

16 March, 2008 ✧ “The Deportees”
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“The Deportees”

It’s a coincidence that I’m preaching about immigration justice on Palm Sunday, but it’s as good a place to begin as any.

This reading is from the Gospel according to Matthew (21:1-3, 6-11; NRSV):

When they had come near Jerusalem... at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you... you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them [back] immediately...”

The disciples...brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

*When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was...asking, “Who is this?”
The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”*

This morning, Christian congregations around the world heard this reading to mark the beginning of Holy Week, a somber arc of time that traces Jesus’ final days through betrayal and into death and mourning, and back out again into next Sunday’s joyful celebration of Easter.

Palm Sunday is the gateway to Holy Week; it’s also called Passion Sunday; “passion” comes from a Latin word that means “to suffer.” In the Christian community, today is a time to reflect on the painful dissonance between Jesus’ suffering and the initial triumph that greeted him when he arrived in Jerusalem.

How did the shouts of “Hosanna” change so quickly to shouts of “crucify him!”?

How could the people turn on him so quickly?

How do we shift – in a matter of days – from welcoming the guest with open arms to persecution?

These are not empty questions.

Like the citizens of Jerusalem, we Americans, as a nation, offer conflicting messages of welcome and persecution to some of our visitors. The people we greet with open arms (or wallets) and upon whom we later heap suffering are the unauthorized migrants who come to the United States in the name of hope, of dreams, of need. Who can blame them for coming? For generations, our country has broadcast its philosophy of insatiable greed – often disguised as “The American Dream” – to other countries. We have exported the excesses of “the land of plenty” to lands where the only thing there’s plenty of is hunger, and poverty, and hopelessness.

A community like ours – which caters to both tourists and the *nouveau riche* – is especially inviting to immigrants, who take jobs that few Americans want...and do them with pride. The white stucco cityscape of Santa Barbara is built (largely) by immigrants; our¹ windows and floors and bathrooms are cleaned by immigrants; our children are nannied by immigrants; our aging parents are cared for in their retirement communities by immigrants; our gardens are manicured by immigrants; our produce is picked by immigrants; and our food – not just the tacos but even the *sushi*, Dios mio! – is prepared by immigrants.

Driven by our appetite for cheap and plentiful labor, we have explicitly invited immigrants to cross our borders legally, and we have implicitly seduced them to cross our borders illegally – that’s the warm welcome. But the growing tide of unauthorized migrants across our borders has been met with hatred, intolerance, inhumane treatment, and draconian immigration policies.

Here, I offer you a few facts – because ignorance protects neither us, nor others – and then an invitation to consider our responsibility for mending this frayed corner of the interdependent web.

It’s hard to know exactly how many illegal immigrants² live in the U.S. but recent studies (both government and academic) estimate the number to be more than 11 million;³ the number may be as high as 20 million.⁴ It goes without saying that illegal immigrants come from many different countries, but the majority of them – eighty percent – are from Mexico and Central and South America.⁵

As those numbers have increased, particularly following 9/11, our government’s response to illegal immigration has shifted. Not with regard to our laws, sadly – whereas our immigration policies were once reformed steadily and regularly, any healthy and balanced immigration reform has slowed to a halt. Instead, it’s *enforcement* of our unjust and outdated laws that’s taken on a new charge.

Last month I went to a workshop led by a civil rights attorney⁶ with the ACLU. I learned, in chilling detail, about the greatest fear in which millions of unauthorized migrants live and work: the fear of ICE raids.

“ICE” is the nickname for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement,⁷ whose official role is that of “investigative arm” of Homeland Security. In point of fact, it’s a well-oiled deportation machine. The agency has taken to orchestrating raids that are fueled by the gun-slinging, “High Noon” mind set of our current Administration, and carried out using despicable tactics that deny people the civil rights that are due to every and any person living in this country, regardless of immigration status.

Here’s what an ICE raids look like – and what, in fact, has happened in Ventura County several times in recent months:⁸

An unmarked vehicle might drive up to a family’s home at 5:00 a.m., and unidentified agents pound on the door. They’re insistent about entering the home, even though they’re not permitted to do so without a specific “administrative warrant of deportation.” They bait people into making self-incriminating comments. They bully people – who cannot read English – into signing deportation orders by passing saying, “This just confirms that we came by.”

