My Time in the Maricopa County Jail
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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix
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Reading

The reading for this morning is a few lines from “Fundamental Difference” by the African American female writer and poet, Alice Walker. In times of difficulty, in times of struggle or when despair for the world grows in me, I find myself going back to these words for grounding and strength.

These words are from “Fundamental Difference” by Alice Walker

“To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves, that the line stretches all the way back, perhaps, to God; or to Gods. We remember them because it is an easy thing to forget: that we are not the first to suffer, rebel, fight, love and die. The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is always a measure of what has gone before.”

Sermon--My Time in the Maricopa County Jail-- by Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

Goodness, it is good to be back with all of you. And it especially good to be out of the Fourth Avenue jail. I was a part of the direct actions of non violent civil disobedience on July 29th, joining with others to literally put our bodies on the line to stop the cruel and inhumane neighborhood raids and sweeps being conducted by the Sheriff’s department. We were standing up for human rights, standing against racism, against economic exploitation, and standing together for love and justice. I knew this before the action. But, being in that jail opened my eyes even more directly to the explicit realities of human rights abuse and terror that is happening daily to poor communities and particularly Latino communities and communities of color in Arizona. I knew already it from second hand stories, but being that jail, I saw it with my own eyes.

I was arrested by the Maricopa County Sheriff’s Department, and even though they were on their best behavior because of all the white people of privilege and clergy being arrested, still one of the protesters, a Latino man, who was not one of the protesters trying to get arrested, was badly beaten by deputies.

Throughout our processing in the jail, we saw significant disparities in how white people and people of color were treated, and while many white people refused to give any information beyond their name and birthdate (all that is legally required) it was only people of color that were turned over to ICE agents and 287(g) officers for questioning. Listening to politicians on the outside, it’s possible to convince ourselves that people are not targeting people based on race, but inside the jail it is impossible to deny.
On the day before the actions, just before I was to welcome more than 100 Unitarian Universalists who had gathered here in our sanctuary to be a part of the events on the 29th, I took a little time to go out into our memorial garden and center myself. Outside, behind the sanctuary in our memorial garden is a statuary of 4 women called “That Which Might Have Been.” These statues, by the artist, John Henry Waddell, a member of our congregation, are a memorial to the four little girls killed at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The bomb was set off by members of the Ku Klux Klan, in September 1963 (47 years ago next month) during the middle of the civil rights movement. Overwhelmed by that tragedy, Waddell was moved to begin work on the memorial which was completed the following year.

I have sat in our garden many times, but the statues held particular power and meaning on that day before July 29th. I was sitting nearest that statue of the woman that faces North, who stands powerfully with her hand raised up to the sky. Each of the statues represents something different, and Waddell has said the North facing statue stands for the power of hope and prayer. Sitting before the statues I was reminded of earlier days in our country, when the majority in our country let fear convince them that somehow their lives and values were at stake and could be lost by allowing another person to share in the opportunity and equal rights that our country so prides itself on. That fear, and the hate that it fueled, led to the murder of those little girls. Sitting before that statue, it all came home, that today, it is the children who are carrying the scars, it is the children who are being most damaged by those who beat the drums of fear in our state and in our country, and who legislate out of that fear.

This week, many Unitarian Universalists--here in Arizona and around the country--faxed, called and emailed the Department of Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement to stop the deportation of a young woman, Marlen Moreno. We were successful in getting a one year delay of the deportation, with hopes that more can be done in that time to help Marlen receive legal status. Marlen is married to a legal resident, she has two children, both citizens, the youngest of whom is 10 months old. She came to this country with her parents when she was just 13 years old. She has no papers. After spending 4 months in jail for being undocumented, attorneys finally were able to get her released to be with her husband and young children, but she was still scheduled for deportation this week. Working together with Dream Activists we were able to delay the deportation. This was a success, but it doesn’t always work, and many people with similar stories, and similar roots in this country have been and continue to be deported. Taking a mother away from her children, or a husband away from his family--it may be legal--but as a religious community, we are called to ask is this just? Is this moral? Is this humane? Is this what we want done in our name? In our country?

