

Northlake Unitarian Universalist Church
Sermon for Sunday, February 4, 2007
“Hating the Stranger”
Speaker: Jim Mason

I have a couple of true stories for you this morning. The first is from CNN news network.

He was the first U.S. soldier killed in combat in the Iraq war, even though the United States wasn't quite his country. Lance Cpl. Jose Antonio Gutierrez, 22, an orphan who grew up on the streets of Guatemala City, made the perilous border crossing through Mexico and entered the U.S. illegally when he was 14.

Because he was underage, he was not deported, and eventually he got a green card and went to high school and college in California. He joined the Marines in March 2002. After only a year in the service, Gutierrez died in a firefight near the Iraqi port city of Umm Qasr.

Jose dreamed of becoming an architect and making enough money to bring his sister Engracia to the US from Guatemala.

Before the funeral, his sister told reporters "I do feel proud, because not just anyone gives up their life for another country. But at the same time it makes me sad because he fought for something that wasn't his."

Cardinal Roger Mahony told the standing-room-only crowd at Gutierrez's mass that they were honoring "a great man" and an American citizen. Gutierrez was awarded his U.S. citizenship posthumously.

His parents had both died by the time he was 4, and he lived on the streets until he was 8 before being taken in by a shelter. But yearning for a better life, the strong-willed youth left Guatemala, hopping trains and hitchhiking for 2000 miles until he reached the United States.

Along with his love of soccer and chess, Gutierrez also enjoyed writing poetry, his foster mother said. "Letter to God," a poem he wrote in 2000, was read at his funeral.

"Thank you for permitting me to live another year, thank you for what I have, for the type of person I am, for my dreams that don't die," he wrote in Spanish. "May the firearms be silent and the teachings of love flourish."

[CNN.COM -- www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2003/iraq/heroes/jose.gutierrez.html]

The second story is a first person account written by a woman identified only as Catalina.

I'm Honduran. I love my country, but it was time for me to leave. Why? There is no work. They closed the factory where I was working, leaving a great number of us without jobs.

We worked from 7am to 5pm. We had to ask permission to get a drink of water. We were not allowed to stand up if our work was done sitting. If your work was done standing, you couldn't sit down. They'd warn us, they'd put out a goal of 1,000 pieces of clothing; it would depend on your particular job. If you did it quickly, the next day they would raise or multiply the amount of work you had to do and lower the wage for that job or the price, so that someone would kill herself working, but earn less than what she had before. I thought, and I continue to think, that this is unjust, that it is robbery, because the worker deserves a good salary, a decent wage. It doesn't matter if you work all day, as long as they pay what they should pay. When our government put some pressure on the companies so that they would pay overtime, some of them removed their factories from Honduras in order to go to even cheaper countries. They left thousands and thousands without work.

When I found myself without a job, I decided to become an emigrant, because I have two children to provide for. Without work, I couldn't give them what they needed.

In addition, the father of my baby insisted that I get an abortion. He almost convinced me in my head, yes, but in my heart, he couldn't. He gave me a little bit of money for it, but with the money, I embarked upon my journey, five months pregnant.

On April 11th at 10 o'clock in the morning, I said goodbye to my children and told them that if we never see each other again, that they must not forget the good ways I have taught them, that they must behave themselves.

I won't read you her entire amazing story. It was an extremely difficult and dangerous journey. But it had a happy ending. By the time she swam across the Rio Grande, she was nine months pregnant. But her baby was born healthy in Texas and is therefore a US citizen.

[Casa Juan Diego -- www.cjd.org/stories/catalina.html]

These are just two stories of an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States today. Notice that I say "undocumented" instead of "illegal". Jose and Catalina were not criminals. They were refugees.

Consider this hypothetical situation. You're a single parent with two kids living in Kirkland in the year 2020. After a series of economic, political and environmental catastrophes, oil is so expensive that the transportation industry is in turmoil. Travel costs have become prohibitive and airplane sales have dropped to almost zero. Boeing has laid off 50,000 workers in the Puget Sound. Paccar has closed because there are no customers for fuel-guzzling heavy trucks. At the same time Microsoft has also laid off 20,000 workers due to the embrace by American companies of open source operating systems and software.

