

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

The Borders of Our Boxes

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White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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The first reading is an excerpt from **The Big Box** by Toni Morrison and Slade Morrison

Now, Mickey used to live on the eighteenth floor
With two elevators to serve us.
But he had too much fun in the streets all day
And made the grown-ups nervous.
He wrote his name on the mailbox lid
And sat on the super's Honda.
He hollered in the hall, and played handball
Right where the sign said not ta.

So the tenants who loved him had a meeting one day
To try to find a cure.
They thought and talked and thought some more
Till finally they were sure.
“Oh, Mickey,” they said, “you’re an awfully nice kid
With a wonderful future before you.
But you have to know how far you can go
So the grown-up world can adore you.
Now, the rules are listed on the elevator door
So there’s no need to repeat them.
We all agree, your parents and we,
That you just can’t handle your freedom.”

Mickey sat sill and avoided their eyes
By lowering his little-boy head.
But he heard their words and he felt their eyes
And this is what he said:
“But I comb ny hair and I don’t do drugs
And every day I vacuum the rugs.
I feed the hamster and water the plans
And once a week I hang up my pants.
If owls can scream
And rabbits hop
And beavers chew trees when they need ‘em
Why can’t I be a kid like me
Who doesn’t have to handle his freedom?
I know you are smart and I know that you think
You’re doing what is best for me.
But if freedom is handled in just *your* way
Then it’s not my freedom or free.”

So they gave little Mickey a knowing smile
 And put him in the big brown box.
 It has carpets and curtains and beanbag chairs
 But the door has three big locks.

Oh, it's pretty inside and the windows are wide
 With shutters to keep out the day.
 He has swings and slides and a double bunk bed
 But the door only opens one way.

His parents visit on Wednesday nights
 Just after their comedy show
 With Blimpies and Frisbees and comic books
 And matchbox cars that go.
 For his birthday he got a store-bought cake
 And an autographed basketball
 And a record that played exactly the sound
 Made by a living seagull.

Oh, baby seals scream
 And rabbits hop
 And beavers chew trees when they need 'em.
 But Patty and Mickey and Liza Sue -
 Poor kids - can't handle their freedom.

The second readings are from the Hebrew Scriptures:

Exodus 12:49 (ESV): There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.

Deuteronomy 10:19 (ESV): Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

Leviticus 19:33-34 (NRSV): When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. 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 in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Sermon

The theme for the summer is freedom, and it's been a rich one. I have had the opportunity to explore many variations of freedom and the many restrictions of freedoms--both the healthy and the unhealthy ones. I've thought about covenant as one of the healthy boundaries that keeps our freedoms in place and keeps them accountable to our shared community. I've thought about censorship and self-censorship as a restriction on our freedom of expression. And I have thought about the tension between our public expression and the more private and quiet still small voice that is also still a form of expression. Undergirding all of these explorations is the understanding that borders, boundaries, and boxes are all useful metaphors to better understand freedom. And I realized that one of the reasons that my mind was so fixated on boundaries and walls is that I have been listening to the soundtrack for the latest Tony-winning musical called *Hadestown*.

The catchiest song in the whole soundtrack is called *Why We Build These Walls*, and it is sung by Hades, the god of the underworld. It is basically a call-and-response song about the importance of walls and keeping people out. He has a deep bass voice, and he's obviously an anti-hero, but he's charming. His army of underworld dwellers becomes a gospel choir singing joyfully about the importance of these walls and celebrating their existence. It's a really strange feeling to hear a beautiful gospel tune that makes my spirit soar set to lyrics that are so antithetical to my values. I'm going to read the lyrics to you as a backdrop for today's message about borders:

Why do we build the wall?
 My children, my children
 Why do we build the wall?
 We build the wall to keep us free
 That's why we build the wall
 We build the wall to keep us free

How does the wall keep us free?
 My children, my children
 How does the wall keep us free?
 The wall keeps out the enemy
 And we build the wall to keep us free
 That's why we build the wall
 We build the wall to keep us free

Who do we call the enemy?
 My children, my children
 Who do we call the enemy?

The enemy is poverty
 And the wall keeps out the enemy
 And we build the wall to keep us free
 That's why we build the wall
 We build the wall to keep us free

Because we have and they have not!
 My children, my children
 Because they want what we have got!
 Because we have and they have not!

...
 That's why we build the wall
 We build the wall to keep us free

What do we have that they should want?
 My children, my children
 What do we have that they should want?
 We have a wall to work upon!
 We have work and they have none
 And our work is never done
 And the war is never won
 The enemy is poverty
 And the wall keeps out the enemy
 And we build the wall to keep us free
 That's why we build the wall
 We build the wall to keep us free

This past week, I spent some time in the Quetico Provincial Park--the Canadian portion of the Boundary Waters Canoe and Wilderness Area. There was one simple portage that transported us from the American to the Canadian side. My friend and I didn't bring our phones, so we had no access to Google Maps. For a moment I worried that we would get lost, but then I remembered a thing called paper maps. Sooo helpful. They were even waterproof (in case they fell out of the canoe). I've been up to the Quetico before, and at least twice the same person--my friend's dad--has made the same joke as we pass from one country to the next. Be prepared: it's a groaner. Right as we're passing over the part of the map where there is a dotted red line to indicate the border between our two countries, he gets this little glimmer in his eyes. He looks around and says, "I've been looking all around this lake, and I can't find the dotted red line anywhere. Where is it?"

