

Humanitarian Aid Is Never a Crime

Prayer

My sermon today will focus on the recent trial of Dr. Scott Warren, a humanitarian aid volunteer who was charged with three felony charges for offering food and water and basic medical care to migrants in the Sonoran Desert. Dr. Warren went to trial twice, once in early June, which ended in a hung jury, and again in November. I wrote this prayer in the middle of the June trial.

This is my prayer about the world . . . as I believe it should be, in Southern Arizona and everywhere. I will first offer an interpretation of the world as it is by saying “in this place,” and then allow you to imagine the world as it should be by saying “in another place.”

In this place,
Migrants traverse miles of mountainous, desolate deserts,
In another place,
Safe welcome for all in all places.

In this place,
Walls, fences, and drones, divide.
And in another place,
No borders, only open horizons.

In this place,
Offerings of water, food, medical supplies, clothing...
In another place
All have what they need.

In this place,
Migrants are chased down, scattered, and abandoned...
In another place,
No human being is a target.

In this place,
Human lives lost daily to dehydration, starvation, and overexposure...
In another place,
All lives are sustained and valued for their inherent worthiness.

In this place,
Human kindness is criminalized,
In another place,
Care and compassion are laws of the land.

In this place,
Underworn suits and dusty boots flood courtrooms in defense of
kindness,
In another place,
Justice -- the full restoration of relationship -- dwells within and among
all beings.

In this place,
Our hearts are broken open by the pain of our world
In another place,
Our hearts beat in unison, their strength multiplied.

In this place,
We know another world is possible
And we know there is no other place but here.
So another place is possible, right here, in this place.

Reading: #464 - And Then, Judy Chicago

And then all that has divided us will merge

___ And then compassion will be wedded to power

And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind

___ And then both men and women will be gentle

And then both women and men will be strong

___ And then no person will be subject to another's will

And then all will be rich and free and varied

___ And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many

And then all will share equally in the Earth's abundance

___ And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old

And then all will nourish the young

___ And then all will cherish life's creatures

And then all will live in harmony with each other and the Earth

___ And then everywhere will be called Eden once again

Sermon: Humanitarian Aid Is Never a Crime

A courtroom in Arizona was filled to the brim for two weeks this past June, and then again in November. It was filled with humanitarian aid workers, desert dwellers, clergy, press, and law students. Dr. Scott Warren, a humanitarian aid volunteer and teacher of geography, was on trial for providing and holding space for life-saving humanitarian aid in the Sonoran desert.

When I say “life-saving” I mean that literally. Over 2,500 human remains have been found in the Sonoran Desert since 2000. Thousands more have not been discovered. No More Deaths, which is associated with the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Tucson, alongside other humanitarian aid groups, provides life-saving humanitarian aid in the desert.

The prosecution of this activity by our government, brought UUs to court. TWICE this year. Once this spring, which ended in a hung jury. And then again in November, when our government decided to retry Dr. Warren.

Dr. Warren’s initial arrest in January 2018 came the evening after No More Deaths released a report of abuse of humanitarian aid workers and work by Border Patrol. This arrest of Dr. Warren, we believe, was retaliation for revealing these truths.

So we went to court. All of us. Collectively, we spent hundreds of hours in court. Listening as kindness was ripped to shreds. Listening as the impulse to compassion was openly questioned. We sat in silence. On hard benches. Taking in the deception and the lies. The arguments and counter arguments.

We listened to all the pain. We took breaks when it was too much for us. Others listened when we couldn't anymore. We sent some out to drop water in the desert. We asked one another to care for themselves. We listened for the truth. We amplified the truth. We did not let our hearts break.

We let our hearts break open. So when the hour came, right after the flurries of texts and emails about a verdict. As we power walked back to the courthouse, we could feel hope begin to fill in the places where our hearts had broken open to the pains of the trial.

Hope began to fill in the cracks. Began to stitch up the gaps too big to fill.

As we rushed back to the courthouse, just a few hours after closing arguments, I was filled with hope. Because I've been in church my whole life. I know that a group of twelve strangers -- in this case, a jury -- a group of twelve strangers does not come to a big decision unanimously in 2 short hours. Not unless they are choosing to Side with Love.

In the courtroom, we held our breaths together. And as the judge read the verdict, "Not guilty," we gasped. The gasp that comes before shouting for joy. And then, again, "Not guilty," another gasp, and the press ran out of the courtroom.

And then, the courtroom attendant went one by one and asked each juror: "Is this your personal opinion?" and "Is this is opinion of the jury?" One by one, each juror answered "yes" to each question. It was like a litany of affirmations that humanitarian aid is not a crime.

In that moment, our hearts, which had just that morning broken open to the pains of corruption, aggression, and xenophobia -- were welded back together by joy.

It was because we let our hearts break open, not break to pieces, that we were able to have such joy that afternoon. That we were able to laugh. And sing. And feel the fullness of joy in that moment.

As we gathered, some jury members of Latinx descent came and joined us. They said the work that No More Deaths and so many others do is "Fabulous."

Rev. Mary Katherine Morn, President and CEO of the UU Service Committee, wrote in an op-ed in the AZ Star that week: "It may not be possible to prevent all of those deaths, but it's well within our power to reduce them...Warren and the other volunteers with No More Deaths believe it is not only possible, it is what must be done."

Humanitarian aid is never a crime. Kindness won. Love wins, in the end.

