

ABIDING LOVE
Sermon by Rev. Jennifer Kelleher
Sunday, July 15, 2018
All Souls Church, New York City

PRAYER:

Spirit of Life, Deep Abiding Energy of the Universe
Holy divine presence. Miracle of breath. Dear God.

As we enter into this time of silence:

We hold in loving memory loved ones we have lost, and send of our love and support to those mourning losses. May they feel that they are not alone in their grief.

We share healing energy to those who find themselves ill, injured, in times of trouble or within a difficult life transition. May they feel they are not alone on this life's journey.

We lift up in gratitude and gladness the blessings of our lives, those people and experiences that have made us and continue to shape who we are.

We hold close the memories and each moment to come,
those actions and interactions we have had and will have that make us feel connected:
that show of our love for others and that others have shown of their love of and for us.

May each person who has touched our lives know how much their care has brought graces to us
we can't even fully express.

May we try our best to live into the best examples of what those who love us and loved us have
left us, as we share together in this sacred work of creating a more kind, fairer world than we
may yet know today.

May we care with one another along this shared journey,
understanding the relationships we create are the true ministry of God's love here on earth.

Into this shared quiet, we fill our hopes, prayers, best wishes & blessings.

(SILENT MEDITATION)

In the name of all that is holy, we say Amen and Blessed Be.

Abiding Love

I'm walking with my grandmother and helping to push the stroller, my small body snuggled between her two arms. It is a warm, summer morning. Bright and clear. The sun is shining so hard, I keep my face down towards the pavement to keep from squinting up into it. And also to keep my little legs steady as I help with the task of getting my baby sister where we needed to go. I cannot see them yet, but I can hear the waves of the Atlantic Ocean and smell the salt-air. Gulls circle overhead, calling out one to another and to the sky. I'm sure there are other families also making the walk over from their homes to the beach.

As we walk, grandma and I, we sing:
You are my sunshine, my only sunshine,
 you make me happy when skies are gray.
You'll never know dear, how much I love you.
Please don't take my sunshine away.

In that simple song, in that time and place, love is everywhere.
I know I am loved and I am love.

This is my very earliest childhood memory. I was a toddler, no more than three. Research shows that it is emotions that allow our memories to imprint, especially our childhood ones.ⁱ

Psychologists have learned that emotionally charged situations can lead us to create longer lasting memories. When we are led to experience feelings of delight, anger or other states of mind, vivid recollections are often more possible than during everyday situations in which we feel little or no emotional attachment.ⁱⁱ

Now, please do not be mistaken – my family – like all families - was not a constant musical on sunny shores. As some of you also may have or are experiencing, I grew up in a family complicated by addiction issues, strained relationships, mental illness, and at times - violence. My grandmother, who I adored, was an alcoholic. She had troubled relationships with her three daughters, my mother the eldest of them. But grandma doted on me, the eldest grandchild, to no end.

But I was not aware of these issues in my early childhood. I was fairly oblivious to them. I was protected and nurtured - by my mother, my grandmother, my dad and my entire family. And from that foundation I was able to build trust. Trust in myself, my family, trust in the world, trust in the Divine's grace.

It was not until I was an adult that I began to understand not every child is given the same base. The same rights.

I reflected on this while listening to a song by the musical duo the *Indigo Girls* this week: (You may also saw them on TV for Pops Goes the Fourth on your local PBS station, which for me meant I then had to listen to their entire album of greatest hits).

The Indigo Girls have a song called "Kid Fears" and the main lyric goes: "What would you give for your kid fears?" I love this group and this song. Yet listening to it again I realized for the first time how much privilege is assumed in that statement: "What would you give for your kid fears?"

Because there have always been children, whose kid fears, are more terrible and terrorizing than any of my adult fears.

Our news cycle of the past months has shared almost daily, one example of this: the deeply disturbing reality of children forcefully separated from their parents and grandparents as they as a family have attempted to immigrate to this country.

I was particularly affected by a story in Texas reported by San Antonio journalist Lauren Caruba.ⁱⁱⁱ Just hours before the federal government vowed to end its policy of separating migrant families at the border, a woman named Angelica (last name not used to try and protect her identity), arrived at the U.S. border fleeing violence from her life in Mexico. Violence she said had left family members dead. Angelica is about my age – in her early forties. She came to the El Paso area to legally seek asylum protection for herself and her 3-year-old granddaughter traveling with her. A week prior, her daughter, her granddaughter's mom, was able to cross into the U.S. and was staying in California.

