

## **“Sanctuary in Risky Times”**

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.*

These days, I've been thinking more about people who have demonstrated incredible courage in time of danger and uncertainty when the stakes have been high. People like Marion Pritchard.

Marion Pritchard, born Marion Philippina van Binsbergen, was living in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. She was a young social work student and recalls one day riding her bicycle to class and seeing Nazi soldiers at a home picking up children by their arms or legs or even their hair and throwing them into the back of a truck. She stopped and watched. Two other women came along and were furious and began attacking the soldiers who then threw the women into the back of the truck after the children. Marion says, “I just stood there. I'm one of those people who sat there and watched it happen.”<sup>1</sup>

Marion went on to become part of the clandestine network of people who worked to save the lives of Jewish people throughout Europe. She registered Jewish infants as her own and found safe homes for them. She secured false identification for Jews so they could avoid capture by Nazis. She got ration cards and helped feed them.

Her best known rescue involved the Polak family, a father and his three young children. Marion began to keep them in hiding in 1942. They stayed in the servants' quarters of a friend's villa outside of Amsterdam. They had developed a hiding place - a pit underneath the floorboards in the living room - and a drill that they could complete in less than a minute to safely hide should the need arise.

One night in 1944, three Nazis and a Dutch collaborator, who had been a police officer before the war, came to the door. The family was in the pit.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/23/world/europe/marion-pritchard-rescuer-of-jews.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/23/world/europe/marion-pritchard-rescuer-of-jews.html?_r=0)

Marion recalls that they didn't find the hiding place, but the Nazis had learned that if they returned an hour or so later, those in hiding may have come out and they could pick them up.

The Dutch collaborator returned about half an hour later through an unlocked door. The children were out of the hiding place because the baby had started crying and the other two wanted to come out as well, and the hiding place had not been covered up. Marion feared for the children's lives and so she took out a revolver that had been hidden on a bookshelf and shot the intruder.

A local undertaker buried the body in a coffin with someone else, and as far as she knew, no one went searching for the missing man. Marion stayed with the Polak family until the end of the war.

Now, obviously this is a story of true heroism. A story of someone willing to risk their own safety and act in a noble and courageous way for the sake of others. But, it's also the story of someone who decided she didn't want to sit by and watch atrocities happen without doing what she could to intervene and resist.

Stories like these have me thinking about the risks and commitments I am willing to make right now when the political stakes are so high and many people's lives are at risk.

Religious communities have historically been places that hold a special place in our societies and are recognized as places that offer refuge - in a spiritual way but also in a very material and physical way.

Sanctuary has biblical roots going back to the ancient Jewish people. The book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew bible outlines instructions from God to designate three cities as places where someone who had committed what today would be called criminally negligent homicide could go and await a fair hearing, instead of facing the natural punishment of the time, which would have been a blood feud - the family of the person slain would come and kill the murderer. These designated cities offered refuge.

The tradition of offering refuge or sanctuary in designated places can also be found in ancient Greece and Rome as political refugees were offering sanctuary in temples. And, as the tradition has carried on, churches and other places of worship have offered themselves as places where people who have broken the law, either a law that is unjust or a law for which the punishment is unjust, can seek shelter until a fair outcome can be reached.<sup>2</sup>

The sanctuary movement in the United States that has offered protection and refuge to immigrants came about in the 1980s. As hundreds of thousands of people fled Central American countries torn apart by civil war, especially Guatemala and El Salvador, many came to the United States. Yet, only a small percentage of these refugees were granted asylum. Hundreds of faith communities across the country designated themselves as safe places for these refugees to seek shelter and protection. Some even took the bold step of helping refugees on their journeys to cross the border into the United States.

In the last few years, the sanctuary movement experienced a resurgence in response to the record number of deportations during the Obama administration and the failure of Congress to enact just and humane immigration policy reforms.

All along the way Unitarian Universalist congregations have played an active role in the sanctuary movement and especially as part of this most recent “New Sanctuary Movement.”

The First Unitarian Society of Denver is notable in this regard. From the fall of 2014 to the summer of 2015, that congregation offered sanctuary to Arturo Hernandez Garcia, a 15 year resident of Denver and father of two. And, just last month, they again opened their doors for sanctuary to Jeanette Vizguerra, a mother of four and community activist whose stay of removal had expired. She is still currently in sanctuary at First Unitarian in Denver. Dozens of other UU congregations have designated themselves as sanctuary congregations first as part of the new sanctuary movement and now more recently in response to current federal policies.

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<sup>2</sup> for further reading see, “The Historical Case for the Right of Sanctuary,” William C. Ryan, *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Spring 1987), pp. 209-232.

The issue of justice for immigrants and immigration policy reform has received more and more national attention in the past fifteen years or so with the rapid growth of undocumented immigrants living in the United States over that time. This number peaked in 2007 and has pretty much held steady the last few years.<sup>3</sup> Over that time, we have witnessed how broken our immigration system is as people who have lived here for years and made lives here have been caught in a system with no clear pathway to citizenship. And, we have witnessed families torn apart by immigration enforcement policies and increased deportations.

The presence of groups like Migrant Justice reminds us that within our own state lines our fellow Vermonters include people who have come here seeking safety and economic opportunity, who are willing to do jobs that most people won't take on, and who are caught in a system that is a moral travesty.

With people being barred from entering the country, and others facing the threat of being removed from the country, we are reminded of the state of fear many of those in our communities live in.