ICE agents have staged raids on day laborer sites, workplaces, private homes – often with the cooperation of local officials. That they might resort to illegal tactics is overlooked by the “success” of deporting unauthorized migrants. (The good news, if you can call it that, its that our community has been spared the worst of what ICE is capable of. Cam Sanchez, Santa Barbara’s Chief of Police, told me that he has refused to cooperate with federal ICE officials in staging raids at the day laborer sites in town. However, once a youth or an adult lands in the court system and they’re discovered to be illegal residents, ICE is contacted and the individual is deported as soon as possible.)

Depending on their immigration status, it’s possible for entire families to be held in deportation centers for months. Other times, parents are separated from their children, or juveniles are separated from their families; mothers have even been separated from nursing infants.⁹ What if a 30-year old who arrived in the U.S. as an infant is deported, but has never been to Mexico, doesn’t speak Spanish, and doesn’t have any known relatives,¹⁰ what then? As the current system stands, he or she sits in an ICE deportation facility, or in a camp in Mexico, for as long as it takes to find a solution.

This, from an Administration that trumpets “family values.” It’s not the voice of cynicism but a fact that “the detention of immigrants is the fastest growing form of incarceration in this country,...[and] with the support of the Bush Administration, it is becoming a lucrative business” for privately-owned prison companies.¹¹ In other words, people are profiting from ICE’s zealotry, and our broken laws.

“America,” says the Reverend Bill Sinkford, President of the UUA,¹² “has created an under-class of residents who are refused the dignity and civil protections that come with citizenship. Our current system keeps families apart, both through a huge backlog in

family-based immigration, and through the unjust detention and deportation of immigrant mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters...[We UU's] know that as people of faith, our concern for family values needs to embrace these families as well."

Here's one more layer to this moral and legal muddle (if you thought it was odd of me to quote the Gospel according to Matthew, hang onto your seats – because now I'm going to quote Geraldo Rivera): during an interview with NPR's Morning Edition¹³ this month, Rivera rejected the notion that concern for national security is what drives anti-immigrant activism. "Are you really concerned about quote-unquote-border security," he asked, "or are you concerned about the changing demographic face of the United States?...It is not a fear of terrorism, it is not fear of crime...it is demographics that is [sic] the true fear."

Fear, in other words, of brown skin and Spanish surnames and a high birth rate – and the loss of what some view as "American culture." Fear that Latinos are "taking all the jobs"¹⁴ or just plain "taking over." This week, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported "a link between anti-immigrant activism and the significant rise in hate crimes against Latinos in recent years"¹⁵ – a hate driven by a belief that "there is a secret plot by the Mexican government and American Hispanics to wrest the Southwest away from the United States in order to create 'Aztlán,' a Hispanic nation."¹⁶

We already know – we believe, as Unitarian Universalists, that there is no "us" and "them" in our interdependent web. We remember the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., who said that "we caught up in a network of mutuality."

I would argue that there is no clean separation between hate groups who think that Mexicans are plotting to take over the U.S., and we, who keep ourselves blind to, or ignorant of, how our neighbors and employees are treated by the country that employs them.

"We are...called to acknowledge," says Bill Sinkford,¹⁷ "that racism has blinded many Americans to what takes place in our own kitchens, workshops, and fields. For our nation to be whole, we must acknowledge that our lives of privilege are supported in thousands of ways by people whose labor is invisible and whose suffering is hidden."

We cannot live with this blindness; the veil is shredding between what we are willing to see, and what is so for our Latino brothers and sisters. What steps can we take, as individuals, to heal this rupture?

It gives me hope and strength that our Unitarian Universalist Association has endorsed the New Sanctuary Movement, "a movement of prophetic hospitality and public witness to bring about real change in the immigration policy"¹⁸ of the U.S.

What else can we do?

How can we stand in solidarity as individuals of faith and conscience?

If Unitarian Universalists stand on the side of love – the only cure for the disease of fear¹⁹ – what actions might reflect and embody that love?

✳ First, and most essentially, solidarity means *bearing witness*. We become willing to see, and to listen, and to learn about the suffering created by unjust immigration laws and by misinformation. This includes hearing and seeing the underlying forces that drive people out of their home countries, and into ours.

