

“And Justice for All” Sermon

August 2012, Neighborhood Church

Come on a journey with me—a journey back in time to your third grade classroom. Picture it. The desks, the walls, the chalkboard, the flag hanging patriotically from the corner. Imagine your morning routine in third grade. If you were in school in the US you likely began your morning with the pledge of allegiance. Can you picture yourself, standing by your desk, hand on your heart reciting these words you may have known since kindergarten, but haven’t yet fully grasped their meaning. I invite you to say them with me. Now, there some among us who are not citizens, who may feel uncomfortable pledging allegiance to this country—understandably. And there are some among us who **are** citizens, who may **also** feel uncomfortable pledging allegiance to this country. But the pledge is something we teach our children to say every day in school (whether they are citizens or not). And the words have power.

So I invite you to stand as you are able and recite—or listen as you are comfortable—and join me in our Pledge of Allegiance.

I pledge allegiance to the flag, of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

I can remember that experience so clearly—could you? Standing at my desk with my hand on my heart, proud of what those words said and what they meant. Especially the last line: **With liberty and justice for all.** For all. PERIOD. And today as I recite these words I wonder, “What does Justice for all look like? What might it feel like? Do we really mean it?”

Two years ago I stood at this pulpit and preached on SB1070. I ended that sermon with, “Todos somos Arizona!” We are all Arizona. It was a rallying cry, a call to stand in solidarity with Arizona under the harsh and divisive legislation that is SB1070. And despite the Supreme Court ruling, the climate of fear and hate in AZ is as hot as the weather and on the rise. So today I want to say it again. “Todos somos Arizona!” But this time I say it as a reminder that the challenges of immigration, of civil rights for all-of JUSTICE for all—are not particular to Arizona.

Fear and distrust among immigrant communities is on the rise. Policies of exclusion and hateful rhetoric continue to infiltrate our national discourse. Families are being torn apart. Arizona’s issues are our issues—we are all Arizona.

Juana is a mother of two. She has been in the California for 20 years. She supports herself and her family by selling tamales, usually in the parking lots of large stores. She was recently arrested at a Wal-Mart for selling food without a permit. She was detained for 13 days and now faces deportation. Her children were put in foster care. Put yourself in Juana's shoes for a moment. Imagine being arrested, torn from your children who are put into the foster system all because of a minor civil violation. An immigration system that separates children from their parents, a system that breaks up families is itself broken.

Is this Justice for all? Because our pledge, the language of our constitution and our founding documents does not say justice only for naturalized citizens, or white men. Especially not today. Justice for all, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, all men are created equal, is language that expresses our best intentions and holds us to our highest ideals.

Our nation takes pride in the ethos we've created about being the greatest country in the world. We claim a kind of picturesque hospitality complete with the possibility of freedom and success for all who work hard enough. Yet many see the cracks in this facade—a hospitality only for an elite few. The inhospitable attitude and cruelty shown to our immigrants today weakens our nation's soul, weakens what it really means to be an American.

But Arizona and all its issues have given us a gift.

What became abundantly clear at Justice GA is that we are not just fighting for immigration reform but that immigration is part of the ongoing struggle for civil and human rights. Immigration has merely become a container for deep-seated issues of racism, classism and cultural imperialism that have plagued this country since its founding—unfortunate patterns of behavior we seem destined to repeat generation after generation.

One of the hallmark moments of our Justice GA was the Tent City vigil and protest. Our mantra was, “Shut it down!” Thousands of us boarded buses to Sheriff Joe Arpaio’s infamous tent city to witness and protest this jail notorious for its human rights violations. Tent City houses a large number of immigrants picked up in the Sheriff's neighborhood immigration sweeps—many are the children of immigrants, themselves citizens.

What is significant is that many of these immigrants have no prior criminal history. They are immigrants like Juana who are just trying to support their families. This is not an uncommon occurrence in detention centers across the country. In fact, there is no legal mandate for immigrants to be held in detention indefinitely. An immigration violation is still a civil offense and the only reason they are being held is because they are not aware of their rights, which are being ignored. Is that justice for all?