In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Dr. Martin Luther King describes the damage segregation inflicts on the children. In his words, he writes of seeing in the eyes of a six-year-old girl, how “the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; [or] when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: “Daddy, why do white people
treat colored people so mean?” [end quote] Many of you who lived in the south during segregation have told me how much what is happening in Arizona reminds you of those days. It is not coincidence. And it is not coincidence that today, I have heard Latino parents tell me that their children ask them “Why do white people hate us so much?”

Proponents of SB 1070 have taken great pains to assure us that this law has nothing to do with race or the color of one’s skin. I am sure Congressmen and Senators will claim the same as they discuss changing the 14th Amendment to the Constitution which guarantees equal protection under the law and citizenship to those born in the U.S. But just because they claim that, just because the do not use the words of color or race, does not mean that what we are seeing is not racism. It is. The children know the truth—and in their questions, we see what no rhetoric can deny. “Why do white people hate us?” This is how our state’s policies and actions are translating to their lives—undeniably along race and color lines.

Anyone who was in that jail with me on those days can not deny the racism that underpins this rhetoric of fear around illegal immigration. I was surprised how openly the Sheriff and his deputies tried to draw lines between the protesters along race. I am told the Sheriff went into one of the cells with some of the protesters and asked the white protesters what they were doing and why they cared about these Hispanics. Didn’t they see that they had more in common with him? Audrey Williams, an African American woman who needed a wheelchair while in jail, was put in solitary confinement for almost 20 hours. When she made repeated requests to be put with the other protesters, her friends, they told her “those white people don’t care anything about you.” They tried to bait us and divide us with race and they spoke of their own work along racial lines. No matter what our politicians say, unequal treatment along lines of race was in effect during our time in the jail.

I want to be very clear. I am not calling everyone who supports SB 1070 a racist--I know that is not helpful and there are plenty of people who do not see it this way. But, what we all need to understand is that the crafters of this legislation are afraid of the ways our country is changing culturally and racially. And they are, without a doubt, interested in protecting white privilege and power--over and against the promise of the American dream--even at the expense of the American creed which so clearly and powerfully states that our nation is founded on the belief that all people “are endowed by their creator with inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Let’s put this in an historical context. Now, Senator Lindsey Graham is talking about changing the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. When the 14th Amendment was passed, those who argued vehemently against it, argued that with its passage the United States would be overrun by Chinese, Catholics, and blacks (although they used worse language for these groups). They thought the sharing of privileges and citizenship and the mixing of so many different kinds of people would lead to the country’s demise. They were afraid of what it would mean to grant citizenship to the children of immigrants who came here (just as immigrants today have come here-- to work in service of our growing economy. We can look back on it now and see so clearly the racialized fears, the white protectionism. No one would dare use explicitly racial language to talk about this today, but the fear
and the arguments are the same, with the clever exception of substituting the language of “illegal” for race.

We are a religious community, and therefore we are a called to look at our world through the lens of morality, ethics and conscience. We are not a political establishment. And the power of the separation of church and state is that it endows religious communities with the role of holding the moral high ground in matters of justice and conscience. I would never give us this freedom and we must never be afraid to use it.

From this perspective, we must see that it is unconscionable to fail to create legal avenues for people to come to this country to work, yet provide abundant jobs and opportunity that draw them here. It is unconscionable to allow companies to take vans to Mexico to recruit workers, and now claim that those workers came here illegally and attempt to criminalize them. It is unconscionable to criminalize and put in jail young people who were brought here as children, who had no criminal intent—to criminalize them for the decisions of their parents. It is unjust to have a situation where people have been working here for decades, owning homes, building lives, raising families and all of a sudden try to deport them from their lives. It is unjust and sinful to have law enforcement going into predominantly Latino neighborhoods in the middle of the night knocking on doors, pulling people over for minor traffic violations like illegal lane changes and asking them for papers. Yet this is what is happening, to neighborhoods, to citizens, to families, to children. And it is a fundamental violation of their human dignity and their civil rights.

