulletin:

**UNISON: O God--whose power can cover the sun, whose mighty storms destroy cities and islands--and whose love and compassion are ever with us, alone or together, in joy or sorrow--we gather today to remember and celebrate the many harvests of our summer.**

-E.Smith