

Remembering Josseline

March 4, 2012

Reverend Eric Meter

Welcome

Centering

Kindling

Opening Words

We are here

as our days vacillate between spring and winter

as we mourn Monday's senseless school shooting outside Cleveland

and look ahead to this week's Super Tuesday primary elections

we draw upon all the energies that are ours

to make our place in this world more worthy of our deepest longings

a place where justice and beauty are at home to stay

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and everyone with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Praising #1010 *We Give Thanks*

Ingathering *Stitches* by Kevin Morrison

Affirming by Kendyl Gibbons

The doors to injustice open wide whenever we start to believe that there are certain people who need not be treated in the ways we have agreed we must treat each other.

Singing #95 *There Is More Love Somewhere*

Sequence

A more personal reflection to help guide us into a time of stillness and reflection this morning. I hope you will hear in these words universal chords as well.

We sing, *there is more love somewhere*, an ancient call of faith if there ever was one. But where? Where, in the midst of so much that is not as it should be, is that love?

At least that's what I've been asking myself this week, when my customary February blues chose to pay a visit.

And then I hear of a man I know who has just planted his seeds for the year in the garden he so diligently cares for. And I hear of the woman travelling across country once or twice a month to visit a friend in hospice care, who has outlived the prognosis her doctors gave her several years ago.

And there right in front of me is the card I've been looking for for several days. An elderly friend back in California has had a hard time of it over the past weeks. Her condition is making it hard for her to talk, so, after the last phone call, it is time to write a letter. Here is a card, here is blank paper and a pen. Maybe I should have paid more attention to those early lessons in penmanship after all.

The love is there as it has always been, going about its business. Waiting patiently. Waiting for us to notice it. Waiting for us to remember to practice giving it the gift of our attention. The attention that will bring our love, once again, to life.

bell

From the stillness, names emerge. The names of those whose lives have most shaped our own. Those whom we have loved and who have loved us. Those with whom we have struggled. Those we miss. The sound of these names, woven together, either softly into the space we share this morning, or raised silently in the quiet of our hearts, form a mosaic of love.

names

Breath and note. Pitch and tempo. Such simple things. Yet where or who would we be without the inspiration they bestow?

Readings

Our theme this month is brokenness. And brokenness, as you know, is more than just a few mis-made stitches.

This reading, a longer one than usual, is an excerpt from Margaret Regan's account of the death of fourteen-year-old Josseline Hernandez. Regan, a reporter with the *Tucson Weekly*, pieced

together this story of the El Salvadoran girl's death from interviews with many people associated with the case.

It is a tragic story, but emblematic of many others along the US-Mexican border.

"Josseline shivered as she stepped over stones and ducked under mesquites. She was in Arizona, land of heat and sun, but on this late-January day in 2008, it was cold and damp. The temperature was in the 50s, and the night before it had dropped to near freezing. A winter rain had fallen, [making the trail] even more treacherous.

Josseline was seven miles north of the Mexican border, in prime Sonoran Desert. It was a wonderland of cactus and mesquite, beautiful but dangerous. At fourteen, she had an important responsibility: it was her job to bring her little brother, age ten, safely to their mother in Los Angeles. The [children] had never been away from home before, and already they'd been traveling for weeks. Now they were almost there, just days from their mother's embrace.

The family hadn't been together in a long time. Back home in El Salvador, the kids lived with relatives, and in the years their mom was gone, Josseline had become a little mother to her brother. Finally, [their mother] had worked long enough to save up the money to send for the children. She'd arranged for Josseline and her brother to come north with adults they knew from home, people she trusted.

But, here in the borderlands, they were in the hands of a professional. Like thousands of other undocumented migrants pouring into Arizona, their group had contracted with a coyote, a smuggler paid to spirit them over the international line. So far, everything had gone according to plan. They had slipped over the border from Mexico, twenty miles [away], and had spent a couple days picking their way through this strange desert, where spiky cacti clawed at the skin and the rocky trail blistered their feet. The coyote insisted on a fast pace. They still had a hike of twenty miles ahead of them, out to Interstate 19, where their ride would meet them, and take them deep into the United States.