I know, I know...it's bad. But this time, just last week I was on this trip to the Quetico with a different friend, and he hadn't heard the joke before. And you better

believe that I delivered it. My friend made the requisite groan as he should have. But the moment really got me thinking. Jokes like this are really my favorite, because they're both silly and also point to a deeper truth. We all know that borders aren't real in a topographic or geographical sense. They are a social and political construct. And unlike most land borders (where one could paint an arbitrary line or potentially build a wall), this border was literally a dotted red line floating on water. Even if there was some way to create a wall that floated above the water to prevent canoes from passing over it, there would still be fish and water passing under the wall. The very idea of a water border is absurd anyway. Who owns water?

The paper maps we used were very helpful. Almost every component of the map helped us navigate the nuances of our journey. We could know we were on the correct route because we could follow and find every inlet, every bay, every point, isthmus, channel, island, campsite, and even a few pictographs. The only useless part of the map was the border. It didn't help us navigate at all--it only informed us of when we were going from one jurisdiction to the next. It told us the precise moment that we had crossed the border.

And since we were going to be crossing the border far away from any official border crossing, we had to fill out paperwork ahead of time to get permission to make a Remote Area Border Crossing. At the ranger station, we produced our faxed paperwork, showed our passports, and paid the camping fee, and then we were on our way with permission to explore a wilderness area that was maintained and cared for by the Ontario Parks system in conjunction with the Ojibwe people. When we crossed over the border, we had access to a quieter wilderness area than the Boundary Waters. They have only a quarter of the campers that the Boundary Waters have. It is more remote--the quiet is quieter and the wildlife is wilder. The further we went, the further from civilization we were, and hence the further away from the safety of hospitals and park ranger stations. But also...the further away from mass shootings, interpersonal violence, workplace stress, the onslaught of the news, and rush hour. Our rush hour was just two canoes---it was not very congested.

The ease of that border crossing got me thinking about another border crossing. In 2010, I was in Syria visiting my friends who lived in the old walled city of Damascus doing peacebuilding work for the Menonite Central Committee. Out of all the countries for which I had gotten travel visas, the one for Syria was by far the most expensive. I didn't know why, so I asked my friend. Turns out...they charged \$131 USD, because that was the exact rate that our government charged Syrians who visited the United States. What felt absurdly expensive and even almost unfair was just my own government's policies reflected back to me. An eye-opening plot twist, to be sure.

But then from Syria, my friend and I traveled down to Jordan. We wanted to climb up Mt. Ararat and float in the Dead Sea. But first, we had to cross the border between Syria and Jordan. Now I should tell you my friend Ben is half Egyptian. His dad was a foreign exchange student when he met his mom. Ben is like a brother to me. I

have seen him navigate the world while holding multiple identities, and he has mastered the art of code switching. He had also been living in the Middle East for four years at that point. He spoke Arabic, and he also had an American passport, both realities which were highly valuable. As we were approaching the border, he prepped me on what he was going to do. He was going to flash his American passport, put on a bit of American swagger and faux arrogance and speak in an overly loud American accent. He had also dressed more American that day. If we looked more like two American tourists, then we would probably have an easier time crossing through. Then, if he needed to, he could listen to the border officials discussing us in Arabic. If they gave us trouble or started asking more questions, he could also speak to them in Arabic and explain more about his peacekeeping work in Syria or his time in Egypt, an ally of Jordan.

You see...what I didn't realize was that his multiple identities had a potential to be both an asset and a liability. He had to navigate through his world differently than I did--with what W.E.B. DuBois calls "double consciousness." He is conscious of who he is while at the same time being conscious of who people see him to be. This is a reality for people of color in America, and it is also the case for people with obvious, on-the-surface marginalized identities. There was a potential risk that the border officers could have believed that he wouldn't be able to handle his freedom--just like Patty, Mickey, and Liza Sue. They might have tried to impose the border on my friend Ben, keeping him in a specific box--and maybe even claimed that it was for his own safety. But what kind of safety is there in boxes--in borders? And safety for whom?

I chose a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning, but I really could've chosen a reading from any number of scriptures, including that scripture of the secular humanist--the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. "Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." "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 in the land of Egypt." In other words, the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. "Love your neighbor as yourself." - Leviticus 19:18

Interestingly, even though this mandate to love your neighbor was already given earlier in the chapter, sixteen verses later the mandate was expanded upon, "Love the alien as yourself." Is that alien not a neighbor? Or did somebody way back then know that specificity was helpful? Did they know that if they hadn't been specific, some ancient Hebrew would've squabbled and split hairs about his treatment of a stranger, an alien, or a Samaritan. "Well...technically he's not my neighbor. We're separated by a wall." You see...that's why I'm grateful for the specificity. And the specificity is still important. Of course all lives matter, but it's even more helpful to say that black lives matter, trans lives matter, immigrant lives matter, asylum seekers and refugees matter.

