

CIRCLING THE EARTH

A sermon given for the United Nations Day Service by

The Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on

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This concept of universal human rights is a relatively new one in the span of history. Seventy years ago this December, the recently formed United Nations adopted its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was drafted in the years just after World War II, when the horrors of the war were keenly felt by almost everyone everywhere. The UN Declaration marked a real milestone for a global community that was looking for ways to keep a fragile peace, protect basic freedoms, and uphold the dignity of individuals. Nobody wanted to see the fate of humankind so nearly imperiled again.

While we are not now fighting another world war, armed conflicts continue in more countries than we care to count, particularly in war-torn regions like Latin America and the Middle East. Today, however, we have nearly as many displaced persons worldwide as we did in that post-war era, and our global refugee crisis seems to be daily growing more acute. We again need a worldwide response.

The latest estimates tell us that there are upwards of 60 million migrants around the world - scores and scores of millions of people. Some of them have been driven out of their homelands by political tyranny and military and para-military violence, while others have been fleeing powerful economic and environmental factors that

threaten their survival. Globalization has brought us certain benefits but it has also incurred some terrible human costs.

Responding to the massive tally of those, this year the UN is working to ratify an international agreement that would look to provides some humanitarian relief and options for resolution, the first such overarching measure of its kind in history. *The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration* will be presented in December 2018 at an intergovernmental conference addressing the considerable challenges of 21st-Century migration. The UN uses the term migrant broadly, so it includes refugees and asylum seekers, those looking to live, either permanently or temporarily, not in the county where they were born.

One of the humanitarian principles that we as Unitarian Universalist seek to affirm and promote is “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” Our commitment extends beyond the pronouncement to material support of a Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office, which has been actively calling for “just migration for all” for the past couple of years.

Note that the “all” here is entirely unqualified, and the UU-UNO, as that office is known, has asked us UUs to advocate for increased respect for all migrants by resisting any false information, all criminalizing legislation, and especially defamatory propaganda. We are asked to instead share the personal stories of actual migrants and underscore the desperate risks they assume when seeking safety.

Chief among the universal human rights articulated in the 30 articles contained in the UN Declaration is this: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” We might question how widely this is regarded as a fundamental human right, as opposed to a privilege a few secure for themselves by select means. What the Declaration asks us to grant people is a host of rights by simply virtue of their having been born. It asks us to humanize everybody alive on this earth.

We cannot do this without first stretching our minds to imagine, as the preamble to the Declaration says, “the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom... from fear and want”, a world where we hold “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” as a point of pride in our kinship.

According to the Secretary General of the UN, Antonio Guterres, “Migration can benefit the world”. In a recent opinion piece in *The Guardian*, he writes: “As a global community, we face a choice. Do we want migration to be a source of prosperity and international solidarity, or a byword for inhumanity and social friction?” He notes that “[m]igrants make huge contributions to both their hosts countries and counties of origin”, but their contributions are often overlooked.

In addition, he notes, “mass movement in desperate circumstances fuel a sense that borders are under threat and governments are not in control... We have to [envision] ambitious international action for those with nowhere to go.” The UN’s *Global Compact on Migration* is an attempt exactly to do that.

Part of envisioning a new way is putting human faces on migrant persons. “We are not talking about people who have a fairly decent and safe life deciding to move to another more prosperous country that offers more opportunity,” UU-UNO Director Bruce Knotts maintains. “All migrants forced from their homes need a safe place to go...” They need one, and as the Universal Declaration remind us, they actually have a right to one.

The UN sponsors a media campaign called TOGETHER that works to promote “respect, safety, and dignity for refugees and migrants” and “to counter the rise in xenophobia and discrimination” in a number of countries, including here in the United States. It publicizes individual narratives that counter the negative stereotype of migrants as helpless, pitiable, dependent, sharing those stories that highlight the several valuable contributors they have made to their particular communities, as well as to the larger society.

“The World is round, it turns around all the time,” Tac, a Vietnamese refugee tells TOGETHER. “Sometime[s]... you fall down and you need someone to help you get up again.” Like many refugees’ stories, Tac’s communicates just how eager individuals generally are to get back up again. His is clearly an immigrant’s success story and it deserves a wide public.

When I was growing up in my Northeast corner of America, I was told that ours was a country of immigrants, and that this was cause for celebration. Of course, our national history is more complicated than that, and far less celebratory for black and brown and indigenous

people, but I would learn that in my later years. I was raised on hazy visions of people approaching New York Harbor on ship, Ellis Island pulling into sight, the Statue of Liberty holding her torch aloft, and promises being made to huddling masses yearning to be free. I was told that America existed to guarantee their freedom.

