

“Prisoners of Conscience”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
5 December 2010

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Time for All Ages “Thoreau’s Night in Jail”

A long time ago, back when your great-great-great grand-parents were alive, there lived a man named Henry David Thoreau. Tall and skinny, Henry was a man of big thoughts and quiet deeds. Henry wrote a very important essay called Civil Disobedience, which is about fairness.

Henry lived in Concord Massachusetts in the United States. In the 1800s, when he was alive, slavery was allowed by the US government. Slavery means people are owned by other people. Black people worked in the fields and looked after the houses of white people without any pay or any choice. This was very wrong and lots of people worked hard for many years to stop slavery.

In Concord there weren’t any slaves, but Henry was angry at the people in charge for allowing slavery anywhere in the U.S.. One day he said “I am not going to pay tax anymore”. Taxes are the money we give to the government – the people in charge – so that we all have roads and schools. It was against the law to not pay taxes.

But Henry said that he could not “recognize the authority of the (government) which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle...”. Henry could not contribute to the unfairness of slavery.

For six years he did not pay this tax. Then on a hot summer’s afternoon in 1846, Henry went into Concord to collect a shoe he had left to be mended at a shoemaker’s.

As he strolled along, he was stopped by Sam Staples, the police constable. Sam asked him to pay his back taxes. Henry said no, he couldn’t, because slavery

was wrong. Sam said he'd have to put him in jail. And Henry said that was okay.

So they walked down to the jail and Henry was put into a cell. The walls were solid stone, the door was thick wood and iron. Now, funnily enough, Henry didn't mind being in a jail cell. Henry knew his mind and his conscience were free, even hidden behind stone walls.

Henry spent the night in jail. After a breakfast of brown bread and hot chocolate, Sam came to tell Henry he could leave. Henry's aunt had paid his back taxes. So he walked down the street to the shoemakers to pick up his mended shoe. Then he went off to pick huckleberries for his dinner.

Now Henry had been kind of mad that he had gotten out of jail so easily. He had wanted everyone in the town to hear about his imprisonment and learn the reasons why. He knew that slaves didn't get freedom so easily.

So he wrote an essay about his night in jail, the one called Civil Disobedience. In it, Henry says each one of us has to stand up and act against the people in charge, if we know what they are doing is hurtful and wrong. Even if we aren't the ones being hurt, we have to speak and act against what is unfair.

All this happened to Henry many years ago. But people all over the world are still talking about Henry's life. Just like we did this morning.

Meditation Words by Larry Hoffman

Hanukkah celebrates not one miracle but two. There are the seven days that recall the intervention of God in unprecedented ways, the times, that is, when we did not give up (though we might have) and when a feeble initiative that ought to have died within a day lasted instead until we found a way to keep it going. But the miracle of the first day is more awesome still. It is the unaccountable human penchant to light a flame in the first place, to dare to hope (against all odds) that if we can just get through at least one day, the defeat we fear just might not come true ...

Introduction to Amnesty Reflections (Shawn)

A candle surrounded with barbed-wire. It is said to be one of the most widely recognized non-commercial symbols in the world. But, I doubt most of us who recognize the symbol understand the full substance and significance of Amnesty's work. I say that because I suspect that if we did, the world would be a very different place.

Over the next few minutes, I invite you into some of the stories behind the symbol, as shared by members of our Amnesty Chapter. If you're like me, you may find these stories hard to hear. You may find your mind wandering, your thoughts wanting desperately to be someplace else.

Pay attention to that feeling, but resist the urge to give into it. With the focus of meditation, return your attention, again and again, to the to the humanity and the inhumanity in what you are hearing.

Reflection by Rona Goldensher

In January of 2009, members of this congregation participated in an Amnesty International Action by writing letters to the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The letters were written on behalf of human rights activist Justine Masika Bihamba. A typical day in Justine's life, and that of the grassroots organization Synergie that she directs, might involve meeting yet another 15-year-old rape victim and providing health care and emotional counselling for her. Or it may involve teaching a class in a marketable trade to some of the many victims who have been abandoned by their husbands after they were sexually assaulted and are destitute. Or caring for an infant born of a young woman who was taken as a sex slave by an armed militia. Or working in various ways to raise awareness of these rampant sexual assaults.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there are astoundingly high rates of sexual violence committed mostly by armed soldiers against women as a weapon of war in an attempt to destroy the families and communities of "enemy populations". Perpetrators are rarely brought to justice.

Justine, as well as other workers in her field, are routinely threatened because of their human rights work. In September of 2007, soldiers broke into Justine's home when she was not there and brutally attacked her children. Although Justine repeatedly attempted to press charges, the crime was not prosecuted

and Justine and her family continued to be threatened by the attackers. In our letter of January 2009 we demanded an immediate and impartial investigation into this heinous crime against Justine's family, that the perpetrators be brought to justice, and that protection be provided for Justine and her vital work with Synergie.