Just prior to that vigil, several ministers and UUA representatives were given a tour of Tent City by Sheriff Arpaio himself. Rev Leslie Takahashi-Morris shared that what she saw reminded of the stories her father told about being held in a Japanese Internment camp, also in the desert of Arizona, with the excessive heat, dehydration and other cruelties he and his family suffered. These are the same kinds of conditions she witnessed at Tent City; inmates on lockdown during the hottest part of the day, 128 degrees inside the tents, no water for 1.5 – 2 hours, only 2 meals a day, often with expired, rancid moldy food. These stories bring a whole new meaning to the idea that history repeats itself. It is disappointing that we must continue, time and time again, to call attention to the need to treat people with basic human and civil rights.

It was just another morning drop-off at Hope of Detroit Academy. But this morning something was very different. Two families noticed they were being followed by several large SUV's with tinted windows. They thought they might be Immigration Customs Enforcement vehicles and got very scared. Not knowing what to do they dropped their children off in class and took refuge in the school. ICE agents surrounded the school, playground and church in the area lying in wait. Other families began to panic calling the school to find out if their children were safe. When the Director of the Alliance for Immigrant Rights heard about the incident, he intervened on behalf of the families. He asked the ICE agents if they had a warrant, they did not and left. Several families were afraid to pick up their children that day and attendance at the school continues to be low because parents are too scared to bring their children to school ¹

1 <http://weareamericastories.org/written/jose-luiss-story-of-ice-abuse-stalking-and-arresting-parents-at-school/>

This kind of intimidation is spreading. One young immigrant mother shared that everywhere they go now, they find harassment. “They watch us on the playground, she says, at our schools, even in church where I go to help serve food to the hungry. It feels like everyone is looking and pointing at you just because you’re brown.”²

There is no Justice for All. Not in Arizona and not in California. Last year, 75,000 people were deported in California after being arrested for minor civil violations--violations like Juana’s, the woman who sold tamales. All of this under the guise of the federal “Secure Communities” program which is supposed to target immigrants with a criminal record. The ones who actually pose a danger to our communities.

It sure makes it feel like Justice for All is a fairytale. A pretty little myth. So why bother? How do we keep on keeping on in the face of what feels like a never-ending struggle?

We start by showing up, by joining the conversation, by choosing hope. We can put our faith into action. It is time to turn the tide from exclusion to inclusion, to challenge the champions of hate and Stand on the Side of Love.

One such band of new freedom riders is doing exactly that. The No Papers No Fear campaign is sponsoring the Undocubus, a group of undocumented mothers, fathers, students and children riding from Phoenix, AZ to Charlotte, NC arriving in time for the democratic national convention. They've been making stops along the way to witness, educate and tell their story. They are coming out of the shadows setting an example of love and fearlessness. And guess what—UU's have been out in force at every stop.

We who believe in freedom cannot rest. Life calls us on.

We UU's are on the front lines of change—especially here in California. The TRUST Act (AB1081) was just passed by the state legislature and sits on the Governor’s desk waiting to be signed. It will reform California's participation in the federal “Secure Communities” program by setting specific standards for detainer requests, in an effort to restore the trust between immigrant communities and local law enforcement. I hear Governor Brown needs a little convincing, along with our own Sheriff, Lee Baca. Give 'em a call!

Our UU Legislative Ministry team is lobbying hard for the TRUST Act—you can join them, they'll be in Sacramento on Tuesday. They have also created an LA Area Immigrant Justice Task force and you can be a part of it. They are supporting an area wide detention center visitation program begun to help ease the isolation of those caught in the system. You can be part of that too—there is so much energy and possibility!

But I'm not up here to talk only legislation and politics, we have John Stewart for that. So, what does any of this have to do with spirituality? With our search for truth and deeper meaning? I've been asking myself this question to really get at why immigration reform matters, why justice matters and why it is a religious issue.

Deep down I feel a sense of purpose to be part of a humanity that seeks to better itself. Deep down we all crave that sense of knowing that our lives mean something, that we make a difference in the world if even a small one. Because otherwise, what's the point? My life is so blessed. I work hard for my family and can afford food, own a home and a car. I can drop my kids off at school without fear. I can attend church without people looking at me wondering if I belong. The color of my skin does not draw sideways glances, deny me access or trample of my rights.

