

## **Would You Harbor Me? ©**

*A sermon by the Rev. Lee Bluemel*

*Preached at the North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist*

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So, it happened last week, at a gas station in Andover.\*

I suspect you know what, before I say it.

A woman was yelled at, yelled at to go back to her country, to learn English.

Never mind that she has three advanced degrees from U.S. universities.

Never mind that she was pumping gas in Andover,

a well-heeled town with 16 churches, three synagogues and a Hindu Temple.

We know her story because she is a knitter

and a friend one of our esteemed elders, Phila Slade.

She is many things. She is also Asian American.

I mentioned in a special Enews this week

that the State Attorney General set up an emergency hotline

to take calls about harassment and intimidation of racial, ethnic and religious minorities, women, LGBTQ individuals, and immigrants. .

It was set up on Monday, and only four days later, over 300 calls had come in.

And those are just the ones which were reported.

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

It is a pertinent question these days, a searing question this Thanksgiving week.

*\*Correction: Upon further conversation following the delivery of this sermon, we learned that the incident I spoke of at the beginning of the sermon actually happened 15 minutes down the road in Lowell, not in Andover.*

This holiday still harkens back to an old national myth which you might talk about with your children, a story about saving a desperate immigrant people, some of whom were seeking religious freedom.

The English who had separated from the Church of England had been living in exile in Holland for 12 years before they left for this land, which had been inhabited for 12,000 years by the indigenous people. When the desperate immigrants arrived on our shores, they would not have survived without the Wampanoag supplies they discovered and stole, including many bushels of corn from storage pits.

As they explored the area, they were blown into a harbor and found the Wampanoag village of Patuxet, abandoned due to a plague of European diseases. Patuxet had tilled fields, home sites, food stores, trails and graves. They renamed it New Plymouth, and that first winter, about half of them died there.

In spring, March of 1621, they met an Abenaki leader named Samoset and a Wampanoag man named Tisquantum, both of whom knew English. Tisquantum (whom your kids might know as "Squanto") had been kidnapped by earlier English explorers and brought to Europe. When he managed- remarkably and after great trials- to return home, he found his village of Patuxet abandoned, his family and neighbors all dead from disease.

He agreed to live among the colonists. He showed them how to grow corn and use fish to fertilize their fields. He acted as translator for diplomatic meetings as they decided on rules of contact and formed a military alliance with the Wampanoag. As we know, this alliance only lasted a generation, and instead dissolved into war. This is why many Native Americans will gather in Plymouth on Thursday to observe their 47<sup>th</sup> National Day of Mourning.

In this land, providing religious freedom and safe harbor for immigrants has gone in and out of style, and right now, it seems to be on its way out. As the Pope said yesterday, there is an “epidemic of animosity” against people of other races or religions that is sweeping the world- including anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant attitudes in the U.S. And that he understands that such animosity unchecked is very contagious and can spread like wildfire. It seems to be spreading even to LGBTQ people and anyone who does not appear to be “white”.

In our country, you can see the evidence at the personal level, at gas stations and some schools and likely in discussions over Thanksgiving dinner.

You can see it at the social and political level, in mere discussion of a Muslim Registry and in statements and actions by those being appointed every day to the very highest levels of power.

You can even see it in some religious communities and theologies that are exclusive rather than universalist in nature.

Of course, we know that once we start down that road of separation, of animosity, of making quick judgments, of seeing those we meet or live among as “the other”, it quickly becomes a dangerous road. We know this from our history.

So some of us started a new spiritual practice last week— the Safety Pin Solidarity Practice. We started wearing a safety pin, to indicate that we would try, at least, to be a safe harbor to one another, but especially to those being harassed or attacked.

Now, I was raised by parents who remembered the Depression, so I save things... like safety pins.

You can only imagine my joy at realizing, finally, why I had saved all those safety pins all those years!

It was for *just* such a time as this. Boy, is it nice to feel useful!

But there are more ways than safety pins to be useful these days- more ways to participate in the conversation about who can depend on safe harbor here. African-American men? Muslim women? GBLTQ individuals? We're wondering. If safety pins don't work for you, here's another idea: sugar cubes.

Last week, my son's science class did an experiment about fossils using sugar cubes. The idea was to understand sediments and how some fossils last through millenia. So they wrapped one sugar cube in clay, one sugar cube only *partially* in clay, and one sugar cube without any protection at all. Then they dropped them in glasses of warm water to see what would happen.

You can probably guess. The one with no protection dissolved first. The one with partial protection took a little longer, but it dissolved too. The only one that made it- that did not dissolve completely- was the one wrapped entirely in a protective layer of clay.