Josseline pulled her two jackets closer in the cold. She was wearing everything she had brought with her from home. Underneath the jackets, she had on a tank top, better suited to Arizona's searing summers than its chilly winters, and she'd pulled a pair of sweatpants over her jeans. Her clothes betrayed her girly tastes. Her sneakers were a wild bright green, a totally cool pair of shoes that were turning out to be not even close to adequate for the difficult path she was walking. Best of all were her sweats [which had] the word HOLLYWOOD emblazoned on the rear. Josseline planned to have them on when she arrived in the land of movie stars.

She tried to pay attention to the twists and turns in the footpath, to obey the guide, to keep up with the group. But by the time they got to Cedar Canyon, she was lagging. She was beginning to feel sick. She'd been on the road for weeks and out in the open for days, sleeping on the damp ground. Maybe she'd skimped on drinking water, giving what she had to her little brother. Maybe she'd swallowed some of the slimy green water that pools in the cow ponds dotting this ranch country. Whatever the reason, Josseline started vomiting. She crouched down

and emptied her belly, then lay back on the ground. Resting didn't help. She was too weak to stand up, let alone hike this roller-coaster trail out to the road.

It was a problem. The group was on a strict schedule. They had a ride to catch, and the longer they lingered the more likely they'd be caught. The coyote had a decision to make, and this is the one he made: he would leave the young girl behind. He told her not to worry. The Border Patrol would soon find her, and they would take care of her. Her brother cried and begged to stay with her. But Josseline was his big sister, and Josseline insisted that he go. As he recounted later, she told him, 'You have to keep going and get to Mom.'

The other travelers grabbed the boy and walked on, leaving [Josseline] alone in the cold and dark. She had only her clothes to keep her warm. On her first night alone, the temperature dropped below freezing, to 29 degrees. By the weekend, when her brother arrived safely in Los Angeles and sounded the alarm, [it] had warmed up — to 37.”

Our second reading this morning is from a fabulous address by the Rev Victoria Safford titled *How Does Our Faith Hold Brokenness?* which was recently republished in *Quest*, the newsletter of our Church of the Larger Fellowship.

On those occasions when the weight of the world is closing in and the evidence against hope mounts as I read the news, when I start confusing cynicism with pragmatism, and I sigh, “I’m so tired, I’m so discouraged,” – [my husband Ross] will say, in the kindest way, “What kind of entitled grandiosity of privilege is this, to think that you or I or anyone has the right to sever the bright thread of hope, the tradition of dedication to the common good and faith in people’s power to imagine great change and great risks and then to take them? [We have a] beautiful, proud history of work for human rights and freedom. We’re only here to pass it on,” he’ll say. “All you have to do is keep the fire burning for a little while, and pass it on. You have no right to put it out.”

Not in so many words, but that’s about what Ross would say.

Sermon

Fourteen years old. Fourteen. Who were you, and what were you doing at fourteen?

When I was fourteen I would never have dreamed of anyone wearing sweat pants with the word Hollywood printed on the rear, but in some ways my dreams were not all that far from Josseline’s. The movie *Star Wars* had come out not long before, and I was still dreaming of becoming a Jedi knight like Luke Skywalker when my family took a trip to Eagle River in northern Wisconsin to learn canoeing. When the river’s namesake, a bald eagle, the first I had ever seen outside of a zoo, flew over us, it took my breath away. I gave the majestic bird the highest honor I could think of, naming it Obi Wan Kenobi.

But our time in the wild was nothing like what Josseline would face. We were equipped, safety was primary, we had a bunkhouse and blankets to return to each night and there was always a back up plan.

Josseline had none of those. It is no rush to judgment along any political lines to say that Josseline shouldn't have been out there where she was, where she died. But out there she was, like so many others before and since.

The truth is that people will go to any length possible to provide for their families.

In my time with you this morning, I want to bring Josseline's story to you as an example, among countless others, of the brokenness that is part of our world today, and ask what this may mean for us.

We can't fix everything. Have you noticed that we don't even talk about compassion fatigue any more? It's all we can do just to keep our job or jobs, and keep the kids fed. What we're experiencing isn't so much compassion fatigue as what it means to live in a culture in which fatigue is now the norm.