What effect has the Amnesty International Action that we participated in had? I have seen no reports that the attackers of Justine's family have been brought to justice – at least yet. However, in spite of the enormous intimidations Justine and her colleagues receive, Synergie is still astonishingly active. In 2009, Synergie assisted more than 2,200 survivors of sexual violence with legal, medical and economic help. Synergie is also involved in a wide variety of activities to educate the public and bring justice to sexual assault victims. It is incredibly moving to watch Justine talk about how she can not abandon the women that need help; and hard to believe her courageous work would continue to be possible without the support of the international community.

Reflection by Jane Munro

(This version is not exactly the same as the one shared from the pulpit.)

Good morning. My name is Jane Munro. I have been a member of Amnesty International here at First for about one year. I am interested in the status of human rights in Latin America, and want to share with you this morning about Guatemala.

One of the principal concerns of Amnesty in Guatemala is the problem of the violations of the human rights of the aboriginal Mayas who make up approximately sixty per cent of the population of the country.

Some of the most serious current problems stem from the relationship or lack thereof between Goldcorp, a Canadian gold-mining company operating in the western highlands, and the indigenous Mayan communities who live there.

1. The Mayan communities claimed that they were never consulted about the project, a massive open-pit mine with a cyanide leaching process which they believe[d] threatens[ed] their environment by contaminating the water which they need[ed] for their subsistence farms.

2. The plebiscites held in more than 22 Mayan communities regarding this project overwhelmingly rejected this type of economic activity in their area but were ignored by both government and Goldcorp.

In the wake of a forty-day confrontation between protesters and the police and army, which left one person dead and twenty injured, Amnesty issued an Urgent Action Notice.

Appeals for the redress of these violations were made. Letters were sent to the Guatemalan government, to Goldcorp, and to the Guatemalan ambassador in Ottawa, among others.

The results were mixed. By February, the death threats had ceased. In 2008 an international delegation of concerned Goldcorp shareholders visited the region. A report was drawn up by Goldcorp and published this year which found Goldcorp had failed to respect indigenous rights but maintained that it had also brought jobs, health care and educational facilities to the Maya region.

Recently, the Inter-American Commission ordered the government of Guatemala to suspend Goldcorp's mining permit due to "serious and ongoing allegations of environmental, human and indigenous rights violations caused by the mine". At last report, this suspension had not taken place.

Upon reflection, Amnesty has achieved only partial success. The lives of the three leaders were saved in 2005 and the publicity caused by the Urgent Action Appeal prompted the arrival of the delegation, the resulting critical report from Goldcorp, and increased global scrutiny.

However, violations of indigenous rights in Guatemala still occur. The Maya are second-class citizens in a country where they are the majority. However, I cannot help but believe that without the help of Amnesty International and other pro-active groups the indigenous peoples of Latin America would be even more exploited and vulnerable than they are presently in our imperfect world.

Reflection by Ted Wood

Good morning! I'm Ted Wood and I'm a member of Amnesty International Group 142.

For the past year we have been working on the Demand Dignity campaign which aims to stop and prevent human rights abuses that drive and deepen poverty. Human rights violations by governments, local authorities, companies and other institutions drive people into poverty and deny them resources and services they need to live in dignity. Amnesty's campaign aims to help those who are most vulnerable. We are focusing on 4 areas: reducing maternal mortality, upholding the rights of Indigenous Peoples, promoting access to adequate housing, and holding companies to account for human rights violations. Over the next year we will particularly focus on the land rights of Indigenous Peoples while continuing our work on other issues.

Last year we worked on the case of Indigenous rights activist Raul Hernandez who had been imprisoned in Guerrero, Mexico after he was charged with murder. Raul Hernandez is a member of the Me'phaa Indigenous People's Organization which defends and promotes the rights of the Me'phaa people in the State of Guerrero. Eyewitness accounts of the murder established that Raul Hernandez was not present when it took place. We believe the case against Raul Hernandez was a reprisal by local authorities for his legitimate activities promoting Indigenous rights and for highlighting abuses committed by authorities.

Members of our congregation participated in letter writing during coffee hour on Sunday September 27, 2009. We sent over 20 letters to the Governor of the State of Guerrero with copies to the Ambassador of Mexico and also the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs. Our letters called for the release of Raul Hernandez and a full and impartial investigation into the murder. We called for authorities to recognize the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders as set out in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

In December 2009 we included Raul Hernandez in our annual greeting card action by sending well wishes to him and his family care of the human rights centre in La Montana, Mexico. These cards offer hope and encouragement and can act as an effective way to bring about change. We will be sending cards again this year at our meeting on December 15.

And now the good news: on August 27 of this year the Guerrero State judge ordered the immediate and unconditional release of Raul Hernandez. The judge stated that Raul "is neither guilty nor judicially responsible for the murder." Raul Hernandez spoke after his release saying, "We will continue to work so that they give us infrastructure, schools, [and] medical clinics. We will continue to struggle."

