

# THE SANCTUARY OF OUR HEARTS

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH  
23 SEPTEMBER 2007

## CALL TO WORSHIP - Mick Mortlock

Together in the arms of this loving community,  
We can be safe,  
We can lay down our burdens,  
Seek the truth,  
Nurture each other,  
and rise in song,  
Come, let us worship together.

## READINGS

We offer two readings this morning. The first from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25

Then Jesus will say to them, "I was hungry and you gave me food,  
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,  
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,  
I was naked and you clothed me,  
I was sick and you took care of me,  
I was in prison and you visited me.'  
And the righteous will answer,  
"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food,  
or thirsty and gave you something to drink?  
And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you,  
or naked and gave you clothing?  
And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"  
And the lord will answer, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these  
who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

And New Colossus by Emma Lazarus, the poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

## SERMON

A Google search on the word sanctuary comes up with some interesting hits. There are, of course, many religious groups called The Sanctuary. So, too, there are wildlife sanctuaries and those for abandoned or abused pets. There are sustainable and affordable housing developments called The Sanctuary. There are also, not surprisingly, many spas and golf courses with sanctuary in their names. But it does get a little weird. There is an on-line Goth community called The Sanctuary. There's a tattoo parlor. In the 1997 movie, *The Sanctuary*, a former CIA operative with company secrets hides out as a priest. Sanctuary, the rock band, is called the ultimate Iron Maiden tribute band. I think my favorite is the Sanctuary Cruise, Asia's first all-gay cruise-line.

Sanctuary connotes a place of refuge and protection. Indeed a place so protected and set apart as to be holy. A place consecrated and sacred. This room in which we gather for worship is called the sanctuary – meant to be a place of peace and holy refuge. So, too, we protect endangered animals or habitats – things precious and holy to us – in sanctuaries. Sanctuary suggests also peace and quiet – hence the appeal of spa as sanctuary offering quiet in a world that assaults our senses. Now I'm not entirely sure how a tattoo parlor or Iron Maiden tribute band qualify as sanctuary. Yet I understand the sense of sanctuary that a black-haired, pale-faced, leather-clad, counter-cultural Goth youth might yearn for in a world that feels so alienating. Or the sense refuge gay men might feel sailing together on the China Seas.

The idea of sanctuary is ancient. The altar at which people worshipped was considered especially holy, and so it became an especially egregious crime to do violence in that sacred space. So accused criminals would often run to the altar or the temple to escape persecution or prosecution. A right of sanctuary grew up around such places. In ancient Israel, there were six entire cities of refuge. For a thousand years during the Middle Ages in Europe, civil authorities would not violate the sanctity of the church where fugitives sought sanctuary.

The point was not that criminals would escape punishment, but rather by seeking sanctuary there would be space and time for justice to prevail. Some might be able to prove their innocence. The guilty had greater assurance of receiving a just sentence.

The concept of sanctuary is not necessarily limited to place. I met a man from El Salvador recently who spoke of the power of Archbishop Oscar Romero. Romero was a defender of the poor and persecuted in El Salvador at the height of the death squads' reign of terror. This man spoke of how Romero created a sense of sanctuary and safety for the people simply by his presence and the power of his message. He made the people feel safe. It was certainly not a physical sanctuary honored by any authority. Indeed, in 1980, Romero was assassinated in the church, during mass upon the altar. He had just given the homily and was about to celebrate communion. His blood spilled upon the altar, and it is said, it mixed with the communion wine.

Romero was killed by a death squad trained at the School of the Americas. Yet since that time, the people of El Salvador have reported seeing visions of Romero walking among the people. The flagrant violation of the sanctuary of the altar helped spark a greater resistance – among other things, the growth of the Sanctuary Movement in the United States when churches took in political refugees from the tempest-tossed lands of Central America, even as they were denied entry by US immigration policy.

And so, the concept of sanctuary continues into modern times, even as its definition has expanded – sometimes in less than reverent ways, sometimes in ways that bring home the need for us to reach out to one another – especially the marginalized. To seek and offer sanctuary for ourselves and each other.

The United States used to be a sanctuary nation. It used to be something we were proud of. Through out America's history we have been a place that seekers have come to – seeking opportunity, a new life, freedom. Many fled persecution or poverty in their homelands. Indeed, some accused of crime, justly or not, came to our shores. It is an evocative American mythology.

When I was in second grade, the whole class performed a play about America as a land of immigrants. We were all on a ship, coming into New York Harbor. Most of the students had just a line or two, telling about what nation they came from and what dreams they had for life in America. Martha Walsh had the biggest part – the Statue of Liberty, welcoming all the immigrants. She held her torch proudly aloft, although halfway through the play her torch arm got tired and she had to switch. I had the second biggest role – the American girl. I remember little of my part except that while Martha had more lines, I got to recite the poem that graces the Statue of Liberty – New Colossus by Emma Lazarus. I was proud that by the day of the play, I had it fully memorized. And it's still pretty much with me today.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles.

The Greek Colossus of Rhodes – one of the ancient Seven Wonders of the World – was a massive statue by the harbor, a symbol of military triumph and empire. In contrast, our Statue of Liberty became a symbol of a fresh new nation, leaving behind the pomp and decay of Old Europe's aristocracy, standing in the harbor as a symbol of welcome, of a land of many peoples, coming to find freedom and opportunity.

