

Sermon, August 27, 2017
Rev. Linda Simmons
The Refuge of Radical Love

This past weekend, 10 or so of us from many different settings on island, some from this UU Meeting House, some from other churches and some from no church at all, gathered here to be trained by Grace Gaskill from Catholic Charities in Boston on how to be of assistance to their case worker who comes here in support of the Central American Minor Refugee Program also known as CAM. The Central American Minor Refugee Program was established in December 2014 in response to the arrival of unprecedented numbers of unaccompanied minors from Central America to the United States.

Administered by the United States Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, the CAM program provides parents from Central America who are documented and live in the United States with a safe and legal means of reuniting with qualifying children still residing in their home countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

With concern for the safety and well-being of these children, the program is part of a regional humanitarian strategy intended to deter children from attempting the perilous, unaccompanied journey to the United States through Mexico. Grounded in U.S. policy, which prioritizes the reunification of families, and in keeping with international standards for human rights and the rights of the child, the program seeks to protect children who were persecuted or fear persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. The program allows for the arrival and transition of Central American Minors into U.S. communities.

Catholic Charities is one of 5 agencies in MA that receives refugees from the Central American Minor Refugee and other refugee programs. Grace, who met with us here last Saturday, is the Volunteer and Community Outreach Fellow for the Refugee and Immigrant Resettlement Program at Catholic Charities in Boston.

She helped us understand more about the refugee situation worldwide before teaching us more about the Central American Minor Refugee Program that our Immigration Resource Center we will be directly involved in.

She told us that there are currently 65.3M “persons of concern” worldwide or people at risk who have fled their homes due to violence or disaster. 34,000 persons per day leave their homes in search of protection. 24 people flee every minute of every day. 21.3M are designated “refugee”. 51% of refugees are under the age of 18 years old. 49% of refugees are female. 86% of refugees are hosted by developing Countries; Turkey has the most: 2.7M. Afghanistan, Syria and Somalia have ½ of all refugees.

The United States went from accepting 85,000 refugees in 2016 to 50,000 in 2017. Catholic Charities has almost reached their quota for the year with hundreds of applications still

flowing in. We are beginning to shutter our doors citing fear of terrorism. It is important to note that all refugees entering this country are required to undergo 12-15 checks with all domestic and international criminal agencies and that extra checks are required for refugees from the Middle East.

Also, no persons accepted to the United States as a refugee, Syrian or otherwise, has been implicated in a major fatal terrorist attack since the Refugee Act of 1980 set up systematic procedures for accepting refugees into the United States. Before 1980, 3 refugees had successfully carried out terrorist attacks in the U.S. . They were not Muslim and a total of 3 people were killed.¹

Those of us who are trained and had background checks last weekend from the Immigration Resource Center, an offshoot of the Nantucket Immigration Community Alliance started in March 2017 in this Meeting House in answer to a request by the immigrant community who now also helps staff it, will be doing home visits on Nantucket with the CAM refugee and their parent or parents and we also hope to be establishing a relationship, to invite the family to our potlucks with Faro de Luz and to assist in other ways that the family requests with transportation and other needs.

I have thought long about why this pleases me so much, to be part of this on our little island. And then I read an article called “Towards a Pedagogy of Radical Love” by Karen Kidd and it helped me understand this all the better.

Kidd writes about working in El Salvador in 1989 with the detained and imprisoned. Through Peace Bridges International which is an organization that provides non-violent accompaniment to teachers, unionists, students, church workers and activists when requested by local municipalities. It does not interfere with local politics but asks leaders what they need and stands beside them as witnesses as they do their work.

Kidd was at a church refugee center in El Salvador trying to improve the safety for the refugees and the church workers running the center by providing this US witness when the US supported Salvadorian military invaded the building and detained some of the Salvadorian staff and Karen Kidd. She was blindfolded, handcuffed, interrogated and kept standing without food or water and threatened with rape and mutilation.

Kidd writes:

“It was in a torture center. I knew that’s what it was; I had had Salvadoran friends tortured in that prison and I could hear torture around me. While in detention I tried to speak out against the torture but was unable to stop it. Under my blindfold I caught glimpses of people lying broken on the ground. However, when the officials were ready to release me, I refused to leave. I had been imprisoned with Marcela Rodriguez Diaz, a Colombian colleague, and in our unjust world my North American life was being valued more than hers. I refused to leave the jail without her, and was re-imprisoned, staying with her until

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/29/us/refugee-terrorism-trnd/index.html>

we could both be released.

