

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

## How Could We Not?

*Reverend Victoria Safford*

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**WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH  
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115  
651.426.2369 [vsafford@wbuuc.org](mailto:vsafford@wbuuc.org)**

The **FIRST READING** is by Judith Terzi, based on an old song by Woody Guthrie.

*PARTIAL CLEARING*

Jesús and María,  
 step out of the shadows,  
 look up at the mountain,  
 the cedar, the pine.  
 Refresh in the streams  
 that line your palm,  
 your brow. Don't stoop  
 in the furrows, the rows.  
 Rise up in the orchards,  
 the vineyards, the fields.  
 The fruit, it is sweet,  
 the lettuce not rotting.  
 Crawl out of the caverns  
 that nurture *tristeza*,  
 despair. The skies  
 are clearing, relinquish  
 your fear at least for now.  
 Gather carnations  
 from earth that you've  
 plowed, from gardens  
 in cities you've loved  
 then left. The laughter  
 of children, it scatters  
 like petals, like leaves.  
 Oh *Jesús y María*,  
 Rosalita and Juan,  
 you are not deportees.

The **SECOND READING** is from the Reverend Ashley Harness, Minister at Lyndale United Church of Christ, Minneapolis

Sometimes I re-write parts of our communion liturgy so we remember where Jesus lives today:

On the night before Jesus was killed by those who feared him...  
 On the night before he was shot by police...  
 On the night before her trans\* body was murdered...  
 On the night before she was deported by ICE...  
 On the night before he was crucified  
 for saying *yes* to his own  
     Jewish,  
     brown,

Palestinian,  
 poor,  
 radical  
 humanity  
 and *no* to the forces of oppression...

Jesus sat at table with those he loved.  
 He took the bread and blessed it and broke it.

He said, "This is my life, broken open and shared with you.  
 And each time you eat this ordinary bread,  
 remember the extraordinary, transformative power of our lives when they are broken open for  
 justice and love."

### **How Could We Not?**

From the poet Jane Hirshfield comes a helpful reminder:

*In my wallet I carry a card  
 which declares I have the power to marry.  
 In my wallet I carry a card  
 which declares I may drive.  
 In my wallet I carry a card  
 that says to a merchant I may be trusted to pay her.  
 In my wallet I carry a card  
 that states I can borrow a book in the town where I live.  
 In my hand I carry a card.  
 Its lines declare I am cardless, carless,  
 stateless, and have no money.  
 It is buoyant and edgeless.  
 It names me one of the Order of All Who Will Die.*

We are part of the holy Order of All Who Will Die, the Order of All Who Would Live, all the people, mortals all, who want to live a happy, useful, fair and blessed life. We are part of one another, regardless of the paper cards we carry.

*Love thy neighbor.  
 Love thy gay neighbor, thy Muslim neighbor thy black neighbor, thy brown neighbor, thy  
 neighbor who is homeless, thy native neighbor, thy trans neighbor, thy Asian neighbor, thy white  
 neighbor, thy Jewish neighbor, thy Christian neighbor, thy neighbor with disabilities, thy  
 neighbor without documents, thy atheist neighbor, thy addicted neighbor, thy neighbor with  
 mental illness, thy neighbor in jail, thy neighbor elder, thy neighbor child...*

The poster on the pulpit comes from *#love trumps hate*. Love trumps hate and love trumps fear and love will resist and will outlive every ill-conceived and malevolent Executive Order. Love prevails, if we choose it, if we stand on its side and remember what holy orders we belong to. It is fierce, forceful, faithful, this love; it is resilient, risky, hopeful and brave, this love to which we're called. It is not convenient, conventional or quiet. King called it "strength to love," a translation of what Gandhi called "satyagraha," or "soul force," and we know it, we intuit what it means and what it asks of us, not only from great, sweeping historic movements, religious, political movements for social change and justice; we know it, this trembling, fearsome love, from our own lives and our relationships. Anyone with a family, anyone who's ever had children or parents, or a lover or a friend, anyone with neighbors or co-workers, anyone who day to day interacts with other human beings, anyone who admits belonging to the Order of All Who Will Die and All Who Would Live, knows that this love, this capacity to see the holy in someone else and honor it, is hard and messy and complicated. If love is easy, it is not love. If it asks nothing of you, no sacrifice, no sacrament, no commitment, no bravery, no risk of loss, then it is not love. Love is a leap of faith. In matters of the heart, you gather all your information, weigh the pros and cons, do your homework, your research, and then - you simply jump.

