

Reading "Would You Harbor Me?"
Lyrics by Ysaye Barnwell

Would you harbor me?
Would I harbor you?
Would you harbor me?
Would I harbor you?

Would you harbor a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew
a heretic, convict or spy?
Would you harbor a run away woman, or child,
a poet, a prophet, a king?
Would you harbor an exile, or a refugee,
a person living with AIDS?
Would you harbor a Tubman, a Garrett, A Truth
a fugitive or a slave?
Would you harbor a Haitian Korean or Czech,
a lesbian or a gay?

Would you harbor me?
Would I harbor you?
Would you harbor me?
Would I harbor you?

Sermon
"Being Sanctuary" Rev. Kierstin Homblette

Would you harbor me?
Would I harbor you?
Will we prepare a place for one another and for those most marginalized
in our world?

How right that we ask ourselves these difficult questions this morning. For today marks the beginning of the liturgical season of Advent. In the Christian tradition out of which we grow, Advent is the season preceding the birth of Jesus Christ; four weeks when Christians the world over try to sit quietly in the midst of chaos, preparing a place in their hearts where the seeds of love and hope can take root.

Part of the Advent story recalls the journey of Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus, as they wander the town of Bethlehem, looking for a place of shelter and preparation for the birth of their child, the one who would become Emmanuel, God with Us.

You've likely heard the words from the Christian Bible, in the book of Luke. How Mary gave birth to her son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them at the inn.

Would you harbor a young poor, middle eastern, Jewish couple?
Would you harbor a woman about to give birth to a baby, claiming he was the immaculately conceived son of God?

The people of Bethlehem said no, they would not harbor Mary and Joseph, and so, the story says, Jesus was born in a manger. The Light of the World, the hope of his people, came into being there, in the dark, dusty barn, amongst the barn animals.

The Advent wreath, likely inspired by pre-Christian Pagan symbolism, contains four candles, and Christian communities light one additional candle each Sunday of Advent. The first candle, lit today in churches around the world, is the candle of hope.

The spiritual practices of Advent,
of waiting,
of preparing a place in our hearts for that hope to be born,
of making a place for love in the midst of a broken world,
are so important in times like these.

In times when young, black children are killed in the streets.
In times when immigrant families are torn apart and separated by walls and fences and deserts.
In times when transgender women, especially women of color, are murdered or commit suicide at staggering rates.
In times when shootings in schools and movie theaters and government buildings are all too common.
In times when more people show up to Black Friday sales than to the voting booth.

As a country, we are wandering, looking for sanctuary, waiting for hope to be born.
And yet it can feel like every day we wake up to news of more beloved souls killed,
More hatred on display,
The ugly parts of our human nature exposed, raw and painful.
Hope nowhere in sight.

In the midst of this seemingly hopeless reality, how can we find a way to say yes when we are asked to harbor a stranger who needs our sanctuary?

Or find a way to allow hope into our hearts, closed tightly against the onslaught of fear?

How can we do the work in this country to prepare a place for hope, a place for love in the midst of such sorrow and pain and confusion and rage?

Because make no mistake, it will take work.

Mary, pregnant with the hope of her people, labored long and hard to bring Jesus into this world.

Those of you amongst us who have given birth know- they call it labor for a reason, right?

The reign of justice, foretold by the prophets, will not be delivered to us from on high, appearing one day as if by magic.

No, we must work for it- labor for it-
take the time to make room for justice,
to prepare a place for hope.

Over the last few months, we have seen the people of Ferguson, Missouri, and those in many other cities, calling out for a change.

Proclaiming the injustice of systemic racism and making many folks feel profoundly unsettled.

These Ferguson protestors-

mostly young, mostly black, mostly working class-

have been doing the work of building a movement for change.

They have been laboring, protesting, speaking, yelling, tweeting, blogging, getting arrested, getting tear gassed, putting their bodies on the line.

Working to make room for justice, seeing hope in each other and in solidarity efforts around the country and around the world.

Churches, libraries, and community centers have been offering sanctuary, safe harbor, food, and rest to protestors- both those from Ferguson and those who travelled from afar to be there with them.

A community called to action by the tragic death of young Michael Brown, at the hands of a white police officer in August.

A community sustained in their efforts by righteous anger at a long-standing system of racist oppression.

A community sustained also by love,
fierce love for each other, for their children, for their elders, for a country
that is their home.

If we don't look closely enough,
if we only read news provided to us by a violence-obsessed mainstream
media,
we may only see riots and looting and anger in Ferguson.
It may not look much like love, if we aren't careful to go deeper.
But when we take the time to listen to the voices of those on the ground,
Hear from the perspectives of those youth leaders and clergy and
community organizers,
We see a powerful movement begin to take shape.

A movement that contains anger, yes, and understandably so.
A movement in which there have been riots,
Referred to by Martin Luther King Jr. as "the language of the unheard."
And also a movement
Rooted in a deep sense of justice,
Sustained by love,
And guided by hope.

The people of Ferguson are working to prepare a place where the seeds
of love and hope can take root.
They are laboring, endeavoring, striving to give birth to hope.
To give birth to a more just world.
A world where black lives matter, as the hashtag proclaims.
And we must respond to their calls to join them in witness and in struggle,
doing the work of preparing a place in OUR hearts,
and a place in our WORLD,
to harbor hope and justice.

Would you harbor me?
Would I harbor you?

This was the question- real, not hypothetical- that Arturo Hernandez
Garcia asked of the First Unitarian Society of Denver less than two months
ago.

