

“Sanctuary”

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Wilton Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 91

Matthew 23: 13-17; 23-24; 37-39

My family emigrated from Zimbabwe in what some might say was the “right” way. My parents did the paperwork. The process was filled with bureaucratic hurdles and took six long years.

In July of 1988, on the day we were scheduled to fly out from Zimbabwe, a United States Navy warship shot down an Iranian commercial airliner. The embassy in Harare, which was holding our immigration papers, closed.

It was a time of high emotions and high drama but we eventually made it to America, green cards in hand.

As living conditions in Zimbabwe spiraled downward we had found a sanctuary across the ocean. We have not had to worry about our immigration status since then.

But many folks still do have to think about sanctuary.

I first encountered the concept of sanctuary cities, universities, and churches last year following the Trump administration’s increased enforcement on immigration. Students at Yale Divinity School helped organize marches and rallies to protest impending deportations of Yale “Dreamer” students and longtime New Haven residents. There seemed to be a good amount of support from the Divinity School community.

I hear that the sanctuary movement may not be a current newsmaker in Wilton so, if you don't mind, I'll share a little bit about what's happening up the road in New Haven.

Churches in New Haven sheltered community members who were on the verge of being deported back to their home countries. These churches rallied around people who came to them, sometimes in the dark of night, seeking refuge from immigration authorities.

I observed all of this from the sidelines. I wasn't sure what to think about it.

I also wondered if this is something that churches should be doing. Should churches be impeding law enforcement?

I have mixed feelings about the sanctuary movement.

This might sound surprising in light of my immigration story but for me, it is a complex issue.

In the past, I had separated people into right and wrong. Those who immigrated the "right" way and those who entered the "wrong" way.

I see the government's policy of separating children from parents as wrong, appalling, horrific and inhumane.

Yet, I vacillate on the deportation issue.

On one hand, I think, well, we have laws which seem fair. For people who do not have the right papers, deportation is the consequence. If they are claiming asylum and fleeing from legitimate threats to their lives, there is due process for that.

On the other hand, I think, *these people are human beings*. They have every right to a flourishing life, just as I do.

If people are breaking laws in order to make a better life for themselves and their families,
and religious communities are taking steps to counter the enforcement of these laws
then, perhaps it's time we changed the laws.

The city of New Haven was at the forefront of the sanctuary city movement a decade ago. In 2007, New Haven was the first municipality in the entire country to offer a resident card that could be used as official government identification.

The card was meant as a form of protection to undocumented residents of the city. With it, one could open a bank account, use city services, and interact with police without fear of deportation. Before this, undocumented immigrants were known as walking ATMs and were frequent mugging victims; victims who were reluctant to report the crime to police. When applying, no questions were asked about immigration status. At 6:30am on the first day of registration, a line of people already stretched from City Hall down the street and wrapped around the block!¹

That simple identification card gave an aspect of freedom and sanctuary to our undocumented neighbors.

However, across the country voices protested New Haven's actions, including, most recently, voices from the White House. Last year the president called out New Haven's mayor by name on Twitter over the sanctuary movement! But through all of this opposition, the mayor, city council, and residents have **just closed their mother-hen protective wings even more tightly.**

¹ Alexandra Sanders, New Haven resident card going strong five years later, *New Haven Register*, July 24, 2012, available from < <https://www.nhregister.com/news/article/New-Haven-resident-card-going-strong-5-years-11452415.php>>, accessed Sept. 18, 2018.

Each day on my way to and from the divinity school, I pass First and Summerfield United Methodist Church downtown. There is a large, colorful sign affixed to the front gate depicting people at play and on it is written the words “Sanctuary: keep families together.” Each time that I walk past this church, I think of Nelson Pinos, who, for over 300 days now, has been sheltering in the basement of the church. Nelson left Ecuador twenty-seven years ago and made a home, family, and life in New Haven. If he leaves the sanctuary of the church, he likely will be sent back to Ecuador, without his family.

What comes to mind when you think of sanctuary? Is it this place here, a room for worship in the church building? Is it a wildlife refuge, like a bird sanctuary? Is it a feeling of being sheltered?