William Sloane Coffin, who was minister of Riverside Church in New York City, said once, "It's important to realize that the leap of faith is not so much a leap of thought, as of action. For while in many matters it is *first we must see, then we will act*; in matters of faith it is *first we must do, and then we will know*: first we will *be* and then we will *see*. One must, in short, dare to act wholeheartedly without absolute certainty. Socrates had it wrong," said William Sloane Coffin. "It is not the unexamined life but finally the uncommitted life that is not worth living. Descartes, too was mistaken. *Cogito ergo sum – I think, therefore I am*. That's nonsense. *Amo ergo sum – I love, therefore I am*."

Our theme this month is *simplicity: the practice of living by heart*. In the religious life, the spiritual life, the faithful and committed life, there are a lot of simple imperatives that are really complicated. We're called to *live by heart*, and that takes some careful thought. *Love thy neighbor* is simple – and it's not.

The Board of Directors of White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church said *yes* in November when we were asked if we would be a sanctuary church for people in the Twin Cities who are undocumented migrants, neighbors facing detention and deportation in a new Administration. Our congregation was one of five that stepped forward; now there more than two dozen, with many others pondering. At a January gathering for communities of faith, more than 2000 people showed up at Shiloh Temple, a Baptist church, and at the end of the day, Baptists and Lutherans, Catholics and Jews, Muslims, humanists, Quakers, Unitarian Universalists, prayed for the Sanctuary congregations, for this heavy work that whole room was holding together, in what the prophet Isaiah once called "such a time as this." They blessed us, we blessed each other, as we all held questions about money and liability and the law, about our buildings and volunteers and community partners. All through that day, and through this whole winter, frankly, ringing in my head and resounding in my heart, has been one single, simple question, louder and stronger than the rest, tolling like a bell in a steeple. It was offered by a member of the Board here, when the call first came to us and we were struggling with its implications. *How could we not say yes to this*, she said quietly, after hearing all the arguments and doubts, just within the Board. *How can*

*we not say yes?* - and of all our unanswered and unanswerable questions were clarified then, sanctified, even, in the light of love and our faith and our history, in the light of this moment we're living in and called to.

In two editorials in as many weeks, the *New York Times* recently said this:

*About 11 million people are living in this country outside the law. Suddenly, by Presidential decree, all are deportation priorities, all are supposed criminals, all are threatened with broken lives, along with members of their families. The end could come for them any time. This is not fake news. It's the United States of today, this month, this morning. They have been vilified by the president as criminals, though they are not. They have tried to build honest lives here and suddenly are as fearful as fugitives. They await the fists pounding on the door, the agents in black, the cuffs, the van ride, the cell. They are terrified that the United States government will find them, or their parents or their children, demand their papers, and take them away.*

*What has been most alarming about campaign posturing on immigration has not been the wall, which will never be built in the way it's been described. It is instead the prospect of ramped up enforcement that promises to increase misery on both sides of the border. The criminalizing of law-abiding immigrants who have lived in the United States for years, and of the migrants from Central America who arrive desperate for refuge. The households sundered, the jobs lost, the brutal idiocy of it all. Federal forces, reenlisting state and local law enforcement agencies in a widening immigration dragnet, threaten to return America to a disgraceful era of workplace raids, indiscriminate sweeps and mass arrests. This will fix nothing, except perhaps the bottom lines in the private prison industry.*