✳ Standing on the side of love means educating ourselves, and learning to undo the myths that feed fear.²⁰ In our “responsible search for truth and meaning” – which applies to all areas of our lives, not just Sunday mornings – we find the courage to question the images of immigrants fed to us by outside sources.

✳ Solidarity means seeking out the places where our own lives, and our circles of community, intersect with those of immigrants. Where is there room to practice compassion? How deep are our responsibilities to our workers? Are there opportunities for us to teach unauthorized migrants their rights, and what to do in an ICE raid?

✳ We stand on the side of love when we use our voices to speak for those without a voice: writing letters, publicly challenging the tactics of fear, pointing out the gaps in our public policies.

✳ With all of our action, we say:

May justice live long: *Que viva la justicia.*

May civil rights live long: *Que vivan los derechos civiles.*

May human rights live long: *Que vivan los derechos humanos.*

Que sea asi, amigos y amigas.

May it be so; *que sea asi.*

Endnotes

1. By “our,” I mean both Live Oak (whose cleaners and landscapers are Latino) as well as the general population of Santa Barbara & Goleta. I do realize that not all of us have the means to hire house cleaners and nannies!
2. In this sermon, I’ve chosen to use the terms “illegal immigrant” and “unauthorized migrants” (used by the Pew Hispanic Center) rather than the off-putting and sterile phrase “illegal alien.” Also, I choose to use the term “Latino” rather than “Hispanic,” the latter being a government-endorsed term and used in formal institutions and the former being a grassroots term. For more on this topic, see www.lasculturas.com/aa/aa070501a.htm.
3. Including the Pew Hispanic Center (see <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/17.pdf> and <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/44.pdf>); the United States Government Accountability Office (see www.gao.gov/new.items/d06775.pdf); and the Center for Immigration Studies (see www.cis.org/articles/2007/back1007.html).
4. According to Bear Stearns researchers Robert Justich and Betty Ng. See www.csmonitor.com/2006/0516/p01s02-ussc.html.
5. An estimated 57% and 24%, respectively. Again, these figures are provided by the Pew Hispanic Center, in its March 2006 report.
6. Belinda Escobosa Helzer, with the Orange County chapter of the ACLU.
7. ICE replaced what was once known as INS, or Immigration and Naturalization Service, which ceased to exist on March 1, 2003. What was once part of the Department of Justice is now under the umbrella of the Department of Homeland Security; and handled legal and illegal immigration and naturalization.
8. Personal communication, Belinda Escobosa Helzer and PUEBLO staff.
9. See Talbot, below.
10. Yes, this actually happens! See “Mexico Tries to Help Deportees” by Ioan Grillo, *TIME* Magazine, Feb. 7, 2008.
11. “The Lost Children” by Margaret Talbot. *The New Yorker*, March 3, 2008, pp. 58-67. Talbot’s terrific, if disturbing, article focuses primarily on entire families of illegal immigrants who are detained in these private facilities, and the indignities they’re subjected to in those prisons.
12. Rev. Sinkford’s beautifully prophetic statement was released on May 7, 2007: www.uua.org/pressroom/pressreleases/24270.shtml.

13. Rivera's interview aired on March 2, 2008 while he was publicizing his new book, *His Panic: Why Americans Fear Hispanics in the U.S.* You can listen to the interview at www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=87866811.

14. One of the most important factors regarding public opinion about immigration is the level of unemployment; anti-immigrant sentiment is highest where unemployment is highest and vice-versa. See "Immigration and Public Opinion" by Thomas Espenshade and Maryanne Belanger in Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco, ed. *Crossings: Mexican Immigration in Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Cambridge, Mass.: David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies and Harvard University Press, pages 365-403.

15. "Report links hate groups anti-immigrant activism," Associated Press. *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 2008, A15. See for example www.splcenter.org/news/item.jsp?aid=186

16. Not all anti-immigrant groups are classified as "hate groups." See www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?sid=175.

17. See note #12.

18. See note #12.

19. A paraphrase of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words in "A Network of Mutuality."

20. For example, did you know that illegal immigrants pay taxes? The Social Security Administration reports that "about three-quarters" of illegal immigrants pay payroll taxes, which amounted to nearly nine billion dollars (Social Security tax and Medicare) in 2002. See www.nytimes.com/2005/04/05/business/05immigration.html?ex=1270353600&en=78c87ac4641dc383&ei=5090.