



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

In the Shelter of Each Other
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(sung)

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?
Would you shelter me? Would I shelter you?
Would you harbor a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew,
A heretic, convict, or spy?
Would you harbor a runaway woman or child,
A poet, a prophet, a king?
Would you harbor an exile or a refugee,
A person living with AIDS?
Would you harbor a Tubman, a Garret, a Truth,
A fugitive or a slave?
Would you harbor a Haitian, Korean, or Czech,
A lesbian or a gay?
Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?
Would you shelter me? Would I shelter you?

-Sweet Honey in the Rock

It is in the shelter of each other, that the people live. An Irish proverb. To be sheltered is to be held, to be cared for and protected. Seeking shelter can be temporary, like finding an awning to crouch under in a rain storm. For those few minutes, we find ourselves with companions, doing our best to take care of one another. Shelter is about a sense of hospitality that creates the conditions for freedom for the individual seeking it, of body and soul. To be shelter for someone or something is to offer enough security and to provide for their needs such that the person or persons be empowered to live as freely as possible. Shelter is freely given as religious hospitality, born out of that great commandment to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. It is often temporary, but no less powerful for its short duration.

At each point in our history, our congregations have strived to learn this fragile art of hospitality, responding to the needs of the day with the resources we have to share. Our commitment has moved us to partner with organizations like the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, born from Martha and Waitstill Sharp's interest in providing safe passage for refugees during World War II, or Union Station here in Pasadena, who provides shelter and holistic life skills for persons experiencing homelessness.

Our Unitarian tradition reminds us that freedom, body and soul, is the essence of our very humanity. For some of us, that means freedom of thought and belief. For some of us, that means freedom to live and love without threat to our own lives or the lives of our families or communities. Our Universalist tradition reminds us that love embraces all life, and that all bodies have inherent worth and dignity. In the spirit of storytelling, I want to share a story of shelter from our Unitarian past. The story begins in Macon, Georgia 1848, with a married couple born into slavery, Ellen and William Craft. Over the Christmas holiday, they were

granted a pass to head to the next town to celebrate the holiday, and launched their escape plan to travel the thousand miles to freedom in Philadelphia. Ellen, a child born of her mother's assault by her white master, was light skinned and disguised herself as a Southern gentleman traveling north to seek medical care. Her husband, darker skinned, played the role of his "master's" dotting slave. By train and by steamboat, the Crafts made the thousand-mile journey first to Philadelphia, where they stayed with a Quaker family, and then quickly moved to Boston, where they settled within the free black community.

In Boston, William started a carpentry business as a cabinet maker and Ellen became a seamstress. Both were heavily involved in the abolitionist movement, lecturing and speaking. They encountered the public abolitionist work of Unitarian Minister Theodore Parker and his ministry at the 28th Congregational Society in Boston. At the time, Parker was amongst the inner circle of Boston abolitionists, an active participant in the Underground Railroad and a fiery pulpit presence of the moral abhorrence of slavery. The Crafts became members of his Sunday morning congregation. Parker welcomed them heartily, visited them in their home, and knew the full story of their lives and their daring escape from slavery.

In 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act was passed as a part of the Compromise of 1850, which ruled that free and slave states alike must assist in the recovery of men and women who had fled their captivity or risk. Parker openly condemned the law as "a hateful statute of kidnappers," a "bloodhound" law which encouraged law enforcement and ordinary citizens to conspire with bounty-hunters and kidnappers to entrap free blacks and former slaves and return them to slavery. Parker and Craft joined local clergy and activists together to form a Vigilance committee to defend the free African American community.

For their political organizing, the Crafts themselves became the target of kidnappers, and the Vigilance Committee took up arms to protect them. Ellen and William were separated to better protect them, with William in the care of the Vigilance Committee. Theodore Parker harbored Ellen in his own home, which made him the target of huge fines and imprisonment if discovered. By the efforts of the Committee, the kidnappers were driven out of Boston, but the Crafts could no longer remain safe on Northern soil. The Vigilance Committee, raised enough money to send the Crafts to England to live as free persons and start their family. Before they left, realizing they had never been legally married as enslaved persons did not have that right, Parker married the Crafts in his congregation. With a Bible and a sword, he charged Ellen and William to cherish and defend their freedom, body and soul, above all else.

At the time, Parker was criticized for his rash actions by other Unitarian ministers for breaking the law, putting himself in danger and the safety of the congregation. But he stood strong and clear in his conviction. Listen to his words from the sermon in 1851 "On the Fugitive Slave Law:"

I have in my church black men [and women], fugitive slaves... This [Fugitive Slave] law has brought us into the most intimate connection with the sin of slavery. I have been obliged to take my own parishioners into my house to keep them out of the clutches of the kidnapper. Yes, gentlemen, I have been obliged to do that; and then to

keep my doors guarded by day as well as by night. Yes, I have had to arm myself. I have written my sermons with a pistol in my desk – loaded ... and ready for action. Yes, with a drawn sword within reach of my right hand. This I have done in Boston; in the middle of the nineteenth century; been obliged to do it to defend the [innocent] members of my own church, women as well as men!

The Crafts returned to the United States after the Civil War to establish schools for freed African Americans. Theodore Parker never lived to see the end of slavery in his lifetime, but Ellen and William Craft and their children did. Theodore Parker's vision remained, touching the hearts of generations of leaders to come. You might recall these words of Parker's, often attributed to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I can see, it bends towards justice.

When you hear the story of Theodore Parker and the Crafts, you know that our faith calls us to take great risks to protect, defend, and promote human freedom, worth and dignity, beyond the walls of our churches. Throughout our history, this congregation has been a shelter for healing and a retreat, a place of safety for both bodies and souls to be free. Our world is full of people in need, a growing refugee crisis worldwide and crisis of homelessness in LA County. Whom can we newly embrace in the shelter of our beloved community? Where are we being called today?

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Would you shelter me? Would I shelter you?