And the day after that trial, RAICES paid our \$2.1 million to bond out 200 migrants from the deadliest detention centers in the United States.

More joy to propel us forward. Into a world where we know there is more suffering ahead.

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English poet William Blake once wrote,
Joy and woe are woven fine,

A clothing for the soul divine.
Under every grief and pine,
Runs a joy with silken twine.

And Pueblo author Martín Prechtel wrote, “Grief expressed out loud for someone we have lost, or a country or home we have lost, is in itself the greatest praise we could ever give them. Grief is praise, because it is the natural way love honors what it misses.”

Joy and sorrow, grief and praise, are all connected. Inseparable. Two sides of one coin. We cannot experience the fullness of one without the depth of the other. We need to feel it all, in order to feel the fullness of any of it.

UU theologian and professor Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker once wrote, “Evil’s accomplice is anesthetization.”

Anesthetization means not feeling.

So to not feel is to allow space for evil to enter our bodies and actions. To feel is to resist the temptation to go against love. To feel is to discern where love resides, and where we find ourselves.

And, what I hear from the people I serve every day, and what I’m sure Rev. . . . hears from many of you, is an overload of feelings. How can we feel it all?

Feeling everything is impossible. Take it from this empath learning how to set limits on how long I hold on to feelings I pick up from others.

We can’t feel it all. We shouldn’t try.

But we should always make sure that we are still capable of feeling.

“Evil’s accomplice is anesthetization...”

In order to feel so much pain, and still be able to feel the joys, we must learn to let our hearts break open, without breaking to pieces. We must break our hearts open to the pain, and the joy. To the grief, and the praise.

A heart broken into pieces by grief cannot fully feel joy. A heart broken open is ready to receive whatever may come.

On that Wednesday afternoon in November, as we gathered outside the courthouse, it was because we had let our hearts break open to the pain that we were able to feel the full joy of that not guilty moment. Both the pain of the looming trial for 22 months, as well as the pain of living in a militarized borderlands where migrants have been led to their deaths for decades. Our broken open hearts was what allowed the fullness of that joy to reside in us. It is what carried that joy into the next day, and the next week, and the next month, and the next year.

It was feeling the fullness of that moment that allowed us to imagine where we go with all this joy. Back to the desert. Back to the long hikes with heavy gallons of water. Back to the side of love, wherever love is.

Because just that next day, it was announced that the Tucson sector would begin implementing a “remain in Mexico” program, intended to discourage and disempower people seeking asylum.

We must let our hearts break open, to all this pain. Break open, not apart.

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Those of us who were listening, heard another important announcement that November afternoon in the courtroom. Judge Raner Collins ruled that it was Dr. Scott Warren's sincerely held religious beliefs which compelled him to leave water in the desert, something our government felt falls within the category of "abandonment of property."

The Judge ruled that, while Dr. Warren admitted to this action, his action was permissible under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, or RFRA. RFRA is the same law which allows some bakers to not make wedding cakes for same-gender loving couples. RFRA is usually upheld to keep a person's freedom to discriminate or not do something. In this case, RFRA was upheld to allow a person to show more dignity than our government and laws enable. In this case, liberal religious values, which promote the dignity of all people, were upheld. This was the first time in many years that an RFRA claim was upheld by a federal judge.

What is incredibly distinctive, for me, is that Dr. Warren is not affiliated with a formal religious institution. Not even Unitarian Universalism, Dr. Warren has deeply held values which guide his work, and Judge Collins ruled in favor of the RFRA claim because, as he said in his judgement, "I take him at his word."

We have an opportunity now, to reflect on what our own values call us to do. What does our faith compel us to do? Whether or not we agreed with the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, what does this time we are living in call us, as people of faith, to do? What freedom do we have to create the world we dream about?

What does our faith compel us to do, in this moment?

When this trial was going on in Arizona, I urged friends and family around the country to consider the implications of a guilty verdict in Arizona. Because Dr. Warren was on trial for what our government calls “harboring,” which was actually allowing two migrants a place to sleep, food, water, and basic medical care. Our government was attempting to criminalize kindness.

If that guilty verdict came down, could you offer your neighbor a glass of water? Or would that be harboring? Could you let your child’s friend sleep over, or would you need to ask for their papers first, or risk being prosecuted for harboring? Where is the line, when it comes to showing kindness to other humans?

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Judy Chicago’s “And Then’s” do not flow from a static idea of support, but from an active alignment of our values and our actions. We, as religious people, have an opportunity to imagine, in this very moment, the future we want to create.

We do not yet know what was made possible in that courtroom this November. We have yet to fully realize how our faith will compel us to transform our world.

“I take him at his word,” Judge Raner Collins said this week.

What would you do with your sincerely held religious beliefs, if there was a future promise of a judge taking you at your word? What future becomes more possible when you align your actions with your faith?

What is that world you dream about? And how can you continue to build it now?

Wherever you go, friends, go with your hearts broken open. Feel the pain and the grief of these times, so that when the times comes for celebration and joy, you are ready to receive those feelings, too. A broken heart needs medical attention. A heart broken open is within the bounds of community to heal. Figure out where love needs you to be. Take your beliefs there and act for more justice. I will take you at your word. And I will ask that your sincerely held religious beliefs take you further than they have before. There is a possibility waiting in this moment that we cannot forget. The future is in our hands, and will be determined by the work we do. May we continue building for tomorrow, today.