And still we are called to address what is in our power to address, to do what we can.

As you may remember, or not, it has been the practice of our denomination to meet once a year, each year in a different city, for what we call our General Assembly. Columbus was one of several cities being looked at to host the General Assembly (GA) that will meet toward the end of this June. Instead, our planning group chose Phoenix, Arizona. (Just so you know, we are once again among cities being chosen to host either the 2016 or 2018 GA.)

But Phoenix was chosen for this year. That was before SB1070, the Arizona law that required their police to detain folks who looked like they might be undocumented immigrants, the so-called illegals.

As soon as we heard of SB1070, we saw a train wreck heading our way. See it's not only this congregation that is sensitive to the numbers of people of color in our midst. We have been making strides, and real progress, toward becoming congregations that work toward a more culturally pluralistic future. We're training white folks like me to be better allies in the cause of dismantling practices that keep power and privilege the property only of certain folks.

And we have been aware for some time that we need to make GA more accessible to folks across a wider spectrum of those who take part in what we do, and who we are becoming.

What would happen if those of us of color faced the very real possibility of being stopped and detained on their way to our annual meeting?

So the cries went out: Boycott GA 2012! No, we need to change the venue! Can we get our deposit back?

All of this took place in the months leading up to the annual meeting almost two years ago now in Minneapolis. We were anticipating a very lively gathering there, like something we had not experienced in a long time.

But our folks in Arizona did something very smart. They asked migrant rights groups there, folks who served, literally, in the trenches, what they thought we should do.

And do you know what they said? They said come. Come and listen. Come and witness. Come and bring the power of your attention, and make sure you invite the national press along with you.

So that's what we're doing. This June our annual assembly will be different from any other. Justice GA it's being called.

That's why Jolinda Stephens and I, along with many parents of our youth, have been working to get a team of youth together to join us in going to Phoenix. That's why we continue to ask you to help us raise funds to get everyone there.

When Jolinda and I met with the youth early this church year to ask them what they most wanted to do, and what their next Justice Trip might look like, they considered several opportunities, and chose Justice GA as their project. They want to be part of something important. Let me repeat that: They want to be part of something important.

I've been asked, and understandably so, why we are a faith taking up the issue of immigration? It seems such a faraway concern from us here in central Ohio. Don't we have more pressing concerns closer to home?

Yes and no.

First of all, we may think immigration is not something that affects us here in Columbus, but we'd be wrong. And I'm not talking only about our large Somali population. Our local Immigration and Customs Enforcement (or ICE, what used to be called the INS) keeps very active deporting undocumented migrants out of Port Columbus, often breaking up families in the process.

And furthermore, this is an increasingly large concern for all us. As of two years ago, over 625 miles of our border with Mexico is fenced off. We've militarized much of that border with our neighbor to the south at a tremendous cost. The Government Accounting Office in Washington calculates that the border fence, as it's called, cost an average of \$3.9 million per mile. That's 2 -1/2 billion dollars. That kind of money can buy you a stealth bomber with significant change left over, or a whole lot of schools. And we paid for it, you and I.

I know immigration is complex. I know different people of intelligence and heart will disagree on what our immigration policies should be. I also know that migration has been part of the human story for as long as there has been a human story.

If a village had outgrown what the lands around it were able to support, people had to try their luck someplace new.

As a woman told Margaret Regan, when she was interviewing folks for the book on Josseline, “How far would you walk to feed your children?” Before we pass judgment on anyone crossing the border, I think that’s a fair question to ask. But it’s not the only one.

Others might include why we are targeting undocumented workers of low paying jobs rather than the firms that routinely, even systematically, hire them. Which raises a much larger conversation about the role of low wage workers in our economy.

Also, what can be done to help prevent people from leaving their homes in the first place. Regan gives an example of a village coffee co-op in Mexico that has been instrumental in keeping villagers working in their home towns. Some who had previously made the trip to the US have returned to work for the co-op. That’s what Fair Trade coffee can do, and why we sell and serve it here.