“My refusal to leave had confused the guards, who challenged me: “Do you miss us? Do you want us?” with all the sexual innuendo this entailed. I was frightened and I didn’t know how to answer. But I had been learning about nonviolence from the Central Americans I was accompanying, and an answer poured out from me. I said, ‘No, of course I don’t want to be here, but you are soldiers, you know what solidarity is. You know that if a comrade is down or fallen in battle, you wouldn’t leave them, and I can’t leave my comrade, not now, not here. You understand.’

“I don’t know what response I thought I would get. After all, I was speaking to torturers. Yet, intuitively—and influenced by the Latin Americans whom I’d been supporting—I had placed the torturers in what George Lakey and Martin Luther King, Jr. before him have called a “dilemma demonstration,’ a Catch-22 where there is no “good” way out. Do the torturers agree with me and implicitly acknowledge our joint humanity? Or do they disagree and show themselves to be, even to themselves, inhumane tyrants? They became still, silent. Then, gently, and after a long while, one said, “Yes, we know why you are here.” From then on, the most amazing thing kept happening. Guards kept coming, apparently from all around the jail, looking for the two women they had heard about, the “inseparable ones,” and responding with love, friendship, and connection.

“In that Salvadoran jail, I faced and learned many things. I learned the importance of what I call the “futile gesture”: my small, hopeless act of returning to the jail for my friend, which combined with the phone calls and messages from supporters around the world sent to the Salvadorian government on our behalf, led to our release. I learned, incarnate...Mahatma Gandhi’s conviction that liberating the oppressed also liberates the oppressor. But most important, I learned, embodied, the possibility and the power of connection.”²

In 1670, Blaise Pascal published Pensées. In that book, he has a quote:

“What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.”³

This has since been called, the “God shaped hole.” I would call it something else. I would call it a “human connectivity shaped hole” that can only be filled by deep human connectedness, the hole that can only be filled by, against all odds, continuing to show up for each other, stranger and friend,

² Ridd, Karen. Source: The Conrad Grebel Review, 32 no 2 Spr 2014, p 177-178.

³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* VII, 425, <http://www.leaderu.com/cyber/books/pensees/pensees-SECTION-7.html>

the hole that can only be filled by allowing another's life to touch our own so completely that we can imagine that but by the grace of birth and privilege there go I and can put aside our time and needs and comfort and ease and offer something of ourselves. That we can say because we know: I cannot be free or safe or united in body or spirit until we are all free and safe and united in body and spirit.

I think of showing up for each other and others and what it would mean to us if we really knew that no matter what we would not be left behind, that one of us would always be there in the worst place we could ever find ourselves and would stay there with us until we broke free.

What would that do for each of us what would that do for the world?

I believe that showing up offers each of us the possibility of learning ourselves in new ways so that we might continually rediscover our humanity in one another, in those we find similar to us and those to whom the connection is broken or weak because of things we have agreed to let create distance and indifference between us all like the difference of ethnicity, language, race, habits, religion or dress.

When we risk something to be connected, there is a barrier that breaks and a ground that becomes visible with footprints that are side by side, mine and yours and theirs and ours.

Turns out, we've been walking or wheeling each other home, as Ram Dass says, for a long time: gender, race, education, finances, status, ability not getting anyone of us there sooner than another. Turns out, getting there happens not by moving up but by moving in, by reaching out, by staying near by- by filling the human connectivity shaped hole in human consciousness. Home is and always has been about love.

And so we go on my friends. Each of us offering what is ours to give, each of us reassessing how to give more. It's what we do. May we go on with love, with more love, with a love that we cannot understand, that breaks us open and returns us to ourselves in ways that we cannot be sure of before we begin.

May this kind of trusting of each other, that we would not leave each other behind no matter what, pervade our every day lives until we can make this crossing and be found whole and holy, filled and renewed, present in ways that reshape the present for all of us and others we love and have not yet remembered how to love

Amen.

