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Sermon, March 16, 2014

A speaker at the Justice General Assembly in 2012 said, The story is changing. The only question is: How will you participate?

General Assembly is the annual meeting for our whole denomination. It happens in June every year and this year will be in Providence, RI. I hope many of you can join us. It is a time when people from all over the country come together to celebrate, challenge, remember and define what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. There is nothing like it.

When you enter the conference center, no matter where it is held, the first thing that strikes you is how extraordinary it is to be with so many Unitarian Universalists. We are so diverse.

We are many ages, cultures, ethnicities, leaders, ministers, congregants. We are multiple. It stuns the eyes and mind. A sea of faces, colors, clothes, languages and smiles washes over you until you are swimming in the tide of UU.

We are not a quiet people. We are full of ideas of what is good and right and just. And all of those ideas can be heard from the plenary room, the one big room where we all meet to celebrate or discuss the larger questions. They can also be heard in bathrooms and hallways and restaurants and busses, and street corners. In and around the conference center, there is very little that is not UU.

It's like a dream in some ways. I think it is so easy to feel isolated, marginalized, pegged as the religiously odd: the *not quite religious but still coming to church though not professing a specific faith* group. Okay, maybe we are a bit odd. But at General Assembly there is not inside or outside. There is only the inside and we are all in it together.

General Assembly in 2012 was different than all others. It was called a Justice GA and was held in Phoenix Arizona. The mandate was to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery, a public international law expounded by the United States Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall justified the way in which colonial powers laid claim to lands belonging to sovereign indigenous nations during the Age of Discovery. Under it, title to lands lay with the government whose subjects explored and occupied a territory whose inhabitants were not subjects of a European Christian monarch.

The doctrine has been primarily used to support decisions invalidating or ignoring aboriginal possession of land in favor of colonial or post-colonial governments. Justice GA was also assembled to witness and support undocumented workers and immigration rights.

My understanding of immigration was not strong before Justice GA. I had been at a few rallies, a workshop or two in Boston to help me understand the issues, which are always slipping away from me, and had done a bit of reading. I did not feel like an expert. I still don't.

And when I cannot intelligently assess a situation, I worry about speaking about it publicly. I mean, what if someone asks a question I cannot answer or contests one of my points and I do not have the relevant information to defend it?

At this Justice GA, and in all GAs, there are many excellent, stimulating, interactive workshops. In one of them called *Dismantling Racism*, the subject of White Dominant Culture was addressed. Here is a list of some of the attributes our workshop presenters offered us of white dominant culture:

1. Perfectionism
2. A sense of urgency
3. Defensiveness
4. Worship of the written word
5. Those with strong writing skills are highly valued even when relating to others is the most important skill set
6. Either/Or thinking
7. Fear of conflict
8. Blaming of person raising the issue
9. Individualism
10. Progress is the highest good
11. Objectivity: Belief that emotions are destructive
12. Belief in a right to comfort and scapegoating those who are perceived to threaten our comfort

This is quite a list and to take each one would be its own workshop. Many of these were the topic of the workshop sponsored by grassroots nantucket last Saturday that I facilitated called *Building the World We Dream About*. In that workshop, one of the questions we were looking into is this: How can I, a person of European dissent, learn to live in right relation with all of my neighbors? We did not focus on those neighbors but ourselves. We asked, Where do racist responses and actions, imagined and acted out, come from in me and how can I expose them to enough light to change them? It requires a lot of trust and willingness to be vulnerable in community to get at this stuff. It is also very exciting work. We shared a lot of joy and hope. We will be continuing this work here in this Meeting House. I would love to have you join us.

This is all bringing me back round to the point that I was not willing to preach about immigration because I am not an expert and really quite far from being one. And then I read the list I just read you: perfectionism, defensiveness, worship of the written word when we know relating to others is what matters most and I thought,

hey, I am going to do this!

I had a conversation during an immigration workshop in Boston with Rev. Fred Small from First Parish in Cambridge. I told him that I could not preach about immigration because it was too complex. He said to me, Linda, *preach what you know and you know what you experienced.*

My first really visceral experience happened at the Suffolk County Detention Center in Boston. I went as part of a rally there against the inhumane conditions that immigrants were facing. The Boston New Sanctuary Movement asked me to do a reading there. This is what I read:

Rev. Peter Morales, Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) President, excerpted from his essay in "We Are One."

“As a religious people who affirm human compassion, advocate for human rights, and seek justice, we must never make the mistake of confusing a legal right with a moral right. The forced removal of Native Americans from their land and onto reservations was legal. The importation and sale of African slaves was legal.

South African apartheid was legal. The confiscation of the property of Jews at the beginning of the Nazi regime was legal. The Spanish Inquisition was legal. Crucifying Jesus was legal. Burning Michael Servetus at the stake for his Unitarian theology was legal. The powerful have always used the legal system to oppress the powerless.

It is true that as citizens we should respect the rule of law. More importantly, though, our duty is to create laws founded on our highest sense of justice, equity, and compassion. Loud voices urge us to choose fear, denial, reactionary nationalism, and racism. We must resist and choose the better way urged by every major religious tradition. We must choose the path of compassion and hope. We must choose a path that is founded on the recognition that we are connected, that we are all in this together.”

