

## **“Finding Refuge in a Shared World”**

*A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*First Parish in Wayland*

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Imagine a young woman about to give birth to her second child, a son. Her older son, about five years old, and her husband were likely nearby—as were the dozens of other refugees with whom she shared the boat. The refugees’ plans had gone awry and they had not reached their intended destination. Instead, here she lay in labor at anchor in a cold sea. Both she and her newborn son would survive, though her husband died two months later. Indeed, half of the refugees on the boat would not make it through that first fateful winter.

Yet, the young woman, Susannah, would survive, as would both of her sons, Resolved and Peregrine. After a spring and summer of planting and building, Susannah gathered with the other survivors to celebrate the fall harvest. Because of the shared land, resources, and knowledge of the Native Americans who already lived upon the shores of Plymouth, that 1621 fall harvest promised to keep hunger and death at bay during the Pilgrim’s second winter. Generations later, we still celebrate the gifts of food, community, and abundance when we gather for Thanksgiving.

As religious refugees, the young woman, Susannah White, and her sons Resolved and Peregrine, were fleeing violence in Europe. In 1620, much of Europe was in turmoil with religious differences continually reshaping the social, political, and religious landscape. With religion and politics so tightly intertwined, it was very, very dangerous holding a religious point of view different than the current government. That danger was second only to betraying your understanding of religious truth—of what God expected of you. What do you do when faced with such choices? Do you hide your faith? Do you convert at the point of a sword, a gun, if you must? Do you run . . . seeking refuge in a safer place? Is there a safer place?

These are old questions. These are *now* questions. On Thanksgiving Day, President Obama made the connection: “Nearly four centuries after the Mayflower set sail, the world is still full of pilgrims – men and women who want nothing more than the chance for a safer, better future for themselves and their families.”

Of course, not all politicians agree with Obama. Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker has joined with many others who urge caution in accepting refugees from Syria. Many are afraid that among the refugees will be terrorists—people ideologically bent upon harming us.

I know that I’m straying into some uncomfortable political territory. Don’t worry, I’m not planning on jeopardizing our tax-exempt status today or any day! I’ll steer clear of partisan politics or particular candidates. However, I do believe that religion is about making sense

of the world we live in *today*. And, today, our world is seeing the largest migration of human lives since World War II.

Let's put this in perspective. There are more than four million Syrian refugees. ([UNHCR](#) data as of Nov 17, 2015) Nearly eight million more are displaced *within* Syria. That's 12 million people impacted. In comparison, the Haiti Earthquake affected approximately 3.5 million people and Hurricane Katrina 1.7 million. ([Worldvision](#)) 4 million Syrian refugees is nearly two thirds of the total population of Massachusetts. Where will these people go? How will they live? How will their children be educated?

But, what do *we* do? Isn't this just another one of those intractable problems of humanity? A casualty of a war far away? Why risk our safety, our resources for their lives?

These are more than political questions. They are moral questions. They are *religious* questions. How do we make sense of the brokenness of the world . . . of the immense need of the world? What is our responsibility to others? Why act on behalf of another?

In truth, we humans do not always welcome the stranger, the foreigner, or the refugee. During graduate school, I learned just how true this pattern of exclusion is in our own U.S. culture when I worked as a teaching fellow for a course on citizenship. I was intrigued by a catchy title, "Sex and the Citizen," but a *whole* semester on citizenship? What's there to learn, I wondered? Citizens vote and serve on juries (or, attempt to get out of jury duty...). Of course, as it turned out there was a lot to learn.

I learned that in 1790 the first definition of citizenship in the U.S. made clear that citizenship was a privilege of "free white persons of good character." This racial line would spawn volumes of scientific research and court cases on who counted as "white." Are Malays from South Asia white? Are Muslims from India? I also learned that Native Americans were not granted citizenship—whether they wanted it or not—until 1924. And, that for a period of time a native-born white woman would lose her U.S. citizenship if she married a man from an excluded race. So also, women without husbands or recognized categories of acceptable work would be excluded as "L.P.C"—likely to become a public charge. The braided history of exclusions based upon race, class, sex, marital status, religion and nationality is long and complicated. Again and again lines of belonging—and *exclusion*—have been drawn by politicians, courts, and social acceptance. (See [Qualities of a Citizen](#))

And, still lines are being drawn and redrawn.

For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, U.S. immigration law tried to keep out the Chinese while Japanese merchants and brides had special status. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the lines of belonging reversed. [Life magazine](#) published a spread, "How to tell Japs from the Chinese" to 'help' the fearful public. Then the government began interring Japanese—even U.S. citizens—into military [camps](#). Such stories give us pause: who belongs? who *really* belongs in our nation?

Moreover, for centuries, drawing lines of exclusion and hierarchy has not only been commonplace, but religiously sanctioned. God made the races differently. God made masters to rule over slaves. Men to rule over women. God made us heterosexual. God gave us creation to rule. God ruled over us.