All of these things combined have a ripple effect throughout the area and now 15% of the workforce is unemployed. 240,000 people in the Seattle area are looking for jobs. You are one of them.

You have been looking for about six months. Your savings are exhausted, your credit cards are max'd out, and you have now missed three mortgage payments. You've sold your late model car and your truck and you've bought a 1983 Honda Civic. You have put your house up for sale, but there are no buyers, even though you have dropped your asking price by \$100,000. You can't drop the price any further because of your mortgage. You have no medical insurance. You are just getting by on the generosity of friends and family.

You hear about job openings in your occupation in Portland. You scrape together \$150 from friends to buy a tank of gas. You head south on I-5. Three hours later you are passing through Vancouver and approaching the bridge across the Columbia when you are stopped at a roadblock of military vehicles and barricades. As you wait your turn in line, you see that cars ahead of you are being directed to the freeway exit. As you watch, it appears that only cars with Oregon license plates are getting through. Finally a uniformed soldier approaches. He asks to see your driver's license and registration. You show him your Washington state license and car papers. He asks why you want to cross the river into Oregon. You tell him you are looking for work. He tells you that because you are not an Oregon resident, you cannot enter the state without a permit. Why? you ask. Because, he says, we can't let all of you people from Seattle flood across the border and take our jobs. But I'm an American citizen, you say. Yes, he says, but you are not an Oregon citizen.

Could such a thing happen in America? Maybe, maybe not. But if it did, how would you react? Would you turn around and drive back home? Or would you think about finding another way to get across that river? I sure know what I'd do.

Is it a crime to want a better life, to want a seat at the Welcome Table? Is it a crime to be willing to swim across the Jordan or the Rio Grande or the Columbia to find it?

Jackie and I returned last August from Australia where we lived for almost two years. I was there as a contract manager for Boeing. The company has a one billion dollar deal to sell the Australia Air Force our 737 airplanes fitted with a sophisticated new surveillance radar. A billion dollars! That's a pretty sizeable outlay for a country of just 21 million people. Why in the world would Australia need such an expensive surveillance system? Just exactly who are they afraid of?

Well, if you look at a map, it becomes a little more clear. Just across a very narrow body of water from the northern port city of Darwin is East Timor, a tiny and poor island nation at the end of the Indonesian archipelago. Indonesia has a population of 222 million, many of them desperately poor. Ethnically they are mostly Austronesian or Melanesian. About 90% of the population is muslim.

In 2001 in those waters, an Indonesian fishing boat carrying 434 refugees fleeing from the war in Afghanistan broke down and began to sink. A Norwegian freighter rescued them. The Australia government refused to allow the freighter to land in Australia. Eventually the freighter offloaded the asylum seekers at Christmas Island. A newspaper poll found that this action by the government was supported by 96% of the Australian people, who are overwhelmingly white and non-muslim. As a matter of fact, Australia had a white-only

immigration policy until 1973. So it is painfully clear why Australia is buying Boeing's airplanes – to keep out the hoards of non-white boat people.

Our family is originally from Iowa. Most of our relations still live in Iowa. So I like to keep up to date on what's going on there. I think there are a few other people in our congregation with Iowa connections?

Well, it seems that immigration is a big issue in Iowa, too. The meat packing plants have been in the news lately. They have been hiring a large number of undocumented workers to do jobs that are no longer very attractive to white workers. Eight dollar an hour jobs with no benefits still look pretty good to many immigrants. Many of them somehow manage to support families on this wage and even to send a little money south of the border each month. But the Bush administration decided they were a threat to national security and ordered the INS to raid the plants. Hundreds of working men and women were arrested, including mothers with children in day care facilities. For a while the state of Iowa found itself caring for these children whose parents had been spirited away by Federal agents.

