

Claire Feingold Thoryn
Theme: **“Connections”**
Homily: **“Handle With Care”**
September 20, 2015

Call to Worship

We gather in this sanctuary, called to worship with song and with silence. This country is our home, but may not be our homeland. And so we seek to build a spiritual home here. We bring our hopes, our dreams, to this sanctuary, our holy place. We bring the cares and concerns of our hearts. This is our song of peace, O God of all the nations, and we pray for all the hearts that beat today, the hearts in other lands, hearts near and far, and the very heart within our own chest that pumps our life blood. May we find that in this hour our courage is renewed, and our hearts find hope and peace, and the strength to bring those gifts to others.

Reading: “Shoulders” by Naomi Shihab Nye

A man crosses the street in rain, stepping gently, looking two times north and south, because his son is asleep on his shoulder.

No car must splash him. No car drive too near to his shadow.

This man carries the world’s most sensitive cargo but he’s not marked. Nowhere does his jacket say FRAGILE, HANDLE WITH CARE.

His ear fills up with breathing. He hears the hum of a boy’s dream deep inside him.

We’re not going to be able to live in this world if we’re not willing to do what he’s doing with one another.

The road will only be wide. The rain will never stop falling.

Sermon: “Handle with Care”

The man holds his precious cargo so gently.

You may have seen the image I can’t forget. The image of the three year old Syrian boy, wearing his little red t-shirt and his little blue pants, and his little sneakers, face down, little hand at his side, as though he is sleeping, but he is not sleeping, he has drowned and washed up on the beach in Turkey. And in the next photo, a soldier picks up the little boy, this precious cargo, and carries him, but it is too late. The boy’s name was Aylan Kurdi.

If I am feeling overwhelmed some mornings making sure my child has a healthy lunch to take to school, then I can only imagine how terrible a parent feels, as they run holding their children through war zones, as they run towards trains or away from gunshots.

I can only imagine what it feels like to hold my child in the stifling darkness of a box truck as the air turns to poison, or to tread water for hours while holding a child in both arms.

One colleague, Rev. Jake Morrill, sums up the many complex issues that brought about the crisis in Syria and Europe this way:

“Carbon based energy use brought climate change. Climate change, plus agricultural mismanagement by the dictator Assad, brought drought to rural Syria. Drought sent rural Syrians cramming into the cities. A surging urban population brought political instability. Political instability opened the door for the nightmare of ongoing war, including the evil of ISIS. That nightmare, leaving hundreds of thousands dead, brought Syrian parents to the decision that it was worth it to put their babies in overcrowded small boats on the ocean, because a high stake gamble that their children would live is still better than no chance at all. Those decisions have brought the world’s largest refugee crisis since World War II. To those who wonder, “Why don’t they go back?” One response is, “Back to what?” Another is “this is the consequence of climate change, coming full circle. It turns out our gas wasn’t so cheap, after all.”

The road will only be wide. The rain will never stop falling.

The poet Warsan Shire, who immigrated to England from Somalia with her family as a child, wrote (*abbreviated*):

no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well
your neighbors running faster than you breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body you only leave home when home won’t let you
stay.
you have to understand, that no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer
than the land no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled means something more than
journey.home is the mouth of a shark home is the barrel of the gun and no one would
leave home unless home chased you to the shore

Some European countries are taking in thousands upon thousands of refugees. Germany especially seems to wish to atone for its past, throwing open its doors, and its generosity has inspired France to be more open as well.

Many European people are bringing shoes, diapers, sandwiches, anything they can to detainee centers, to train stations. My dear colleague in Canada, Rev. Shawn Newton, and the congregation he serves in Toronto, is working with a Toronto-based Muslim organization and raising 100,000 dollars to sponsor three Syrian families. Our President has said America will take in 10,000 Syrian refugees. 10,000 refugees is a drop in the bucket that is the need; and given the extremely complicated and cautious American legal immigration process, especially post 9/11, bringing Syrian refugees to *our* country will probably take years.¹

And so here on the other side of the ocean, we watch, we weep, we pray, we petition. We send money. We see the reality, and we hope anyway. If we cannot carry that little boy, we can carry

¹ <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/09/15/why-the-us-cant-immediately-resettle->

someone else. We're not going to be able to live in this world if we're not willing to carry each other.

America has a lot of refugees, depending on how legalistically you understand that word: people running because their home is the mouth of a shark, because they can't make a living which means they are dying, because they don't want their children to see the things they have seen. We have many immigrants in our local community and our religious community, and yes we have undocumented immigrants here too.