Again and again power has been understood only in hierarchal terms. Higher and lower. Better and worse. More worthy. Less worthy. Important. Expendable. In. Out.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are inheritors of a religious different tradition. While this particular congregation may have historic *Unitarian* roots (heck, our monthly newsletter is still called *The Unitarian*), since the 1961 merger, we are also *Universalists*. Like Unitarianism, the Universalist denomination was an offshoot of 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant religion. As the name suggests, Universalists promoted the radical idea that *all* people would go to heaven. *All* people would be welcomed into one human community bound together by the love and grace of God.

While many flocked to the Universalist churches, others were aghast! How in the world could society function if clear lines were not drawn between the good and the bad, the saved and this sinner? What kind of moral chaos would erupt if people were not afraid of eternal punishment to motivate better behavior? Such fear even kept the *immoral* Universalists from sitting on a jury. How could they possibly judge crime if they had no fear of eternal punishment?

Today, the Universalist impulse lives on as a conviction that all lives share a common destiny. Rather than draw lines that ultimately separate us one from the other, Universalism says an emphatic, “No! We’re in this *together*. All lives matter.” And yet, we do draw lines between people. Some lines are those of safety—healthy boundaries that protect the innocent or restrain those intent on hurting others. Such lines can be necessary and important tools that ultimately uphold the value of Life and human dignity. But, as with the Japanese internment camps or exclusion of non-whites from citizenship, there is also a long, long, long history of drawing lines in the name of protection that actually demean people, unjustly retrain liberty, or even justify violence.

We are still drawing lines of exclusion and belonging. Since 9/11, the lines have become largely colored by Middle East ancestry and Muslim identity. And yet, the danger is not simply coming from abroad or from brown-skinned men. Again this week, a white man with a gun spread terror by shooting up a Planned Parenthood in Colorado. Indeed, one [U.S. survey](#) shows that twice as many people have died since 9/11 in attacks motivated by anti-government or white supremacist ideologies than by radical Muslims. We *do* live in a broken world of violence and danger. But, who or what is the danger?

These are not simple questions. They *are* political and *are* contested. They are *also* moral and religious. In a moral frame, are we obligated to act on behalf of refugees? Must action

mean opening our borders? You may disagree, but for me I think we should welcome refugees here as well as support refugee services abroad.

For me, I believe that the Unitarian Universalist principle of affirming the worth and dignity of each person includes the refugee. And, I believe that the sixth principle call to promote “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all” suggests that we support those who are seeking peace after fleeing from war.

[Rev. Sean Parker Dennison](#) calls this 6<sup>th</sup> principle “extravagant in its hopefulness and improbable in its prospects.” And yet, he writes,

“As naïve or impossible as the sixth Principle may seem, I’m not willing to give up on it. In the face of our culture’s apathy and fear, I want to imagine and help create a powerful vision of peace by peaceful means, liberty by liberatory means, justice by just means. I want us to believe—and to live as if we believe—that a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all is possible. There is no guarantee that we will succeed, but I can assure you that we will improve ourselves and improve the world by trying.” (read more from Sean in [The Seven Principles in Word and Worship](#), ed. Ellen Brandenburg)

Why act for the refugees? To help support every person who is struggling to find shelter from the bombs, water to drink, food to eat, and a chance to live another day. Maybe believing we can reach every refugee is naïve. Maybe it’s impossible. But in the process of trying to do *something* we will make a difference for someone.

Lately, I’ve been thinking a lot about how our desires for the *right* world might be getting in the way of helping to make a *better* world. A compelling vision for how the world *should* be can be inspiring. Painting pictures of peace, liberty, and justice for all can help us imagine that “another world is possible.” But, I fear that it can also be a recipe for disillusionment and apathy when the actuality feels too distant, too unlikely, or just too hard. I’ve been wondering what happens if we change the goal from “fixing” the world to be *right* to simply making the world *better*. If our goal is simply *better*, then what can we do today to move in this direction? Can you write an elected representative or to the *Town Crier*? Can you make a donation to the [UUSC](#) for its many efforts—including supporting refugee relief? Can you challenge your friend’s or neighbor’s racist comment about dangerous Muslims or Syrians or Blacks? Can you challenge your own quiet assumptions about racial privilege and who does or does not *really* belong in the U.S.?

Our own U.S. history is one of immigration—including innumerable refugees from the Mayflower to World War II to Syria today. Again and again lines of belonging and exclusion have been drawn. Again and again those lines have reflected unjust hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and nationality. As loud resistance to Syrian refugees swirls around us, let us hear also the words of Yuka Yasui Fujikura. Now 88, Fujikura was detained as a teen in a Japanese internment camp. In a recent interview, she states, “To

judge someone by ethnicity or their religion . . . it was wrong then, it's wrong today, too.”  
([NYT, Nov. 26, 2015](#))

As we face the choice of how to respond to the Syrian refugee crises, the ongoing violence of white supremacy on our soil, and the many other injustices and inequalities within our shared world, my hope is that we will join with Rebecca Parker who calls us to [“Choose the Bless this World.”](#)

May it be so. Amen.