A large body of mythology has grown up around America as the great melting pot where all are welcome to enter and pursue the American dream, a mythology I began learning in second grade.

It is an incomplete myth, to be sure. It says nothing of the racism and exploitation that immigrants faced. Nothing of how we have routinely blamed our social ills on the "wretched refuse" that arrived at our gates. Nothing about the Native Americans who were here first. Nothing about those who came not by choice but by capture and enslavement.

It says nothing about any of the laws passed which institutionalize racism and fear. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act – the first law to target a specific immigrant group. After President McKinley was assassinated by an anarchist in 1901, Congress passed the Anarchist Exclusion Act. Sound at all familiar?

Yet those laws were actually relatively few until the last century. Throughout most of our history, our borders were mostly open. Only two percent of the immigrants who came through Ellis Island were denied entrance – and those were mostly those with infectious diseases. It was not until the 1920s that any kind of quotas were put in place. Since then there have been a series of laws trying to exert some kind of control while still allowing people to enter. Some have been more enlightened, others painfully racist. Nevertheless, as of 2006, the United States accepted more legal immigrants as permanent residents than any other country in the world.

If our nation's history on immigration has been less than stellar, it is still true that we have done far more to encourage immigration than control it. And surely, once we were a sanctuary nation who offered worldwide welcome to those yearning for freedom, the homeless, the tempest-tossed.

For all the complexity of the issue, I still find myself stirred by Lazarus' words. I still want to be that nation. I still want to offer sanctuary.

Yet more and more, we are contracting, pulling in on ourselves, pushing others away in fear.

Perhaps we are simply in yet another wave of anti-immigrant feeling – waves that have arisen and washed over us with regularity. Yet it seems that since Sept. 11 our fears have multiplied exponentially. We are a people who are now fully afraid of the stranger.

Historically, fear of immigration has risen in times of economic uncertainty, especially when unemployment is high. People come to fear those strangers will take our jobs or be a drain on our economy.

Our fears feed into misapprehensions about immigrants, which appear logical at first blush but do not bear out under scrutiny. I've seen different numbers, but generally, there are about 35 million immigrants in the US today, which is just under 13 percent of the population. Of those, 29 percent are here without documentation. About half of them entered the country legally and overstayed their visas. The rest arrived illegally.

Despite common belief, studies show that immigrants do not affect median income. They do not increase the poverty rate or the unemployment rate. While immigrants do use our social services, they also contribute to the economy and pay taxes. By one estimate, immigrants contribute \$10 billion to the economy annually.

Yet these statistics say nothing about the reasons people want to come to America. Many are fleeing war and persecution – the tempest-tossed. Still more are fleeing abject poverty. They wish to come here to work and support their families. These statistics say nothing about the global trends, which contribute to the poverty of nations throughout the world.

Immigration is one of the most complicated and fraught issues of our time. Yet the religious call has always been to welcome the stranger, to reach out to the marginalized, the weak, the poor, the wretched, the homeless.

That imperative is found in all religious traditions, although the Gospel of Matthew offers one of the most moving and poetic calls to reach out beyond ourselves. For when we do, we acknowledge the holy in all, even the most wretched and despised.

How are you called as a religious person to respond?

How are we called as a religious community?

The place to start is in becoming informed on the issues. My own call to work on this issue arose when I helped plan a vigil in response to the hate-filled attack on two Latino men in Mulino last May. It connected me with many in the Hispanic community. From that, a group of us formed the Clackamas Coalition for Justice. We plan to bring public forums on immigration issues and immigrant rights to inform ourselves and the community.

In the 1980s, during the reign of terror in Central America – terror which our government's policies supported – many churches became involved in the Sanctuary Movement. Offering refuge and protection to people in danger in their homelands. Some of you have told me that you first became involved in a Unitarian Universalist church because they were Sanctuary churches.

In the past year, a New Sanctuary Movement has been formed to respond to current immigration policy that seeks to deport undocumented workers, often tearing apart families and communities. The government has stepped up enforcement and we will see more and more raids, more and more deportations.

The issues are multi-layered and complicated. You know the dilemmas. How do we create reasonable control of immigration without building walls that only make it more dangerous to cross, knowing full well that when people are desperate enough they will face greater and greater danger? How do we address the world-wide poverty that drives

immigration? How do we ensure that those who come and work here – documented and undocumented – are not exploited when they arrive?

I ask you again how you are called to respond. How are we called as a religious community? How are you called by our universalist heritage of universal love and acceptance? How are you called by our Unitarian of a global embrace?

As we sing *This is My Song*, do we envision fences and razor wire across those blue skies?  
We are not a people called to build walls, but to break down barriers to love, barriers to knowing and caring for one another.

There are those in setting public policy who will continue to work to keep people out. We are not naïve, but we know we must find ways to approach this issue without being mean-spirited, exclusionary, racist or hateful.

And yet if it is naïve to resist the tearing apart of immigrant families, then let us be naïve.

If it is naïve to offer shelter to the persecuted, then let us be naïve

If it is naïve to embrace those who are willing to risk their lives for just a chance at a better life, then let us be naïve

If it is naïve to want no one to suffer the indignities and privations of poverty, then let us be naïve.

Our love, our compassion, our reasoned and passionate understanding is needed in the world.

How are you called to this work of justice and compassion?

May we offer sanctuary in this weary and fraught world. For our selves, for one another and for those in need of protection and refuge.

Our love is needed.

May we love well.

Blessed be.

Amen.