I guess with all that controversy, I should not have been surprised to learn that Iowa became the 26th state to pass a law declaring English the official state language. This is the same state where Jackie's cousins dress up in Norwegian costumes once a year and parade through the streets of Story City Iowa singing Norwegian folk songs. I'm pretty sure that like most Iowans they supported the English language law.

Our family lives in Burien now. I was at the Southcenter Sears the other day standing in line behind a young Hispanic couple. When I overheard their conversation with the sales clerk, I smiled to myself. They were doing exactly what I did when I was their age. They were applying for a credit account at Sears so they could buy a washer and dryer so they could do their laundry at home instead of hauling it to a laundromat. Oh how I remember that glorious day when that washer and dryer were delivered on that Sears truck!

Here is an extract from a recent Burien newspaper article:

The first thing you notice is the diversity. Elmer's pub sits between a taqueria and a brightly colored Salvadoran-Mexican pupuseria, which is across the street from Hon's Hair Design, which is beside AAA Polynesian Deli & Store, which is behind Hans's German Sausage & Deli. Around the corner is Pho My Han Vietnamese Restaurant, which is alongside the Middle Eastern Sahara Market, which is down the street from Rudy & Sally's Kitchenette.

The second thing you notice is, "Where's the Starbuck's?" The large familiar chains are missing from the one-story flat-roof storefronts in the town's core. They're lined up in the newer shopping centers instead.

The town covers 7.2 square miles and has seen its population increase by a third in the past 30 years to an estimated 31,000. Much of the growth has been from immigrants who speak some 58 different languages.

58 languages! Yes, right there in sleepy little Burien. I remember shortly after we moved there from the Queen Anne neighborhood in Seattle, we were in a supermarket checkout line and Jackie looked around and said, “Well, we’re not in Kansas anymore!”

So do all of these ten thousand new Burien immigrants have green cards? Highly unlikely. Are they making life miserable for us natives? Hardly. They’re getting jobs, getting credit, buying appliances, buying and fixing up houses. And by doing so they are increasing the value of our home. Surprisingly, you don’t need a green card or a social security number to get credit or even to get a mortgage. One bank estimates that more than \$44 billion in mortgage loans have been made to undocumented Hispanic immigrants. But you can bet they are paying higher interest rates than us natives.

So, what is my point? What thoughts do I want to leave you with today? Do I think there is an easy solution to the undocumented immigration problem? No, I don’t. It’s going to take a lot of thought and discussion and good will from all sides. But I know it is ridiculous to think we can put 12 million undocumented workers in jail. And we obviously cannot deport them. We can’t afford to – the economy would go into a tail spin. And it is just simply immoral to leave them and their children outside the law.

As religious people, what should our reaction be to this problem? First, I think we need to consider the real source of all this hullabaloo about undocumented immigrants. What’s it really about?

Well, it’s not about national security. The September 11 terrorists were from Saudi Arabia, not Central America, and they entered our country legally. I don’t recall ever hearing about terrorists from Central America.

And it’s not about the economic impact of immigrants driving down wages or taking our jobs or freeloading on our welfare system. The CATO institute, a conservative think tank, found that immigrants do not increase joblessness, even among the lowest paid workers.

And the National Academy of Sciences found that the average immigrant annually contributes \$1800 more in taxes than he or she receives in benefits. And over their lifetimes, immigrants and their children will each pay an average of \$80,000 more in taxes than they will receive in local, state and federal benefits combined.

[Southern Poverty Law Center --- www.splcenter.org]

The United States has always been a nation of immigrants. For the first 100 years of our nation we didn’t even have immigration laws. Our borders were wide open!

Let me take a little poll here. I’m going to ask you to raise your hands in response to a few questions, but don’t do it if it makes you feel at all uncomfortable.

How many of you were born in another country?
How many of you had parents born in another country?

How about grand-parents? Great grand-parents?
How many of you were born outside of Washington State?

See! We're a nation of immigrants!

