



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Sacred Obligations

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Friends, this week is one of those weeks when it's time for your minister to bring out the bible.

One thing to know about Unitarian Universalists is we see the bible as only one of many sacred spiritual texts. Furthermore, we don't believe that texts are the only places that hold spiritual knowledge and religious truth. The transcendentalist movement provided an important corrective in naming the natural world and the lived human experience as two important sources of truth.

Like the political liberals needs to have a working knowledge of the constitution as it upholds the values and principles of our democratic society, the religious liberal needs to have a working knowledge of the bible. We believe in the separation of church and state and in the democratic process, but we understand that the Bible carries both religious and political power in our culture.

Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Forrest Church used to call this "recapturing Bible, flag and family." So liberals need the bible, even if it is triggering for some who may be coming from faiths of origin which have used it to discriminate or exclude. We need our own liberal interpretation bible as grounding for our faith when our culture has become clearly morally untethered, and the checks and balances of church and state are blurred.

This week our nation became gripped by a moral scandal of proportions unseen in my lifetime. Through the new "zero tolerance" enforcement of US immigration laws enacted by the current administration since May, thousands of Central and South American children were separated from their parents who now await criminal charges for crossing the border.

As a [letter I signed](#) with other Unitarian Universalist colleagues this week said:

There are sacred obligations of ethics and conscience from which we cannot and should not be released. There are burdens of humanity which we must bear, or else we renounce that same humanity entirely. The protection of children is one such sacred obligation.

We cannot unhear the heaving cries of young children screaming for their mothers, mothers sobbing for their children. We cannot unsee images of children in chain link pens that look uncannily like cages. We cannot be unaware of how many are complicit in this complex and daunting large scale humanitarian problem.

Whether or not you are a parent, a democrat or republican, a person of faith or no faith, it is impossible not to feel outrage at the cruel and inhumane policy being enforced. Seeing, hearing, knowing what we know, it's impossible not to feel compassion for the children and families being detained without information of how or where or when they will see their families again, and outrage about the unjust enforcement of a policy that created this situation.

And yet, we have heard nothing but moral callousness and theological manipulation from the highest halls of government. We must pay close attention to the religious ideology which has been coupled with this zero tolerance policy.

Take for example Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who “textjacked” the bible last week to uphold the moral righteousness of such policies. During a speech to law enforcement, Session is quoted as saying:

I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for his purposes. Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves. Consistent and fair application of the law is in itself a good and moral thing, and that protects the weak and protects the lawful.

Let’s do a little exegeting of this textjack.

So in Sessions view, the laws themselves are inherently good (ordained by God) and application and enforcement of the laws is inherently good (ordained by God.) And God has created the government for his purposes, which is the very definition of a theocracy.

Digging a little bit deeper, it seems that Session’s view does not have its origins in his mainline Methodist denomination, which filed a formal complaint against him which included charges of child abuse, immorality, racial discrimination and “dissemination of doctrines contrary to the standards of doctrine of the United Methodist Church.”

As it turns out, Sessions religious views seem to be coming from an off the map conservative religious group called Capitol Ministries. Ralph Drollinger is the head of a Bible study for Republican lawmakers and Trump’s cabinet members. Listen to Drollinger’s theocratic defense of the law,;

“It follows that when someone breaks the law of the land that they should anticipate that one of the consequences of their illegal behavior will be separation from their children. Such is the case with thieves or murderers who are arrested and put in jail.

There are three classifications of people in every country, as was true in ancient Israel in the Old Testament. There are citizens, legal immigrants, and foreigners — the latter were known as being “illegal,” and the Bible only forbids family separation for citizens and legal immigrants.”

This rhetoric hard for me to share in a sermon at the fear of legitimizing such a claim. But it’s important for us to know what dangerous ideology and bad theology lies behind these policy decisions. In Drollinger’s alarming view, the punishment for the enforcement of the law, family separation, should be anticipated by those who violate our immigration laws by crossing the border illegally. And the punishment of family separation is fitting for the crime of illegally immigrating.

Now it should be said that crossing the border is actually a misdemeanor carrying civil and criminal penalties. Misdemeanors including petty theft, trespassing, disorderly conduct, public intoxication and prostitution. But Drollinger is comparing the misdemeanor of border crossing to murder, a capital offense punishable by death in this country.

When Jeff Sessions quoted the Bible in defense of unjust “law and order” policies, he did not continue to read the very next chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, where he said: “Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

No, it’s clear he didn’t, because he doesn’t believe that part of Paul’s letter applies to immigrants, who in his view are not in fact our neighbors and are not deserving of our love. What these theocrats are saying is that

“illegal” immigrants are not actually people at all, but “illegals” or “foreigners” subject to more cruel and harsh punishments because they are viewed as less human than native born Americans and legal immigrants. If they are less human, by extension so are their children. Here we see at work is using our system of justice to enact a biblical caste system which strips immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees of their humanity by rendering them criminals.

Bill O Hing is Professor at the University of San Francisco and Director of the Immigration and Deportation Defense Clinic. Twenty years ago, he published an article called: ['The Immigrant as Criminal: Punishing Dreamers,'](#) written in 1998. He writes:

The process of criminalizing the immigrant and her dreams is multisteped. First the immigrant is labeled a problem through demonization, then she is dehumanized, until at last her actions or conditions are criminalized. Demonization is an ugly thing. It attacks a person's sense of worth, of self, of identity. It deflates. Once demonized, the immigrant can be dehumanized.

Dehumanization commodifies the immigrants. Dehumanization allows the public to ignore their faces. Dehumanization allows the powers-that-be to categorize the immigrant at will; to ignore the idealism, the goals, the aspirations; the dreams of the immigrant, the images of the Statue of Liberty; in short to ignore what is in the mind of the immigrant. Once dehumanized and rendered voiceless, the immigrant, her actions, her status, her dreams may be criminalized. The process is completed: problematize, demonize, dehumanize, then criminalize.

Humanitarian crises occur when a group of people has been dehumanized and criminalized to the point where their lives, their children, and their pain do not matter. This is how history produced concentration camps, internment camps, and ultimately ethnic cleansing and genocide. We have more than one of these humanitarian crises brewing in our nation, as dehumanizing and criminalizing rhetoric rages against Muslims. Be on call for the upcoming Supreme Court decision on constitutionality of the so called “Muslim ban.”

Over the course of history, people of moral and religious conviction have taken courage and refused to obey unjust laws. We have resisted and insisted that people, not laws, are inherently good and need protection, especially children. In the Jewish tradition, if a law is unjust on the grounds that it treats people by different standards or is unfairly applied, Jews are not only permitted to but morally obligated to disobey unjust laws.

In our Unitarian Universalist lineage, Henry David Thoreau's wrote in his essay Civil Disobedience: “Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?”

Martin Luther King Jr. grounded his civil disobedience in his deep Christian faith, once saying “an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law.”

Do not lose hope, do not lose heart, and do not underestimate the power of our sacred resistance to change hearts, minds, and policy. In these days, we must remember the foundations of our liberal faith—open, welcoming, inclusive, grounded in honoring the worth and dignity of every person. So this week, as we make our phone calls, show up to witness when AG Sessions is in town on Tuesday, let us not forget our moral duty to speak from our faith.

Love is indeed the fulfillment of the law, and our faith was made for such times as these.