

## **Creating Sanctuary**

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The concept of “sanctuary” has been much in the news of late. As xenophobic rhetoric heats up with plans to deport millions, many cities have declared themselves to be “sanctuary cities,” places where local officials refuse to collaborate with a program that they see as probably unconstitutional but certainly unjust.

There are currently at least 32 cities in America that have declared themselves to be “sanctuary cities,” places where asylum seekers of all kinds can be safe and free from persecution. The idea of sanctuary is an ancient one, grounded in common law and tradition. First and foremost it referred to places of worship, sacred places in which fugitives were immune to arrest. This was later extended to the concept of “political sanctuary” by the United Nations, which includes those seeking refuge on account of race, nationality, religion, political opinions, and membership and/or participation in any particular social group or activities.

Sanctuary includes the right to asylum, which was adopted by the early Christian church. During the first Gulf War, many churches took a stand in support of those who chose to resist serving in the conflict. Buddy Olney, our minister in Chapel Hill at the time declared – with Board approval, of course – that the Community Church of Chapel Hill would be a sanctuary for any soldier or person who objected to serving in the conflict. He was interviewed for the NPR program, “All Things Considered,” and made quite a splash both nationally and locally.

But there are other kinds of sanctuary, even more primal than just described. Deep in their hearts, people have a deep longing for a safe place, a place where they know they can let their guard down, let go of their defenses without fear of being disrespected or attacked. It’s a little like the theme song to the TV series, “Cheers.”

Making your way in the world today

Takes everything you’ve got

Taking a break from all your worries  
Sure would help a lot  
Wouldn't you like to get away?

Sometimes you want to go  
Where everybody knows your name  
And their always glad you came  
You want to be where you can see  
Your troubles are all the same  
You want to be where everybody knows your name

Isn't that evocative of that deep longing we all share? To be accepted, warts and all? Isn't that the kind of place we want to find; the kind of place we want to be; the kind of Beloved Community we want to build? I know there are those among us whose main focus is on creating a just society outside our walls, but doesn't that need to start right here in our own congregation, so we can make the world as safe a place as we enjoy right here?

The thing about sanctuary is, when we have it, we no longer need any buffers or defenses to protect or hide our true selves. We can fully show up in the moment as who and what we are.

As the English novelist, Dinah Maria Mulock Craik wrote, "Oh, the comfort – the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person – having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring them all right out, just as they are, chaff and grain together; certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then with the breath of kindness blow the rest away."

This kind of gentle acceptance is hard to understand from our usual way of being together. We tend to value things and people to the extent that they fill our needs, rather than simply for what they are. I'd like to share this reflection by Eve Ensler, who's best known as the writer of the *Vagina Monologues*, about her experience with cancer. This is from her memoir, *In the Body of the World: A Memoir of Cancer and Connection*. In it, she describes being at the Mayo Clinic, receiving

chemotherapy for a cancer that is ravaging her body. In bed, she notices a tree out her window.

She writes: "I was too weak to think or write or call or even watch a movie.

"All I could do was stare at the tree, which was the only thing in my view.

"At first it annoyed me and I thought I would go mad from boredom.

"But after the first days and many hours, I began to see the tree.

"On Tuesday, I meditated on bark; on Friday, the green leaves shimmering in late afternoon light.

"For hours I lost myself, my body – my being dissolving into the tree."

She goes on, saying, "I was raised in America. All value lies in the future, in the dream, in production. There is no present tense. There is no value in what is, only in what might be made or exploited from what already exists.

"Of course the same was true for me. I had no inherent value. Without work or effort, without making myself into something significant, without proving my worth, I had no right or reason to be here. Life itself was inconsequential unless it led to something.

"Unless the tree would be wood, would be house, would be table, what value was there to tree?

"So to actually lie in my hospital bed and see tree, enter the tree, to find the green life inherent in tree, this was the awakening."

She continues, "Each morning I opened my eyes.

"I could not wait to focus on tree. I would let the tree take me. Each day it was different, based on the light or wind or rain. The tree was a tonic and a cure, a guru and a teaching.

"This tree outside my room brought back other trees, trees I had seen without seeing, had loved without loving: the weeping willow at the bottom of my driveway in Scarsdale, madly shedding in the fall, making a shimmering bed of soft white lime leaves; the majestic pine trees in Croatia by the sea, filled with vociferous cicadas in late summer...

“There was the tree. My tree. Not that I owned it. I had no desire for that. But it had come to be my friend, my point of connection and meditation, my new reason to live.