And we have a very important choice to make right now. Our government--our representative democracy--is denying the freedoms of our south-of-the-border neighbors to seek help and refuge in their time of need. The people in power who represent us are creating and promoting one specific narrative, and our President has

been doing so ever since the speech announcing his candidacy more than four years ago. So what have “we, the people” done about it? And what are we still going to do about it? For just over a year, this congregation provided housing to a family needing sanctuary, needing a sense of home and kindness, a family needing someone to support them in their time of need. We thought we would change their year for the better, but what actually happened? They changed us. They loved us and showed us how a family with such few resources could still wow us with generosity and kindness. We are so honored to know them and celebrate with them today two of their birthdays.

I know this might sound a little odd, but our institutions are failing us right now, and there’s a silver lining there. Because of that failure, a grassroots movement has formed. A movement of people who are pushing, mobilizing, and organizing for justice. A movement of people who are no longer afforded the luxury of standing back, of remaining disengaged. They are committed to doing the work individually and with small groups that our government is unable or unwilling to do. The Ware Lecturer at the 2017 UU General Assembly was Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative, and he gave us some great advice that day: to become proximate to those in need. Because when you are proximate, you form relationships. And people don’t change their minds or their hearts because of facts and statistics. They do it because of relationships and stories. And someone’s gotta start telling a different story than the ones in our national news right now.

Our values compel us to action. The first principle that we affirm as Unitarian Universalists is the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Every person, no exception, no conditions. Simply every person. Not just those who “enter legally.” Not just those who can support themselves. The rhetoric around the immigration debate right now is beginning to remind me of the controversy surrounding Colin Kaepernick’s decision to kneel during the national anthem. Opponents of the Black Lives Matter movement kept offering critique about the way that people were protesting. I heard such absurd things like, “Martin Luther King Jr. would’ve never tolerated people shutting down highways.” I think those people forgot that the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma was part of the main thoroughfare for travelers between Selma and Montgomery, and that once they crossed the bridge, they continued a 5-day 54-mile march along the highway to the Capitol in Birmingham. As a response to so much of the Black Lives Matter protest, people would say things like, “I just wish they could choose a protest that was quieter, a protest that did not disrupt my life. I just wish they would protest more respectfully.” And then Colin Kaepernick silently took a knee during the national anthem to register his protest, and those same people lost their minds. It seems to me that their critique wasn’t really about the format that the protest took, but it was actually about the fact that they were protesting at all.

Just this week, my elected representative who also represents many of you had a border imposed on her. She was denied entry into the Palestinian territories and into Israel to do her work as our Congresswoman. She had requested an entry in order to

learn, to understand, to engage in dialogue, and to investigate a humanitarian crisis. And the people in power told her that they don't think she can handle her freedom. It reminded me of Mickey from our story:

So they gave [her] a knowing smile
And put [her] in the big brown box.
It has carpets and curtains and beanbag chairs
But the door has three big locks.

And after hearing this news, I found an interesting eulogy written about Toni Morrison by author and activist Caroline Carruthers. She wrote, "Keeping her legacy alive means that we all take up the work of collective liberation. 'If you are free, you need to free somebody else,' she would say to her students. 'If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game.' It's not enough to go through doors alone, we have to remove them so that others can come in behind us."

So when we see that certain people are being treated as if they didn't have inherent worth or dignity, we are compelled to act. In the face of this injustice, **not to act** is against our religion. To remain silent would be to contribute to what Hannah Arendt calls "the banality of evil." Maybe you've heard it before, but I'll say it again: If you're not mad, you're not paying attention. And if you do want to do the work of helping us here at WBUUC to prepare for future sanctuary work, please talk to one of your ministers.

Can I give you a challenge today? Let's find some of the borders within ourselves that are keeping us in boxes. Let's find some of the ways that we're asked to remain respectable or to turn the other way while injustice is taking place. And let's commit to plans of action that resist that impulse. In just a moment, I'm going to ask you to turn to a neighbor and answer a very specific question that will have two variations. You'll each have about one minute to answer so please think carefully and leave time for both parties to speak. I will ring this bell to call us back together. Variation #1: When have you broken beyond your usual borders? And variation #2: How will you break beyond your usual borders? I'll read them again: When have you broken beyond your usual borders? Or alternately...how will you break beyond your usual borders?

People with access and privilege can learn a lot when they move to the margins. In speaking about her work in the publishing world, Toni Morrison said, "I stood at the edge and claimed it as central. And let the rest of the world move over to where I was." The call right now is for allies of the immigrant and the dispossessed to go to the border. Both literally and figuratively. What might happen if we break beyond some of our usual borders? What might happen if we let our border work become more central to who we are? Blessed be and amen.