I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for immigration. Ellis Island let my great grandfather in. The original ship manifest reads: April 4th, 1914. Wasyl Thoryn.² A French last name, the end chopped off by whoever was sitting there writing the names down. Russian Jewish ancestry. 5'7". 28 years old. Brown hair, brown eyes. I wouldn't be here if someone hadn't stamped next to his name: ADMITTED.

“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-tossed, to me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”³

Since we are coming up to Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement in the Jewish tradition, it seems apt to bring in lessons on immigration from the Hebrew Bible. In the Bible, there are no illegal aliens, only resident aliens—people not native to a place who have somehow come to live there.

Over and over again the Bible says to be kind to widows, orphans, and aliens. That is the commandment repeated the most number of times. The Hebrew Bible commands: Leave the gleanings of the fields for aliens to harvest. Forgive the debts of aliens. Do not pervert the justice owed to an alien. Do not detest the alien, for you are an alien in his land.⁴

We all have some sense of what it means to be an alien in another's land. We have all had some experience where we weren't sure if we were welcome, where we felt out of place, uninvited, ill-at-ease in our surroundings. At the very least, you probably have some memories of childhood, when you were the powerless kid in a world of adults, you weren't sure what all the rules were or how to follow them or what exactly you had done wrong.

You shall not detest the alien, for you too have been an alien.

But of course, the question always comes, what about the criminals, the lawbreakers? Here's a story about one murderer. He saw a man beating another man, and he stepped in and killed the bully. It was murder, and there were witnesses, so this man fled to another country. There, he was given sanctuary, shelter, and food, he found friends, he married. Later, this man, whom we know as Moses, returned to his homeland and led the Hebrews out of Egypt, and became the brave leader of a migrant people. In today's world, Moses would have been labeled a criminal alien, imprisoned, and deported back to Egypt.

² ellisland.org

³ Emma Lazarus, poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty

⁴ (Deut 23:7, 24:17).

These days our tempest-tossed mostly come from the desert, not the ocean.

There is one little girl who was never in a photograph that went viral, but her story still matters. Josseline was fourteen years old. She loved cute shoes, Hollywood stars, and her family. Her parents were working in America as undocumented migrants, while Josseline and her brother stayed with relatives in El Salvador. Finally her parents had enough money to hire a *coyote*, a mercenary border-crosser, to take the children over the Arizona border.

The US stance had been, in policing the border cities, that less people would attempt the border crossing if it was dangerous. But no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark. The number of people attempting to cross the border did not decrease. Instead, the number of people *dying* in the attempt increased—and increased—and increased, from a handful each year to hundreds of deaths every single year. Most of these border crossings now happen in the 60 miles of desert between the Mexican border and Tucson.⁵ During the day, the desert heat can melt the soles of your shoes, and nights are below freezing.

Josseline got sick and couldn't walk as fast. The man in charge decided to leave her behind. Her little brother begged to stay with her but, as a big sister, she wouldn't let him. She wanted her brother to meet up with their parents. A week later the little boy reunited with his parents and told them how Josseline had been left behind. More terrified for their daughter's life than for their own undocumented status in the US, they notified the authorities. Also searching for Josseline was a humanitarian aid group called "*No Mas Muertes—No More Deaths*." They send groups to patrol the vast desert, leaving food and water along the way. Out on patrol, the volunteer spotted a pair of bright green sneakers. Then he saw Josseline. She was dead. She was just a girl, trying to get to her mother.

“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-tossed, to
me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

The road will only be wide. The rain will never stop falling.

My spiritual director loves to remind me that the root word for “diabolical”—which means evil, devilish—comes from “diabalein” which means to tear apart, to separate, compartmentalize.

Evil keeps us apart. Goodness connects us, brings us together. Truly this world is full of diabolical forces. Selfishness, fear, greed, anger, hatred, tear us apart; they make us want to build taller fences, put up more barbed wire, make stricter rules, hoard what we have.

It is a spiritual practice every day, in every moment, To open up. To carry each other.
To practice what we preach to little children every day: Share. I am not a policy maker. I'm just a minister. All too often, that feels pretty small, in the face of the diabolical. But you know what I remembered this week, that made me feel like despite it all, there is always hope?

⁵ *The Death of Josseline*, Margaret Regan. Boston, Beacon Press, 2010.

Sarah Saldaña, the recently appointed Director of US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement—ICE—is a Unitarian Universalist, from the First Unitarian Church in Dallas, Texas. We have someone at the top—who knows the seven principles!

We're not going to be able to live in this world if we're not willing to carry each other.

Handle each other with care. Handle all you meet with care. For they are the world's most sensitive, fragile, precious, loveable cargo. And so are you.

Amen.