I'm remembering that years ago, almost ten years ago, I shared here a story from the *Star Tribune*. This was before I traveled to Arizona and Mexico with the UUA, before I knew much about the politics and history, the economics and geography of the border, the broken policies and promises. There was a picture of a woman at the airport, wearing handcuffs and a face of abject anguish. She was reaching for her baby, held by someone else, she had tissues in her hands, she was sobbing, and the caption read, "Before she was to be deported and flown to Nicaragua, Nidia Vallecillo pleaded with Immigration agents to remove her handcuffs so she could hold her son Jared." They arrested her in her house in the night, and they almost took her away before she could tell them that the baby was there, asleep in his crib. The two were taken to the airport, where Nidia was informed that though she must leave the country, her son, who is a U.S. citizen, could stay. "With whom?" she asked, and they were both flown to New York, where they were separated because the baby didn't have a passport. In the last moment, before the plane left, someone intervened, a temporary stay was granted, and many hours later, Nidia and Jared were flown back to Minnesota and returned to their house, where, at any moment, without warning, the process could begin again.

They are legion – factory workers, gardeners, nannies, cooks in restaurants where you and I eat, and dishwashers, servers, bus staff. They are construction workers, roofers, neighbors. Many are afraid to go to work, for fear they may be taken while their children are at school. Many are afraid to go home, for fear their children may have said something inadvertently to the wrong

person. It is a wave of terror almost imperceptible to the wide majority of us, the white majority of us. It doesn't really touch us, or so we imagine.

I think of that woman in her handcuffs, crying for her child, and wonder *what exactly is the threat she poses?* What exactly are we trying to protect? [*Safe and Profoundly Unsound*, 2008] William Sloane Coffin asked one time, "Am I my brother's keeper? No. I am my brother's brother or my sister's sister. Human unity is not something we are called upon to create, only to recognize."

In the Bible, there is not one reference to welcoming the stranger: there are many, throughout Hebrew scripture and the Christian testament. It is the theme song, a love song, of a persistent, admonishing God to a constantly wayward people:

**In Deuteronomy** -- *You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

**In Leviticus** -- *The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens also.*

Some people are native to this land. Some others came here in chains. All the rest, all, have come as immigrants, and most of those, throughout the nation's history, without the privilege of "papers," no wallets and no cards. Our parents, many of us, our grandparents, great-grandparents – how did they all manage to cross the border? Who welcomed them home?

**In Hebrews** -- *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels unawares.*

**In Colossians** -- *In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.*

**In Matthew** -- *I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*

These admonitions come from a desert place and a desperate time, when welcoming was a matter of life or death for everyone concerned, when interdependence among human beings and other living things was a matter of life or death- in some ways like the times we live in now. Radical hospitality is a thread that weaves through the text, in Judaism, Islam, Christianity, in unrelated passages written thousands of years apart: a consistent thread in sacred scriptures defined by inconsistencies- in some ways like the lives we're living now. This thread persists, stubbornly, relentlessly, radiantly, coaxing-ly, and sternly: *You can do this hard thing, you can find the strength to love. You can make space. Welcome the stranger among you. You are called, in such a time as this, to this simple, complicated gesture.* It's not just a platitude, nice for Sunday services but impractical and ill-advised in the bright light of Monday morning. It is an act of faith, a leap of faith, a way of faith, a way of life that decentralizes privilege and power, and always has. It is an age-old challenge to every nation, every huddled tribe, every family, every one of us who has ever felt afraid, felt challenged, felt as if our safety, our stuff, our rightful

place, our personal empire might be threatened by The Other. Throughout these sacred texts and, at their best, the religions that ensued, there weaves a destabilizing theology. ***Love is a destabilizing theology.***

*On the night before he died...*

*On the night before he was crucified by those who feared him...*

*the night before she was deported ...*

*Jesus sat at table with those he loved...*

*He said, "This is my life, broken open and shared with you.*

*And each time you eat this ordinary bread, remember the extraordinary, transformative power of our lives when they are broken open for justice and love.*

Albert Schweitzer, the great humanitarian, was asked once how he could explain the life of service. He said, *Whatever you have received more than others in health, in talents, in ability, in success, in a pleasant childhood, in harmonious conditions of home life, all this you must not take to yourself as a matter of course. You must pay a price for it. You must render in return an unusually great sacrifice of your life for other life. The voice of the true ethic is **dangerous for the happy** when they have the courage to listen to it, for then there is no quenching of the fire which glows in it.*