It's a pretty easy experiment; it could even be done around the Thanksgiving table with young children. You could tell your kids, our civil rights are like that sugar cube. Take religious freedom, as an example, since it is Thanksgiving, and since Unitarian Universalists LOVE religious freedom! Don't we love religious freedom? *(Yes!)* We'd be silly not too, since ours is a tiny minority religion.

One could say to the kids, sometimes we need to protect things we love- whether from others or even from the selfish desires or worst impulses within ourselves. At the political level in our nation, religious freedom is wrapped in the protection of the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment. That's the one about free exercise of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right of the people to peaceably assemble and petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

It's a good Amendment. In fact, I'm giving the teens and grown-ups in my family 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment t-shirts for Christmas this year! The 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment has such a huge following, it's time for the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment to generate the same sort of passion! Rumor even has it that Santa is in on all this, and might be giving the grown-ups copies of the Constitution in their stockings!

But I digress.

The point is, politically our people are protected by the First Amendment. If that protection doesn't cover everyone, like the clay covering only part of a sugar cube, *what happens?*

Not only are they are lost, but the rest of us are lost with them. Eventually the whole sugar cube goes. That's the political side of things.

In this congregation, we get another level of protection, thanks to our religion. Some of our layers of protection against others and ourselves are listed in the UU Sources, in the front of the grey hymnal.

Our protection includes *"the words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love."*

Our protection includes *"Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves."*

Our protection includes *"Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit."*

Layers and layers of protection.

Then there's the question of who accompanies you. Who helps to protect you from others, or from your own worst impulses? The Buddha? The mystics? The prophets? UU ancestors? This congregation? Your friends of different faiths? Jesus?

For many people in our country, their protection comes from Jesus. As we heard in the reading, in the gospel of Matthew it is written that Jesus once said, "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...

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of those who are members of my family, you did it to me."

(Come to think of it, if you are part of an extended Christian family, those could actually be good words for a Thanksgiving grace.)

It also seems that Jesus wasn't all talk.

The stories about him tell us that, whatever happened, one thing is for sure: he ate with all kinds of people-- with non-Jews! With women, with tax-collectors, with prostitutes, with the wealthy sponsors who enabled him to do his ministry, with sinners of all sorts, with people of every shade of skin-- *quite possibly even lighter than his.*

That's why, last week, I suggested that Jesus would be quite happy at Market Basket, setting up potluck suppers.

Well, turns out, he's not the only one.

There are people in this congregation who are good at potlucks, and not just with people they already know! They're good at creating a welcome table, and I aspire to be like them. In fact, my aspirations to be like them recently got a lot stronger, *because personal experiences and relationships across difference offer us one of the strongest protections of all.* I'd like to share a few of their stories.

North Parish member Cindy Cook writes, "Over the decades of working with immigrants, we have invited several to our house for Thanksgiving dinner. I would ask students in my class if they had plans to spend this holiday with friends or family. There was often a single person who would say:

“My family is not here. I don’t have someone to share with.”

And I would say, please be our guest.

Privately, I would get their address, tell them where we lived and make plans to pick them up.

Their presence would make the day festive for our immediate family.

Sarah and Elizabeth, our daughters, helped with table-setting, mashing the potatoes, garnishing the platter of turkey.

We would share favorite holiday foods, learn about theirs.

We held hands, said grace in English and invited our guest to share his or her own grace.

As I get older, the day becomes more poignant.

Our own daughters sometimes far away, our parents no longer alive.

Sharing our table has always brought warmth, delightful surprises and sweet memories. It is an honor to welcome the stranger.”

Then she adds, “One more memorable moment.

This was actually an Easter season dinner--a big Latino holy-day time.

I invited 2 students from South America who had no family in the US.

One said to me: I have lived and worked in the USA for 20 years.

I am a naturalized citizen now. *Nobody has ever invited me to their home before.*”

I am as guilty as anyone else for this.

So again, we ask ourselves and each other:

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

Several years ago, Kathy Slade, her husband Paul and daughter Linnie hosted some guests at *their* table, thanks to a North Parish connection.

Kathy and Linnie were participating in the Junior Youth program we call “Neighboring Faiths”- which brings youth to visit other faith communities and learn about other religions.

At that time, North Parish member Colleen Pelczar

was an English as a Second Language teacher,  
and had invited two of her students from Saudi Arabia to explain Islam  
to the Junior Youth during their class in Old Center Hall.

These two women came, bringing cookies and dates,  
and talked about their faith and how they prayed.