Our english word sanctuary comes from the Latin *sanctus*, which means holy.

The sense of sanctuary being a place of refuge or safety comes from the law of the medieval church where a fugitive sheltering within the church walls was immune from arrest.²

So, these sanctuary churches are standing in a long line of tradition where the church has not only offered a spiritual refuge

but also a physical one.

In the Spring of 2016, Ross and I were lucky enough to work on the Greek Island of Chios assisting with the refugee response there. Immense numbers of migrants had been crossing the short distance on the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece, risking

² Sanctuary, Word Origin and History for Sanctuary, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/sanctuary?s=t>

their lives on tiny rubber rafts; most of them seeking shelter from the wars ravaging their countries.

On the walls of one of the first reception areas, an old tanning factory, someone had spray painted a message, which read:

A life worth more than a paper.

And I think that this sums up the whole issue.

Jesus says to the religious leaders, “Woe to you . . . For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: **justice and mercy and faith.**” The scriptural directive for agricultural tithes did not include herbs but the pharisees had moved beyond the intent of the law taking it to an extreme while ignoring its spirit.

This is what seems to be happening in our country today with increased ICE raids and the horrific policy of separating children and their parents at the border. **Our presidential administration is tithing herbs and neglecting the weightier matters of the law.**

In our scripture today, Jesus is holding court. Some pharisees have tried to entrap him with questions and one of them, a lawyer, has asked a question about what is the greatest commandment. In Matthew’s recounting, that part of the story stops here. The lawyer pharisee does not press Jesus further by asking “who is my neighbor?” and Jesus does not respond with the Parable of the Good Samaritan as Luke records him doing so.

Instead, Matthew moves directly to Jesus’s intense diatribe against the pharisees and scribes. Jesus, a Jew, is attempting to reform the Jewish religious establishment of the day. Sadly, at times in our church history, these verses have been interpreted as anti-Semitic; a point which might cause us to shy away from engaging them in worship. But, they are important.

We read only a few this morning but there are seven woes here. Matthew situates this speech near the end of Jesus's ministry. In two days he will die. These are some of the final words of the earthly Jesus speaking truth to power and calling the religious leaders of the day to account.

Some of us have probably daydreamed about doing this; unleashing our woes on somebody, in a *Seinfeld* Festivus-type airing of grievances.

However, one extremely important difference between our woes and those of Jesus are that ours, no matter how sincere and weighty they would seem to us, would lack the gravitas of Jesus's indictments. Jesus was not simply airing grievances. At stake, was the Kingdom of Heaven, life and death, and religion itself.

Also, crucially, our woes might lack a turn of compassion.

After all this vitriol, Jesus offers something else. He **laments** over the city and the people who have turned away from his message.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

Miracy longed to hold her son, to give him refuge in her arms, but he, stinging from a wound of perceived abandonment, refused that place and gesture of refuge. The pain that Miracy felt must too have been the pain of Jesus two thousand years ago as he lamented not being able to shelter the children of Jerusalem.

Ancient rabbis had an expression for converts to Judaism: that they had “come under the wings of the Shekinah [Sheh - hey - NAH].”

This Shekinah [Sheh - hey - NAH] is a divine presence, a dwelling place, which was often represented as a dove, and for Christians, has become synonymous with Holy Spirit.³

So, what are we, the people of the way, to do with this?

If we believe a law to be **unjust**, we must work to change it.

We can show compassion and **mercy** by being present at rallies and protests opposing policies that run against our moral grain.

And, **faith**. We must pray, pray, pray. We must daily read God’s word, for it reveals the truth of the universe. It shows us how we are to treat our fellow creatures and God’s creation with kindness and compassion. We must seek to see the Holy Spirit moving through these troubled times and know that Jesus laments the hurting probably even more than we do.

And, friends we must always have faith that this loving and compassionate God, the great Shekinah will scoop us under her wings, to give us refuge from the dangers of this world.

Amen.

³ Jamieson-Fausset Brown Bible Commentary (on Bible Hub)