It is a destabilizing philosophy, dangerous for the happy – and for us, this is actually good news. In her column for the newsletter this month, Laurie Kigner wrote of our Board’s conversations in recent weeks with so many members and friends:

*We concurred that the Sanctuary Church initiative will illuminate, clarify and enhance everything we do (religious education, environmental justice, building projects, day-today operations, music and worship, small groups, member engagement, etc.) – serving as one example (among many) of what our church is for. Our community is already built to take up this call — not just on this, but also on other issues of justice for all. As one of us said, “it’s like we’ve been practicing for this all along.” This is the plain, forthright clarity I’ve come to expect and to rely on from my church. There is a lucid simplicity in the ways we are called, again and again, to face the complexities of our lives through living by heart. This is why our household will increase our pledge. It’s a matter of the heart.*

There are many unknowns, and some few things we know for sure:

- The request to be a sanctuary church came to us from Minnesota’s immigrant community, from people of color on the front lines, and from interfaith partners who’ve worked with them a long, long time. It is a specific request, to house someone here if, with justified fear of immanent arrest, they ask to come. There are many other ways we can (and should and will and already have) address(ed) the injustice of immigration policy. But right now we are being asked to do this one specific thing. We’re being asked not to lead, but to help.
- This is a symbolic witness, as well as an attempt to help someone concretely. It is a sign of solidarity with neighbors under siege. It is an act of civil disobedience. We are working with attorneys in our congregation to understand the risks, and we’re talking

now with other local sanctuary congregations to retain a criminal attorney to help us more. We know that the federal designation “sensitive location” for churches, hospitals and schools could be revoked at any time, and it’s possible (though not likely) that ministers could be arrested or fines imposed. Possible, though not likely. Not likely – but possible.

- Anyone staying here will understand that there’s no guarantee of protection; in fact they could be at more risk here than in hiding. They will come in with open eyes, and almost certainly be connected to immigration justice work already. We will clarify our expectations, and theirs, at the start. We hope to receive someone who is already represented by an immigration attorney, who may have some sense of how long the person may need to stay. We’re not prepared to take someone “off the street,” and would refer such a request to immigration lawyers or to Isaiah-Mn. We want to know before saying yes to someone that they are a “good candidate” for sanctuary. It’s unlikely that we’ll be asked to house a family with children here.

Our Sanctuary committee is holding these questions and many others, about preparing our building, about timing around programs here and our summer HVAC installation. They’ve talked to folks at Project Home, who bless this idea wholeheartedly. They’re thinking about how to install a shower, what kind of budget this requires, recruiting and training and vetting volunteers (both from our church and wider community); they’re planning talks with the neighborhood, with other congregations eager to help. They’re working on emergency protocols, medical issues, insurance, publicity, security. The committee’s charge is not, “How could we not?” but rather, “How *could* we? How can we? How will we manage this?” They are gathering as much information and as many answers as they can, but ultimately, when we go forward, are going to have to jump. This will be an act of faith. An act of love. A simple act of kindness to which we find ourselves unable and unwilling to say no. We are part of the Order of All Who Will Die, the Order of All Who Would Live, all the people, mortals all, who want to live a happy, useful, fair and blessed life. We are part of one another, standing on the side of love.

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*Here, President Laurie Kigner invited the people to signal, by voice vote and a show of hands, their approval or disapproval of this statement:*

*We, members and friends of White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church,  
affirm the intention to become a Sanctuary Church.*

*Mindful of some risks and seeking to understand this commitment more completely, we stand on  
the side of love with immigrant communities asking for our help.*

*We affirm the steps our Board and Ministers have taken,  
and support our Sanctuary Committee in continuing discernment.*

*We want to be a Sanctuary Church.*

At each service, the people affirmed the statement overwhelmingly. The service ended with a blessing of the Sanctuary Committee, and one another, in gratitude and recognition of the work ahead.