2 <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2012/07/30/3410856/why-im-riding-bus-full-of-undocumented.html#storylink=misearch#storylink=cpy>

But all of that alone is not enough. The immigrants' struggle could have easily been mine. All I did was win the birth lottery. When I hear the stories of Juana and the Detroit families and so many others, my heart breaks. My heart breaks because it does not mesh with my vision of the world where all of humanity is afforded basic rights and dignity. If my place in life is benefited by those who suffer and struggle at the hands of a broken system, then perhaps I might use my privilege to allow others to stand on my shoulders for a while. This faith calls me to believe that that vision is possible.

Faith Calls Us On

In his essay “Ecce Homo,” Xavier LePichon, he talks about the evolution of human beings and human society being structured around fragility and vulnerability. We are hard wired to tend to the suffering among us and to take steps to alleviate it. “. . . a society is humane in the degree that it takes care of the lives of those who suffer most without either rejecting or marginalizing them.”³ Well, if we were being graded on our humaneness we'd get an “F”. There is nothing humane about Tent City, there is nothing humane about allowing people to die crossing the desert, there is nothing humane about shackling immigrants or separating families. “In order to tackle this challenge, we must change the way we look at the 'other,’” and allows our hearts to be touched.

Scholar and activist Conrad Wright proclaims, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” That's it! I want to live in a world where love comes first. When we make sandwiches every Wednesday night for Union Station, when we beautify a school on Big Saturday, when we tutor students in the Everyone-a-Reader program, when we build houses in Tijuana, when we teach Sunday School or welcome newcomers or visit folks in need, we are doing it out of a deep love. And then we come here to put that love—that action into context, to honor and sort out the bigger meaning of it all. Think about it. The world has loved us, our community has loved us and it is a natural human response to want to share that love.

Love Calls Us On

That is what the Tent City Rally showed us—Love is a powerful force. For many of our youth—for many people attending this GA for the first time, this was their first big protest experience. Remember your first protest? Remember what that felt like? Remember how it made you feel like change was really possible? It is a game-changing experience. Our youth have had a taste of that now and there is no going back. Our presence wasn't just about standing in opposition to Sherriff Joe Arpaio and the SB1070 and cruel immigration practices; it was about love—the love of our fellow human beings and the dignity they deserve regardless of status or any other societal label.

All around us, in every direction people were cheering and shouting and rallying the cry for justice and human dignity. Our voices were heard that evening by more than just the inmates in the jail. Public witness on a massive scale also serves as a motivator, an energizer, a reminder that our work must continue and that we must make our voices heard. Making such a loud and prominent public statement of our faith and our values gives me hope that a few, committed voices can make a difference in this world.

I stood by our high school youth and spent a couple of minutes just watching them. They were so invested and feeling the love, I thought to myself, “Don't lose this moment Sara, because this love is what this fight is all about and now we have shared that love with 14 more young people who are called to action.”

3 <http://www.onbeing.org/program/fragility-and-evolution-our-humanity/feature/ecce-homo-behold-humanity/1561>

The experience of General Assembly is about connecting to something greater than ourselves. Experiencing first hand how a group of people—a religious minority at that—committed to justice and to love can actually make a difference in the world instills a sense of **hope** that the world can be a better place. We found hope.

I am called to work for justice and healing in our world because it is in that hope for justice where I find beauty and joy. Hope does not replace pain and suffering, it stands alongside it. Hope is the embrace in which our suffering, our fragility, can be held and then perhaps changed. Hope is both the action we take and the choices we make to be part of that larger calling for good in the world.

Hope Calls Us On.

This faith, our Unitarian Universalist faith, that you are a part of--whether you participate beyond these walls or not--is redefining what it means to be an American—a patriot—and calling us all to stand up for love. We are teaching our children that Justice for All is not just some fancy phrase that has a nice ring to it, but that it is a call to action. The kind of call that holds our country to its best self, its best ideals—with or without God. And, that it is through love that we can sustain the struggle for human rights and freedom, now and for and for generations to come. We are the love people—with liberty and justice for all. Amen.