The sun was shining, the wind was blowing, the sky was so blue. Next, someone from the Boston New Sanctuary Movement read the names of everyone who had died in this jail while being held as an undocumented person due to lack of receiving medications for illnesses. This is what I learned that day:

Over 143 people (immigrants) have died in detention in the US over the last 12 years -- put in jail for being undocumented. Most of these people have died because they could not get medicines for medical issues or be treated when ill.

33,000 people a day are in jail for being undocumented (very few have committed any felonies); President Obama has deported about 2 million people.

After the spoken vigil, we walked, silent, blown by the wind, along the side of the prison where the undocumented people were kept. We walked up along the side of a

pedestrian bridge that led over the highway. This put us level with the windows of those who were undocumented were held. We were about 50 feet away from their windows. We had signs. And they wrote signs on pieces of paper hastily when they saw us: Tell my mother I love her, They don't feed us well here, Tell my daughter I miss her, I have been here 22 months...sign after sign. And there were photos too. And we held our signs and I kept signaling, I see you. I feel your suffering. Tears streamed down our faces.

And as they wrote and took turns holding papers and photographs, the other pounded on the windows with their open hands. Hand after hand after hand. The echoes of those sounds still lives in my ears.

We were told that these detainees have fewer rights than those who have raped or murdered others. They are not recognized as citizens and so their very humanity can be denied. There is no one to report the beating, rapes or neglect that goes on in there and all across the country in detention facilities. They have no protections.

I knew I had to come to Justice GA after that.

NPR Correspondent, Marie Hinojosa, who wrote, *Lost in Detention*, an NPR documentary spoke at one of the plenary sessions at that Justice GA. She told us that there are 2 Americas and we know nothing of the second one. In the second one, private companies erect circus tents in the desert and keep undocumented workers there for years at a time. The fuller these prisons, the more money is made.

Because they are private, they do not have to let journalists in. There is nowhere to go to report rape, robbery, neglect, inhumane conditions. The inhabitants are not citizens. They have no rights.

Marie was able to gain access to one such circus tent. There were no windows. The heat and smell were stifling. She met a woman who had been raped multiple times but had no where to go and was told that if she complained, it would only get worse. Another woman told her of a time there was lice in the prison so all the women were lined up naked in front of the male guards and their clothes and bedding tossed into a fire. This woman told Marie, There was a movie. I can't remember what it was about. But this reminds me of that. It was called *Schindler's list*.

Marie went on to tell us that when crimes happened in undocumented worker neighborhoods, they do not go to the police. How could they? And they were often the victims of crimes.

I have heard conversations on this island about resentment for the undocumented workers because they don't pay taxes and send all their money home. It seems un-American to some.

But I wonder how these undocumented workers live when they are here, how many live together in one room, how many jobs do they work, and how much do they suffer away from their homes, their families and cultures?

I read an article recently about how most immigrants would rather not leave home, their communities, children and parents and culture to come here so often enduring racism. But there are no jobs at home. It is not America that draws them here as we so often assume. It is work.

At Justice GA, there was a witness event that involved over 3,000 of us being bussed at night, when it was cool enough to stand on asphalt for a few hours, to Tent City.

Sheriff Joe Arpaio set up a "Tent City" as an extension of the Maricopa County Jail. Arpaio has described Tent City as a concentration camp.

In 1997, Amnesty International published a report on Arpaio's jails which found that Tent City, in the desert outside of Phoenix, is not an "adequate or humane alternative to housing inmates in suitable ... jail facilities." Tent City is criticized by groups contending that there are violations of human and constitutional rights.

Those critical of Arpaio also point out that the vast majority of inmates within Tent City have not been convicted; rather, they are merely awaiting trial.

When we arrived outside of tent city in the thousands, pouring out of our busses, lined along the road we walked were Latino and Latina children, mothers, and men who gave us water and spoke to us in Spanish about their gratitude. We took the water knowing what we were doing was barely enough.

Peter Morales, the president of the UUA, was offered a tour of tent city by Sherriff Arpaio before we had arrived. He got on the makeshift stage at that witness event and told us that inside of Tent City he felt he was in another country, in another time, that surely this could not be going on in the America he knew and loved.

And what does this mean to all of us here? I think a better question is: What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist? It means in part that we believe salvation is possible right here in this world. What saves us is a shared sense of love and commitment to each other and the world. Community is where and how we become whole. We are here, together, to discern what is needed to go on, not just for us, but for all people. Beloved community is that love that will not let us go.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have no truth-cloak to put on. We have the questions that come and come and the hope that together we can fashion a world that seeks to live into the questions with integrity, honesty and courage. And the source of that integrity, honesty and courage has to come from us opening our hearts and minds to one another as we stand without answers until we are clear about our work in our lives and communities.

I do not have answers about immigration. It is complex and we are divided, right here in this Meeting House I am sure, about what to do or not do, what is right and not right. But I do know, as Unitarian Universalists, we are called upon to ask questions together until we can discern what might be ours to do.

I invite us all into the question.

Please join us after service at noon in the children's room in the AR for a TALK ABOUT, so that we might begin this work together. If not now, when? If not us, then who? Amen