In recent years, though, options for people pursuing legal immigration here have constricted considerably, and the penalties for those risking illegal immigration have become draconian and cruel, even in cases which in the past might have been shown clemency and offered asylum. The governmental measures taken under this current Presidential administration and Congress are unconscionable violations of our standards of decency, especially the despicable practices of family separation and mass detention of children. These actions are tantamount to psychological torture. Even legal remedies offered by our courts lack the necessary swiftness to undo the damage. In 2018, we have seen systematic human rights violations within our own borders.

“Migration should not mean suffering,” UN Secretary General Guterres states. Although the majority of Americans would agree with his statement, the United States refused to participate in the Global Compact on Migration with other member states of the UN. In consequence, American policymakers began looking to engage cities and municipalities in addressing the refugee crisis. Religious leaders, too, have started to mobilize faith communities to provide humanitarian responses.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has asked us to address “immigration as a moral issue”, and we have numerous options to address the migrant crisis on a differing levels. We can band together with other UUs joining local Sanctuary movements. We can publicly proclaim that “No human being is illegal.” We can campaign for political candidates who will work for compassionate immigration reform. We can volunteer to accompany those individuals presently caught in our immigration courts. We can sponsor asylum seekers. We can protest unjust policies. We can donate to UN agencies and initiatives that provide humanitarian relief to refugees. We can even designate a congregational envoy from UU Wellesley Hills to the UU-UNO, if we have a volunteer.

The Rev. Dr. William F. Schultz, former Executive Director of Amnesty International and past President of the UUA, said, “This is the mission of our faith: to teach the fragile art of hospitality...and to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.” Hospitality must not become a lost art, because its loss would diminish our humanity and fracture the wholeness of our world. As the report issued by the UN International Panel on Climate Change indicates, no part of our planet can ever really be privatized. Global warming, extreme weather, and natural disasters threaten all of us. Ultimately, everyone circling the earth shares the same habitation, regardless of their nationality or lack of one.

Traveling through Eastern Europe this summer, I felt self-conscious about carrying an American passport. As I flew out out New York City on July 4th, I had suddenly felt disoriented, leaving a county I had difficulty recognizing as my own. Later that month, as I was sitting on

a train straddling the boundary between Romania and Hungary, I surrendered my passport to a border guard who then left the locomotive. He was gone for longer than I would have liked, maybe an hour, during which time, I was - however briefly - undocumented. The sadness of that state lodged very deeply within me. How heartbreaking it is, this notion that our rights are bound up with a few slips of paper, and that they could disappear the same instant the papers do.

Yet the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its articles belongs powerfully to everyone, even if they never hold a copy this Declaration in their hands or keep one on their person, even if they cannot read or quote it or cite it. It holds for every individual refugee and displaced person and asylum seeker and migrant family, and it asks our allegiance to the unenforceable. It espouses ideals that over time and after tragedy do truly seem self-evident. In its preamble, the UN declared that it was “determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom” for people everywhere. It then asks us to match that determination ourselves.

Reaffirming an abiding “faith in fundamental human rights”, as the Universal Declaration calls upon us to do, is a religious obligation, a moral duty, and an imperative in this era. This Sunday, other UU congregations are celebrating United Nations Day, and we have together been tasked with speaking to complicated issues of just migration. Many of you at UU Wellesley Hills have been active global citizens, participating in the UU Service Committee, the International Council of UUs, and the UU Partner Church Council. Much is asked of global citizens these days. Around the world, we face powerful

isolationist impulses and the dangerous rise of nationalism. We know what these are, because we recognize them from some of the darkest chapters in human history.

We cannot tolerate governments such as ours withdrawing from international cooperation. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls for “the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms”, preferably in the context of “friendly relations between nations” and not through armed conflict. If we feel that American ideals have been severely compromised - and many here do - we can remind ourselves that rights are not assigned by governments so much as they either are preserved or violated by them. Our humanity grant us our rights. Seventy years ago, the Declaration proclaimed that truth to a world in dire need of a corrective vision.

As Universalist minister and Humanist author Clinton Lee Scott wrote in “Morning”, we remain watchful for a “harbinger of a new day” and a better one. “The World is round,” Tac told the TOGETHER campaign, and “it turns around all the time.” Of course, he’s right. Each time it does, we have another day to dedicate to embodying our ideals and taking timely action. We dare not squander them. What United Nations Day remind me is that the greatest hope history offers us lies in the timeless lessons we have learned from it. If we value humankind, we value history, and we understand that we - you and I and them, in the millions and billions - are living it today, and indisputably, together.