I cannot imagine this happening in my neighborhood. If you are white, I would ask you, has this happened in your neighborhood? How would you feel if it did? Can you imagine it happening? Do you see how SB 1070 and other laws cannot be, will not be applied equally?

Somehow as a nation, we must to come to understand that when we act out of fear, we do not become safer. Instead when we legislate out of fear, we becoming willing to sacrifice our highest values, and our most sacred principles. And this will not stand. For we live in a country that proudly celebrates its commitment to justice, equity and opportunity. And that tradition is too strong to be forgotten. And just as in the past, the injustice will not stand once the people have decided they are ready to claim their rights. This is the moment in history where we find ourselves today.

Our moral and ethical values could not be more clear. Our second principle as Unitarian Universalists—one of our core values is “justice, equity and compassion in human relations.” Yes, our immigration system is broken—it has been broken for decades. But there is no compassion and there are no real solution in SB 1070 or similar laws for the people, the children and the families that have been caught up in this broken system. There is no sense of moral justice in these bills in recognizing our country’s complicity in the problem.

Fear is one of our most primal emotions. It affects human beings on a very deep and irrational level. It is the most base of our emotions, and that is what politicians are using to protect their power. It is
shameful—it is sinful. That fear has led to policies increasing the militarization of the border. This has led to thousands of people dying in the deserts of Arizona every year, and led to drug cartels taking over what were once trails of peaceful migrant workers. Instead of looking for solutions to our broken system rooted in ethical principles of justice and compassion, fear has been used to promote legislation that does nothing about the drug cartels—nothing to bring solutions to the problem—but rather establishes unequal and inhumane treatment of families, neighborhoods, and children in our community. When we legislate our of fear, we do not get solutions, we only invite abuse, anger, and frustration—on all sides.

The religious and faithful response to attempts to manipulate with fear is to love—to love bigger and stronger and more deeply. We must cultivate in our selves and share with others a love that casts our fear. A love that can bring our moral principles to the concerns of the day—this is the only way we will create solutions that strengthen our country and the people of our country.

We did not choose this battle. We did not choose for our state to be the testing ground for these unjust and discriminatory pieces of legislation. But here we are. And our national association is looking for our leadership. Our community needs our leadership as a faith community who is clear and outspoken on this issue.

At the annual meeting, the General Assembly of our Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, we made the decision not to pull our 2012 General Assembly from Phoenix, where it is scheduled to be held. We chose not to boycott. The only reason for this is because of the leadership that our congregation, and those in Phoenix, and the First Unitarian church in Tuscon, with its No More Deaths ministry on this issue. Unitarian Universalists from all over the country are looking to us to be the leaders on this issue—they are looking for a place where they can help turn this tide of fear towards love and justice. We are being called for an important task my people—an important ministry—to witness for our association, to witness for the faith community at large, to stand in solidarity with our Latino brothers and sisters, with the children of our state to stand for love, for human rights, to bring the moral and religious value of love to confront the voices of fear and legislation of division.

We could not have a greater or more important task ahead of us.

When the human rights crisis in our country was happening in the South, our minister (now minister emeritus) Ray Manker went to Selma to march and to support the Civil Rights movement. I doubt he could have known then, that today, it would be our state that would become the locus for unjust laws that seek to discriminate and dehumanize a significant percentage of our community, based on race and ethnicity. And while John Waddell felt so troubled by the bombing of the Baptist church and the death of those four little girls, how could he know that one day his work would reminds us of our own true north and our path forward in a time of growing fear and tension. But here we are. Living Experience.
And here we are called. And here we will stand.

I want to end with the words that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr ended his historic “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” written in particular to white liberal clergy who criticized the non-violent direct action civil disobedience as unwise and untimely. He ended that letter saying, "Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all of their scintillating beauty."

Amen and May it Be So.