The case of Raul Hernandez is an Indigenous Rights case. Today, we will have letters for you to sign during coffee hour. One of the cases is on behalf of Indigenous Peoples in Colombia where there are at least 32 Indigenous nations who are at risk of extinction.

Homily: “Prisoners of Conscience” (Shawn)

It’s one of those weeks in a preacher’s life—
a week with Chanukah and Bodhi Day,
with Amnesty, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,
and the National Day of Remembrance and Action.

One of those overwhelming weeks
when every scrap of wisdom I hoped to piece together and share with you,
every thread of hope,
seemed to lead straight back to suffering,
to our enormous human capacity for violence,
to the hard facts of injustice, and the persistent problem of evil.

One night this week, as I sat with the words in front of me
that Rona, Jane, and Ted would share this morning,
I found my mind wandering,
wanting to be most anyplace other than the Congo or Guatemala.

To try to lighten up the mood,
I distracted myself by reading through the news online.

And, there, amid reports about by-elections
and the UN Climate Change Conference unfolding in Cancun,
I found what I was looking for.

An escape.

A story about a perfect little place called Celebration.
Celebration, Florida.

Built by the Walt Disney Company fourteen years ago,
this small town of 10,000 people and miles of white rail fencing,
is supposedly the happiest subdivision on the planet.

The town offers easy access, with minimal traffic,
to the wonders of the Magic Kingdom.

There are horse-and-carriage rides for getting around.

And, on winter evenings, every hour on the hour,
fake snow blankets the town square.

What's not the love, right?!

Some call it the land of the Stepford Wives,
but others see it as an intentional return
to small-town life that is safe and walkable and workable.

Tragically, the town of Celebration marked its first homicide last weekend.

A few days later, an armed stand-off
brought a SWAT Team to town for the first time,
along with a pod of helicopters buzzing overhead.

Two major crimes in the span of a week
has left a crack in the façade of this community.

Jim Zimmer, who lives in Celebration, downplayed it all,
“even as he watched a sheriff's deputy with a rifle
shoo a woman. . . back into her home.”

He said, “For our own property values, we need [to keep up] the illusion.”¹

Though I don't really have a desire to spend time there,
my heart goes out to the people of this town,
as they try to make sense of the violence that has visited their gated lives.

It would be easy to caricature these people living at the edge of Disney
World—to point fingers at the willful insulation on display in their lives.

It would be easy, that is, if it weren't for the ways
that I also choose, more often than I care to confess,

¹ Kim Severson, “A Killing (a First) in a Town Produced by Disney,” *New York Times*, 2 December 2010.

the many conveniences that ignorance has to offer.

After learning more this week about Amnesty's work in the Congo and Guatemala and Mexico, I can well appreciate the appeal of a place called Celebration.

Maybe you can, too.

And, yet, I know I could never be truly happy there.

Ultimately, there is no gated community for the conscience.

In the 1960s, Amnesty International coined the term "prisoners of conscience" to describe those people who are imprisoned because of their race, religion, language, beliefs, or some other fundamental aspect of their identity.

Serving to win the freedom of such prisoners is at the heart of what Amnesty is all about.

And, yet, I'm wrestling with another definition of the term, a different aspect that speaks to how many of us, too, may well be "prisoners of conscience."

It's not that we've been held against our will, imprisoned for some aspect of our identity.

Rather, it's that our knowledge of human suffering, can become a prison itself if we resist or refuse to do anything about it.

We become prisoners of our own conscience, when we fail to take action when and where we can.

That's why I believe I heard some measure of satisfaction in Rona, Jane, and Ted's voices this morning.

Not every problem has been resolved, justice has not been fully served in every case, yet, there are glimpses of progress, signs that reflect that the bright, bare light of attention, when focussed on injustice,

can begin to make a meaningful difference in this world.

The challenge, as always, is not to look away.
To resist the temptation to ignore what we know of suffering on this planet—
of torture and abuse,
of unjust war and wrongful imprisonment,
of modern slavery, human trafficking,
and unspeakable violence against women.

To be sure, there is more work than each of us,
and even all of us, can possibly do.

And, the focus of Amnesty may not be the work
that every one of us is called to.

But, the work of paying attention is.
Paying attention and finding some way to do something about what we see.
Some way to keep from keeping up the illusion.

Now, I won't advocate refusing to pay your taxes,
but I would encourage you to find a way that fits where you're at in your life.
There are many ways to bring light to this world.

But, as Paul shared in this morning's meditation,
the real miracle is when we dare to light the candle for the first time,
trusting, believing, hoping against hope
that something beautiful and good just might happen,
and that "the defeat we [most] fear just might not come true," after all.

Let us then look squarely at the hard and heart-breaking reality of this world.

Let us look to the places where hope and healing have the power to transform
indifference and injustice.

And let us step up and step out, in whatever ways we can, to honour the dignity
and compassion that ennobles not only the lives of others, but even our own.

Then, may the world be made new,
and every prisoner of conscience set free. Amen.