I witnessed some of this fear while I was serving as an intern minister in Philadelphia. A member of the congregation who had been living in the country for a number of years as an undocumented immigrant had a family member who was do to check in with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement office in downtown Philadelphia. They were looking for someone to accompany her who spoke Spanish. I rode with her and a few other family members there and helped her find her way through the nondescript building to the correct office. We sat in a waiting room for a little while. The young woman nervously held in her hands the piece of paper showing her appointment information. She was called up to speak to a man sitting behind a glass window. He verified where she was living and gave her another couple of months to check back in with their office.

Riding in the car with her, I sensed her relief but also the tenuousness of her presence here. Holding onto the hope of being able to stay because even living in constant fear is better than the alternative.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/03/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s/>

People from many different places risk a lot to come to our country seeking better opportunities and then become entangled in an immigration system that is complicated and doesn't recognize the important contributions individuals make to our economy and to our communities.

Today's movement to criminalize undocumented immigrants further pits law enforcement against communities sowing seeds of division, animosity, and fear. And, it seeks to divide us from one another - pitting economic interests against so-called "identity politics" distracting us from the vision we have always had of a beloved community in which all are whole and loved and cared for.

In the face of the rising tide of fear-mongering, a revival of the sanctuary movement has begun, and we must ask ourselves how we are called to offer sanctuary both in this church as well as beyond these walls.

In Vermont, the move towards designating cities and towns as places of sanctuary began right after the November presidential election. Montpelier was one of a few cities that passed sanctuary city legislation even before the president officially took office.

And, just this past Tuesday on Town Meeting Day, many towns across Vermont passed resolutions to declare themselves sanctuaries or passed statements in support of immigrants and refugees. Many of you were part of these discussions in your own towns and some of you were instrumental in advocating for these resolutions.

These resolutions are a great testament, I believe, to the values of welcome and inclusion in our state. And, although sanctuary has become the language of public policy as of late, I am reminded that the roots of sanctuary have religious connotations.

We gather each Sunday in this sanctuary space seeking refuge of a different kind.  
We seek a sanctuary for souls made weary by the losses and pains of life.  
We seek a sanctuary from the troubles and suffering of the world.  
We seek a refuge for quiet amidst the noise and empty words of mainstream media.

We seek a safe haven for asking ourselves life's difficult questions. For some of us, this sanctuary may also be a place of physical safety away from places in our lives where we are made to feel unsafe.

For us as a religious community, the question of how we might offer sanctuary is even more poignant.

Here at UCM, we have already begun to take steps to unite in solidarity with people and communities that are being targeted by federal policies. The board, acting on behalf of the congregation, has signed on to the Unitarian Universalist Association and Unitarian Universalist Service Committee Declaration of Conscience.

This is a broad statement of commitment to UU values and includes the line, "We will oppose any and all unjust government actions to deport, register, discriminate, or despoil."<sup>4</sup>

Since the election, the Social Responsibility Committee has been discussing what it would mean for UCM to become a sanctuary congregation and to be part of the movement in some way. A handful of members and I have participated in a series of webinars put on by the UU College of Social Justice and UU Refugee and Immigrant Services and Education (UURISE) on this topic. And, along the way, we have been reaching out to organizations like Migrant Justice to learn what is most needed and how we can truly partner and learn from the migrant worker community here in Vermont.

In the weeks to come, you will be invited into this conversation and discernment.

There are a number of ways we as a religious community can join in the sanctuary movement.

We can educate ourselves about the lives of immigrants living in Vermont.

We can advocate for bias-free policing at all level of law enforcement in the state.

We can be ready to hit the streets and rally around someone in our community who might be detained.

We might even consider offering physical sanctuary in our own church building to someone facing deportation or collaborating with other faith communities to offer this kind of sanctuary.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.uua.org/action/show-love/declaration-conscience>

All of these actions to become part of the broader sanctuary movement require some degree of risk on our part.

In this time, we are called to risk admitting what we don't know and to listening more attentively and more deeply to those most impacted by our current political climate.

We are called to risk asking ourselves serious questions about our own commitments.

We are called to risk wading into waters that may be troubling, uncomfortable, and uncertain.

When I think back to Marion Pritchard's story, I take heart in the fact that her courageous actions didn't happen all at once. It happened step by step. And, I think that is how courage grows within each of us. You take one risk and learn that you have the strength to do a hard thing. Then you take another and another. Courage can blossom slowly and over time through risk-taking.

I have to admit, I have asked myself over and over again over the last few months, when the time comes, will I be one of those people who sat there and watched it happen?

Let me just say to you know that I know I don't have the courage all on my own. It is frightening for me to stand up here and ask you to face some elusive and unknown risk in order to live our values and unite in solidarity with our neighbors.

I also take heart in these words from the organizer and social movement leader, Marisa Franco. Franco helped to lead the #Not1More Deportation campaign and to found the organization, Mijente.<sup>5</sup>

She says: "Sanctuary is a spiritual stance. It recognizes that oppression is trying to fill our lives with fear and blood and daily numbing horror, and sanctuary says: not in here. Not in my home. Not in my bed. Not in my movement. Sanctuary makes a ring of fire around our people. Sanctuary grants us a taste of reprieve and protection so we can gather strength to go out there again and fight."

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<sup>5</sup> [mijente.net](http://mijente.net)

Ultimately, sanctuary is a spiritual matter.

Sanctuary as a spiritual stance asks us to remember what it means to be human. In a time when there is public pressure to see our neighbors and members of our community as criminals and terrorists and outsiders, we have to create spaces in which we keep our humanity and the root of our compassion intact and where we can be courageous together.

May this be such a place.