What is also good is what we’re doing to educate ourselves here at First UU. Jolinda’s been teaching a class on immigration issues, and this Friday night we’re hosting one of our denomination’s leaders on dismantling racism, Paula Cole Jones, who will engage us in a exploration of history by listening to immigrant voices.

I don’t pretend to have all the answers to this, or to have a position paper for you on what our immigration policies should be.

What I do know are three things:

The first is that, in the words of Robert Bellah, “democracy begins with paying attention.”

I never met Josseline. It’s not hazarding much of a guess to say that none of us did. But she is still worthy of our notice. Of course, you don’t have to look to the far reaches of the Sonoran desert to find her. She, and others much like her, are everywhere.

The second thing I know is that even the highest, strongest walls will erode in time.

When I was in South Africa nine years ago, I had never seen so much barbed and razor wire in my life. And along a well traveled road that stretched north of Johannesburg into the cities more wealthy suburbs, there was a stretch of whitewashed wall topped with razor wire. Below the wire, someone had spray-painted the words you’ll find at the top of your program today, those famous ones from Robert Frost, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” Who ever said that graffiti can’t be literate?

And the third thing I know is that all of us have migration stories to tell, and the ones that don’t involve a helping hand often end in tragedy. As far as my family has figured out, Louie Meter, who brought our name to this country, established himself here in the US only after being helped by a farmer from Illinois. From what we’ve pieced together, his family ran the mill in a small village not far from Strasbourg, France. When the communists took over the local council in the 1850s, the family was worried that the local farmers were going to be taking more of their profits for themselves, so Louie was sent to the new world so that they

would have one less mouth to feed. Soon after he arrived here, though, he was given a gun and told to fight for the Union. Thankfully, he survived his time in our Civil War. After his fighting days were done (and we know little about the how's and why's of this), the farmer set him up on some land which allowed Louie to begin to make a name for himself, and start a family of his own. I wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for that farmer's generosity."

So: democracy begins with paying attention, walls erode in time, and most of us are here thanks to helping hands. That's what I know.

But immigration is also an issue of faith, and here I am given pause. You see, I like to believe that it is in our places of imperfection that we find our gateway to truest humanity. Or in the words of Leonard Cohen, that there are cracks in everything, and that's how the light gets in.

But then as I've been reading about Josseline and also about those who are staunchly in favor of the Border Wall, the cracks threaten to overwhelm. Sometimes they become all I can see. It's hard to see good coming from all this: Folks on the border feel threatened, so they get a wall built, which does not deter those coming north (in fact the only thing that decreased the rate of those crossing the border was the downturn in our economy). The border wall only forced those coming north to do so in much more remote areas, making their attempts all the more dangerous.

I'm left asking what good is getting in through all the cracks in the current state of immigration in our nation? One good thing that is coming out of this is that our youth are taking an interest and are using this as a way of learning to see their lives as part of a much larger context. And hopefully, our presence in Phoenix this June will help keep the conversation on comprehensive immigration reform on more of a front burner.

Ironically, perhaps, the more I read up on these issues, I still can't shake President Ronald Reagan's voice as he spoke at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin back in 1987, as he admonished, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Maybe he knew something we'd be wise to remember. The more we try to fix something so that it will last the way we want it, the more likely it will end up slipping through our fingers.

And I think of Josseline, with the word HOLLYWOOD on the rear of her sweats, displaying a youthful dream of a future she longed to be part of, there with her mother in Los Angeles.

We all had our youthful dreams, dreams that held our ideals as we navigated our way in a world full of challenges and wondered if there would be a place in that world for who we hoped to become. Josseline had a mother and other family and friends who loved her. Tragically, that wasn't enough in her case.

What can be done to protect what needs to be protected? What can be done to protect who needs to be protected? Well, that's what we're going to Phoenix to help answer. I hope you'll consider coming along as well.

Thank you.

Offering

In gratitude for all that went into making this congregation as truly vital as it is, we pause now for a moment of both appreciation and generosity.

Together we support such a community as best we can, in many ways, through our human presence, our gifts behind the scenes, and through this ancient and thoughtful way of supporting what we love.

Our ushers will now come forward. The offering will be given and gratefully received.

Returning

Singing #1064 *Blue Boat Home*

Blessing