For two days, Angélica and her granddaughter were held at this port of entry. She said agents (following what was the zero-tolerance immigration policy) told her she had no right to asylum, nor did she have the right to custody of her granddaughter. Even though she had papers from Mexico she thought were proof that she was her granddaughter's legal caretaker.

Angélica said her granddaughter had cried, saying she would rather return to Mexico together than stay in America apart. "Don't leave me," she said. I wonder if Angélica sang songs to her granddaughter to comfort her? I wonder what songs they may have sung together on her journey, maybe with her granddaughter snuggled close like I remember being snuggled up to my own grandmother?

The agents, reports Caruba, told Angélica her the girl would be better off at a children's shelter. And the next day, Angélica was released from the port of entry alone.

I've not yet been able to find in any news reports if Angelica's granddaughter may have been one of the children reunited with her parent earlier last week, after courts ordered the administration to reunite families separated at the border, or if her granddaughter remains in the group of half of children under 5 still apart from their families because of what government agents say are "safety concerns, the deportation of their parents and other issues." We can only hope, that if not now, soon the young girl will be back in the embrace of her family; her mother or her grandmother.

But that won't erase the criminal action taken against her and every single other child in this recent history or in our nations past history^{iv} as initiated by fear, racism, scapegating and government leaders supported by lobbyists in political power grabs. They have robbed children – in our name -- of their god given right to safety, security and a belief in a world of goodness with good people.

We've taken from these children what should not be a privilege, but morally justified right to a childhood that allows them to have, and only have, "**kid fears**". Children deserve, all children deserve, imaginary monsters – not real ones. Or kids fears like mine: of never getting picked for the kickball team. They should not have traumas that lead to physically, psychological and mental impairments, as well as, in my estimation, spiritual destruction & religious damage.

There are many scientific and journalistic articles published on how the US immigration policy is harming children -- from underdeveloped brain growth^v to untrusting, estranged relationships with parents and caretakers.^{vi}

For my own take on the spiritual injury being caused I must first remind us of our lineage, our ancestor on the Unitarian side of our UU family tree. Earliest notable works in US Unitarianism is William Ellery Channing's "Unitarian Christianity" Written almost 200 years ago in May 1819.

Channing wrote in this foundational work that undergirds our faith tradition:

"We believe that God's almighty power is entirely [in accord with] his perceptions of justice. It is not because he is our Creator merely, but because he created us for good purposes; it is . . . because his will is the perfection of virtue . . . that we pay him allegiance. We cannot bow before a being . . . who governs tyrannically. . . . We [love] not the loftiness of God's throne, but the [justice] and goodness in which it is established. I invite you to take this and tweet it to anyone you think may need it: "We cannot bow before a being . . . who governs tyrannically".

Channing says, "To give our views of God in one word, we believe in his Parental character. . . . We believe that he has a [parent's] concern for his creatures, a [parent's] desire for their improvement, a [parent's fairness] in proportioning his commands to their powers, a [parent's] joy in their progress, a [parent's] readiness to receive the [one who tries to do better], and a [parent's] justice for [one who refuses to change his ways].

We believe that God is infinitely good, kind, benevolent, ... good in disposition, as well as in act; good, not to a few, but to all; good to every individual, as well as to the general system."

What breaks my heart, and what can at times waver my faith, is that Angélica's granddaughter may have had the infinite Love and Goodness of Divinity taken from her as she was taken from her grandmother's arms. Dear God, I pray, do not let this be the earliest memory she recalls when she reaches adulthood.

There are practical lists^{vii} I can share, if you are as moved as I, to do something about the United States' immigration crisis and what may be irreparable harm to our fellow human beings.

- We can support organizations assisting migrant families and children^{viii}
- We can continue to call your representatives in congress.
- We can share stories like Angélica's, and foster awareness and education and side with love in protests like the march taking place on **THURSDAY, JULY 26, 5:30-7:30 p.m.** at Federal Plaza, here in NYC in which All Souls Members are being asked to provide a presence. There is more information on this March in today's Order of Service.

But what I believe we all need even more, and what I hope what you might take some time to reflect on in the upcoming days, weeks, months and years is not only **what** you can do, but **what motivates you** morally and/or spiritually to do what you can do. Not only for this particular time, for this specific act of justice around immigration, but for what grounds us for each time we are called upon to face injustices. I invite us to reflect on what has helped built our foundations of what is true and good? How might we use this **to create the communal stamina we need** to allow our hearts to be continually broken open and find strength together to be people of healing in this broken world?