As our population ages and our birth rates decline, we are going to need more and more immigrants to replenish our workforce. During the economic expansion of the 1990s, half of all new workers were foreign born. The US Department of Labor projects that by 2010 the US will create 22 million new jobs, which is 9 million more than new workers entering the market. This problem will get even worse as us baby boomers reach retirement age and leave the work force. Alan Greenspan, when he was the Federal Reserve Chairman, said that immigration is "critical to mitigating inflationary pressures."

We absolutely need millions of new immigrants for a healthy, stable, economy!

No, we're not going to be in Kansas anymore. And that's the real problem!

It's called xenophobia, the hatred of strangers. It's also called tribalism, which is just another form of racism. Human beings – all of us – are just naturally racist. We like to be among our own kind. We treat our own kind better. It's shameful, but there it is.

When George W. Bush controlled our Congress, the House passed a bill that would have made felons out of undocumented immigrants. It would also have made felons of anyone, including churches, that provided them assistance. That same Bush controlled House approved the construction of a 700 mile fence along the border with Mexico. Why not a fence along the Canadian border? Could it be because most Canadians are white?

There was an article in Monday's paper about a study done at Vanderbilt University. They looked at a government survey of 8600 legal immigrants to the United States from around the world and found that those with the lightest skin earned an average of 8 to 15 percent more than similar immigrants with darker skin. The author of the study said, "[using an eleven-point scale for measuring shades of skin tone,] On average, being one shade lighter has about the same effect as having an additional year of education."

What was particularly interesting to me was that the skin-color advantage was not due to preferential treatment for light-skinned people in their country of origin. The bias occurs when they come to the United States, not back home! The study said that there is a growing body of evidence that there is a preference for whiteness in America that goes beyond race.

The nations of Europe have leaped ahead of us in dealing both with racism and the coming baby-boom demographic shift by forming the European Union, or EU. This new union of nations basically eliminated all borders between the member countries so that people can now freely migrate to where the jobs are. The EU also established a new currency. Initially on a par with the US dollar, the Euro is now worth \$1.30. The EU seems to be working.

So, knowing all this, as religious people what should our response be to immigration issues?

I think we can take a cue from the US Catholic bishops. They have proposed five principles which they say should guide the church's view on migration issues:

1. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.
2. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families. The church recognizes that all the goods of the earth belong to all people. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin, to support themselves and their families, they have the right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate that right.
3. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders. However, the more powerful economic nations which have the ability to protect and feed their residents have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows.
4. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.
5. The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.

[US Conference of Catholic Bishops --www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml]

Today, our immigration laws do not reflect the demographic and economic realities of our world. We need to find a way to legalize the undocumented workforce that is here to stay anyway. We need to provide more visas for more immigrants in the future. And we need to establish border protection laws and policies that are consistent with humanitarian values. We're not in Kansas anymore!

I would like to close today with this reading by Richard Gilbert.

*The human race is a vast rainbow,
White, black, red, yellow, and brown bursting into view.
Yet for all, blood is red, the sky is blue, the earth brown, the night dark.*

*In size and shape we are a varied pattern of tall and short, slim and stout, elegant and plain.
Yet for all there are fingers to touch, hearts to break, eyes to cry, ears to hear, mouths to speak.*

In tongue we are a tower of babel, a great jumble of voices grasping for words, groping for ways to say love, peace, compassion, and hope.

*Faiths compete, claiming the one way; saviors abound, pointing to salvation.
Not all can be right, not one. We are united only by our urge to search.*

*Boundaries divide us, lines drawn to mark our diversity,
maps charted to separate the human race from itself.*

*Yet a mother's grief, a father's love, a child's happy cry,
a musician's sound, an artist's stroke,
Batter the boundaries and shatter the walls.*

*Strength and weakness, arrogance and humility, confidence and fear
Live together in each one, reminding us that we share a common humanity.*

We are all more human than otherwise

[Richard S. Gilbert, *In the Holy Quiet of This Hour*, 1995]