When it came time for Thanksgiving,  
Colleen asked if anyone had space to host some students.  
Kathy volunteered and was matched with those same two young women.  
She was happy to be their host.

And what a host she was!  
Using an app on her phone, she figured out what times of day  
they would need to pray, and what direction they would need to face.  
She realized they would need to pray two times during the gathering.  
She knew, since one of the young women was bringing her brother,  
that they would need two spaces in order to pray separately.  
And she realized they would be praying on the floor.

Kathy says she cleaned her house as she had never done before!  
She set up two bedrooms for them to pray in- and got down on her hands and knees  
to look under the beds to make sure it was clean under there!  
She laid out towels so they could wash and dry their feet, as is done before their prayer.

As for their part, the Muslim students were very excited  
to try all the Thanksgiving foods they had heard about.  
They insisted that the family do everything and eat everything they normally would.  
If there was ham or wine, they just wouldn't partake in those things.  
They came, they ate, they prayed, they talked- and they left very pleased.

The relationship continued after Thanksgiving.  
The students had never seen snow.  
Kathy says that the first snow that year came in a blizzard,  
and she messaged with one of the girls all night, reassuring her it would be OK.



Later, she brought them snow-tubing in Amesbury. They ate ice cream together. They became FaceBook friends and stayed in touch when one of them became a teacher in Saudi Arabia.

Kathy's daughter Linnie is now in high school and is a member of this congregation.

She has a fierce commitment to respecting and protecting the religious freedom of others. Kathy traces this back to the Neighboring Faiths experience.

The father of one of the Saudi Arabian young women thanked Kathy for being a friendly contact in the states.

He had come to the U.S himself in the 70's, but since 9/11 there was such fear that members of the family had begged him not to let his daughter come to the U.S., worrying that she'd be a target.

But she was not easy to say "no" to, so he let her come.

Thankfully, instead of being a target, she got to try some pumpkin pie and go snow tubing in New England. Of course, that was several years ago now.

The Peruvian theologian and Dominican priest, Gustavo Gutierrez, once wrote, *"Neighbor is not he or she whom I find in my path, but rather he or she in whose path I place myself, he or she whom I approach, and actively seek."*

Today, I just want to lift up and celebrate ALL those among us who actively seek out their neighbors.

I want to lift up the Weston UU congregation that earlier this year raised \$100,000 for Syrian refugees through their Refugee Relief Fund.

I want to lift up the folks who will come to the Interfaith Thanksgiving service at 4:00 today at St. Paul's Episcopal Church- the first time the "town service" has been interfaith in any setting *other* than North Parish.

I want to lift up all those who, quietly, with no fanfare, invite guests to their tables... like North Parish folks Prudence Barker and Dave Lewis.

Prudence is our new contact person for donations of bicycles, bike helmets and locks for both kids and adults, all newly arrived refugees in Lowell. Dave is our contact person for an interfaith potluck here on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, co-hosted with the Center for the Study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations.

Later this afternoon, Prudence and Dave will be hosting a Thanksgiving table for two Congolese families at the International Institute in Lowell. The families are among the 150 refugees the Institute has received since September. Dave says he has been reviewing his parenting skills, as there will be 12 kids under the age of 10 at the table!

I hope we'll get to hear how it goes, and get some pointers for ourselves. I hope you'll come back next week, and find out. "Cause in times like these, we need one another. Amen.

**Reading:** by the Honorable Wade McCree Jr, who lived from 1920 to 1987.

Judge McCree was an attorney who served as a judge in the Sixth District Circuit Court of Appeals. He was later appointed US Assistant Solicitor General, the first African American to hold this position. He also served as Vice-Moderator of the Unitarian Universalist Association from 1965 to 1966. This reading is from the 1991 UU Meditation Manual, *Been in the Storm So Long*, a collection of reflections by African American Unitarian Universalists. It begins with a reading from the gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25, verses 35- 40:

*"For 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 gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of those who are members of my family, you did it to me."*

Throughout ancient tradition and in Jewish and Christian Scriptures, emphasis is placed on charity to all, including strangers.

Whether faith in Christ is presumed as a pre-requisite for facing the final judgment, or whether emphasis is strictly on the value of good deeds, the importance of good deeds in *all* pursuits of life is underscored by Jesus. This description signified the ultimate commandment to all of us to engage in a personal ministry with every other creature of creation.

To me, one's religion is expressed in the manner in which one relates to other human beings. If one fights relentlessly against injustice, want, hate, and every form of exploitation, then one is a religious person. The love of God is not expressed by ritual or ceremony, but by loving.