“I was not writing or producing or on the phone or making anything happen...I was not contributing much more than my appreciation of tree, my love of green, my commitment to trunk and bark, my celebration of branch, my insane delight over the gentle white May blossoms that were beginning to flower everywhere.”

What would church be like if we accepted one another the way she accepted that tree outside her window, complete unrelated to anything it did to her or for her, or for what she did or didn't do to the tree, for that matter? Can we open ourselves to that kind of acceptance? Far too often, our morality and ethics are useful right up until they become unprofitable and challenge our financial bottom line, like Mose Allison wrote in his song, *Everybody's Cryin' Mercy*. “A bad enough situation, sure enough gettin' worse. Everybody's cryin' justice, just as soon as there's business first.”

We have too many other values competing for our attention for us to be able to create the kind of sanctuary we long for. When we try, we tend to play along until someone says or does something that hurts, offends, or disappoints us, or we decide we can't afford it, and then it's gone in the blink of an eye.

Sanctuary isn't a thing we can have just by wanting it, though. There are too many things in the way. There are critical skills we need to learn in order for sanctuary to be possible to achieve. These skills are surprisingly simple and can be found in many forms in various religions, but today I'd like to lift up the ancient wisdom of the Toltec people of Mexico, as found in the book, *The Four Agreements*, by Don Miguel Ruiz.

First, let me share them in their simplest form:

1. Be impeccable with your word
2. Don't take anything personally.
3. Don't make assumptions.
4. Always do your best.

Good enough, advice, you may think, but what do they have to do with creating sanctuary? They actually are a simple guide for overcoming some of the basic obstacles to a healthy Beloved Community.

Ruiz describes the first agreement, “Be impeccable with your word,” He says that, “Impeccability means ‘without sin.’ Religions talk about sin and sinners, but let’s understand what it really means to sin. A sin is anything that you do which goes against yourself. Everything you feel or believe or say that goes against yourself is a sin. You go against yourself when you judge or blame yourself for anything. Being without sin is exactly the opposite. Being impeccable is not going against yourself. When you are impeccable, you take responsibility for your actions, but you do not judge or blame yourself.”

Think about this – it’s a simple yet radical concept.

The second agreement, “Don’t take anything personally,” is another real game-changer. Ruiz says, “Whatever happens around you, don’t take it personally . . . if I see you on the street and say, ‘Hey, you are so stupid,’ . . . it’s not about you; it’s about me. If you take it personally, then perhaps you believe you are stupid. Maybe you think to yourself, ‘How does he know? Is he clairvoyant, or can everybody see how stupid I am?’”

He continues, “When you make it a strong habit not to take anything personally, you avoid many upsets in your life. Your anger, jealousy, and envy will disappear, and even your sadness will simply disappear if you don’t take things personally. . .” He says, “Write this agreement on paper, and put it on your refrigerator to remind you all the time: Don’t take anything personally.”

This connects with something I’ve said is implied in our congregational covenant: “You add just as much suffering to the world when you take offense as when you give offense.” A sanctuary community is made up of people who refuse to take personal offense no matter how tempting it might be in the moment.

Ruiz describes the third agreement, “Don’t make assumptions,” in this way. “We have the tendency to make assumptions about everything. The problem about making assumptions is that we believe they are the truth. We could swear they are real. We make assumptions about what others are doing or thinking – we take it

personally – then we blame them and react by sending emotional poison with our word. That is why when we make assumptions, we’re asking for problems. We make an assumption, we misunderstand, we take it personally, and we end up creating a whole big drama for nothing. . . The way to keep yourself from making assumptions is to ask questions. Make sure the communication is clear. If you don’t understand, ask. Have the courage to ask questions until you are as clear as you can be.”

The fourth agreement, “Always do your best,” helps to complete the program. Ruiz says, “. . . it’s the one that allows the other three to become deeply ingrained habits. The fourth agreement is about the action of the first three: Always do your best. Under any circumstances, always do your best, no more and no less. But keep in mind that your best is never going to be the same from one moment to the next. Everything is alive and changing all the time, so your best will sometimes be high quality, and other times it will not be as good.”

I see all four agreements as being interrelated, but if you want to shorten the list for creating true sanctuary here in our Beloved Community, you could trim it to just one, with the other three as corollaries: Don’t take anything personally. I really mean it: don’t take anything personally. Can you refuse to take offense at anything, ever? Can you do that? Can we make just this one change – together – today? If we can, we just might be able to begin creating the kind of true sanctuary we long for, deep in our hearts.

May it be so.