UU Minister Barbara Hamilton-Holway, from our reading this morning said: "The nature of being human is to slam up against limits. We feel unloved and unloving. We aren't being seen

for who we truly are. We feel only half awake. Still there is an irrepressible spirit that stirs in us, leading us to trust that what we want is possible. In relationships, in community, we begin to want for others what we want for ourselves. And the meaning of others expands to include more and more. Love knows no boundaries.”

I will never forget the first words my grandmother spoke to me the last time I visited her prior to her death.

I walked into her room and she recognized me immediately, I wasn't sure she would with the dementia she'd been experiencing. I didn't know what memories might have left her, including memories of me. And she looked right at me and she said first to the healthcare worker in the room and then directly to me, “that is my grand daughter, that is my Jenny, I love you Jenny. I love you, I love you, I love you.”

It is that moment I will hold with me forever.

For in that moment I touched the Divine, of which my grandmother was vessel, in that surety of love she expressed to me

Full on, unconditional, freely-giving love.

A love that went beyond, distance, space and time

A love that could be instantly recognized and poured out in abundance.

God's love

A love that abides. Endures. Is ever present.

That love undergirds everything I hope to be and all I hope I might do with others.

If I hold onto anything in this world, it is that I believe Love such as this is for everyone

It is an all-encompassing ***Love I believe we all rest in.***

A love that Angélica, her daughter, granddaughter, family and all those she lost rest in

A love that all missing children and their parents rest in

A love, yes, the border patrol agents rest in

and our government leaders rest in: even though so many of them seem to fight Love's embrace at every turn

The same Love I believe in which I am held, you are held.

In my moments of despair, of fear that goodness in this world seems to be dying around me, I have to remind myself of what I know is to be true.

So that I may keep on acting, keep on loving, keep on making new memories that may serve others in positive ways.

Hamilton-Holway says of the Church: what I want for myself, I want for others.

I want you, and every person on this earth to know they are loved.

That we are held in an abiding love.

May we, and all sentient beings, dwell in the house of Love forever. Amen & Blessed Be.

ⁱ Klass, Perri, “The Making of Our Earliest Memories,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2012. Accessed July 22, 2012 at: <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/11/the-makings-of-our-earliest-memories/>

ⁱⁱ “Emotions and Memory,” *Psychologist World*. Accessed June 30, 2018 at: <https://www.psychologistworld.com/emotion/emotion-memory-psychology>

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- iii Caruba, Lauren, "Parents, grandparents tell harrowing stories of separation from their children," *San Antonio Express News*, June 23, 2018. Accessed June 30, 2018 at: <https://www.expressnews.com/news/local/article/Parents-grandparents-tell-harrowing-stories-of-13020868.php>
- iv Brown, DeNeen. L., "'Barbaric': America's cruel history of separating children from their parents," *The Washington Post*, May 31, 2018. Accessed June 10, 2018 at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/05/31/barbaric-americas-cruel-history-of-separating-children-from-their-parents/?utm_term=.5e78cd7cd9fd
- v Schoichet, Catherine E., "Doctors saw immigrant kids separated from their parents. Now they're trying to stop it." *CNN*, Updated 12:11 PM ET, June 19, 2018. Accessed June 30, 2018 at: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/14/health/immigrant-family-separation-doctors/index.html>
- vi "Derby, Joanna, "U.S. immigration policy and family separation: The consequences for children's well-being," *Social Science & Medicine Volume 132*, May 2015, Pages 245-251. Abstract located at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S027795361400567X?showall%3Dtrue%26via%3Dihub>. & Hacker, Karent et al. "The impact of Immigration and Customs Enforcement on immigrant health: Perceptions of immigrants in Everett, Massachusetts, USA," *Social Science & Medicine Volume 73, Issue 4*, August 2011, Pages 586-594. Abstract located at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953611003522>.
- vii Lizette Gonzalez, Catherine. "How You Can Support Detained Immigrant Families: From volunteering to organizing to donating, here are actionable steps you can take to support immigrants and asylum-seekers being prosecuted and detained by the United States government," *ColorLines*. June 22, 2018 12:06PM EDT. Accessed on June 30, 2018 at: <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/how-you-can-support-detained-immigrant-families>
- viii Gallucci, Nicole, "7 Activist groups supporting families at the border that need your help right now." *Mashable*, June 18, 2018. Accessed on June 30, 2018 at: <https://mashable.com/2018/06/18/child-separation-immigration-charities-donate/#cHFWo86Vxqq5>