Will you harbor me?
Will you offer me sanctuary?
Will you take me in and help to protect me from deportation,
help me to stay with my family?

The congregation had done the hard work of preparing a place in their

hearts, and in their church, for this very question. They were ready to respond.

Over the course of the previous six months, their own season of Advent in many ways, members of the congregation worked to faithfully discern whether they would become a host congregation in the New Sanctuary Movement. Whether they would say YES to harboring an immigrant, to providing sanctuary IN their sanctuary.

For those of you unfamiliar with the New Sanctuary Movement, it is a growing movement of faith and immigrant communities walking in solidarity with immigrants and their families, helping to amplify their voices and stories of oppression, and sometimes offering physical and spiritual sanctuary, to help shield them from the reach of Immigration and Customs Enforcement as they work to resolve their legal case.

First Unitarian's discernment was truly an Advent practice. They set aside the time to listen carefully to each other and to the immigrant community. They waited to hear the still, small voice within each person. They prepared a space in the basement of the church that could shelter a individual or a small family. And they prepared a space in their hearts for the call to justice and love. After six months they took a vote at their congregational meeting. There was much debate. There was much listening. They prepared themselves by reading their congregational covenant, Reminding themselves of their highest aspirations and deepest values. They voted by secret ballot, so everyone could feel free to vote how they felt they needed to. It was not unanimous but it was overwhelming.

Their answer was yes.

Yes, we will harbor an exile, a refugee, a fugitive, an immigrant.

Yes, we will harbor you.

Yes, we will harbor hope.

And yes, we will labor for justice.

Arturo officially entered sanctuary on October 21st- forty days ago today.

First Unitarian Denver is supported in their efforts by the other five congregations who are a part of the Metro Denver Sanctuary Coalition. This congregation, which was also active in the original

sanctuary movement in the 80s and 90s, is one of those five congregations.

Together they- you- have been helping to provide meals for Arturo and his family.

Sending volunteers to stay overnight in the building, which is old and dark and creepy, especially in the basement where he is living.

Raising money to help offset Arturo's family's expenses- rent, groceries, legal fees, gas for the car- while he is in sanctuary and unable to work.

Signing petitions, writing letters, and making calls to immigration and elected officials and the White House on Arturo's behalf.

And perhaps most importantly, listening carefully to Arturo's story, connecting it to the story of millions of other undocumented immigrants in this country,

who are trapped in an unjust system of our making,

and helping to get that story out there into the world,

so other people know what injustice is being done in our name.

Many folks have questions about the efficacy of sanctuary as a tool for change.

Many folks have questions about Arturo's background or the backgrounds of other immigrants who are here in our country without papers.

Many folks are concerned about the risks associated with providing sanctuary- is harboring illegal?

These are important questions to ask and keep asking.

But the most important question is the question of Mary and Joseph,
the question of Arturo,
the question of Advent.

Will you harbor me?

Will I harbor you?

Will you open up your doors to me, to my people?

Will you open up your ears to hear our story?

Will you open up your hearts so the seeds of hope and love can take root?

As a country, we are wandering and waiting for hope.

It's time for a movement to give birth to that hope.

That movement starts with being able to see the stranger as yourself.

To see Michael Brown as your child.

To see Arturo's family as your family.

Our Unitarian Universalist theology teaches us that we are all connected, that our destinies are inextricably linked. What happens to me happens to you. We are one with the stranger.

In the book of Leviticus, the Hebrew scriptures remind us:

When the stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress them. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Leviticus 19:33-34 and 24:22

You were strangers in the land of Egypt.
You were protesters in Selma, Alabama.
You were rioters at the Stonewall Inn.
You were immigrants, coming to this country for a better life for your children.

And so you shall love the stranger, the protester, the rioter, the immigrant, as yourself.

That movement, that labor to give birth to hope has already begun-
In Ferguson, Missouri and in solidarity actions around the country.
In the New Sanctuary Movement, in immigrant and faith communities in Denver and around the country.
In this congregation and in Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country.
Engaging the advent practice, making room in our hearts and in our sanctuaries for the seeds of hope and love to grow.

Each of us has come into this place,
stayed in this faith,
entered this sanctuary looking for hope.
And for the chance to offer hope to others.

There are so many ways for us to do just that.
For me, the sanctuary movement is one of those ways.
For me, the movement against systemic racism and police brutality is one of those ways.
For you, this may look different.
But its important- essential- to our lives and our world that we are each cultivating hope in the world in whatever ways that we can.

This is the season of hope, in a world that so desperately needs it.
We- all of us- are people who are weary,

who have been wandering for so long,
in search of sanctuary,
and a place to give birth to the hope that lives inside of us as holy, sacred
beings.

How will you be a part of bringing that hope into the world?
How will you harbor others who are doing the same?

Would you harbor Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old black youth
walking home in the street with his friends, protect him from being killed by
police who are afraid of him?

Would you harbor Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old black boy holding a toy gun,
shelter him from being shot dead in the park by police officers
conditioned to shoot first and ask questions later?

Would you harbor Arturo Hernandez Garcia, an immigrant father, protect
him from deportation and separation from his family in an immigration
system that does not value humanity, inherent dignity, or compassion?

Would you harbor me?
Would I harbor you?

Take your time answering.
Make a place in your heart to plant seeds of hope and love.
And then sit and listen and discern carefully.
This question is not hypothetical.

If your answer is yes, it's time to begin and continue.
It's time to labor together,
to build a movement,
to work toward a world where it is no longer necessary to ask these
questions.
And soon the day will arrive for the hope we will birth together to light up
the world.
Wait and see.