

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula**  
**Sunday December 9nd 2018**

**Reading:** “Clementina Flores”

For decades, “Guest at Your Table” has been introducing Unitarian Universalists to real people impacted by human rights issues and to grassroots leaders making a difference around the world. This year, the UU Service Committee’s theme is “Justice Across Borders”, with four stories that provide a personal glimpse into the lives of Central Americans making the perilous journey north in hope of finding refuge in the United States. Each Sunday in Advent, we’ll meet one of the “guests” whose lives have been changed because of the generosity of Unitarian Universalists like us, and, in turn, their stories will be an inspiration to us.

Today’s guest is Clementina Flores, though for reasons of confidentiality that is not her real name.

Along their journey from Honduras to the United States, Clementina’s two sons went missing in Mexico. One day, she stopped hearing from them, and there was no clear way to report their disappearance across country lines.

Unfortunately, their story is not uncommon. For the hundreds of thousands of Central Americans who are fleeing violence in their home countries, the dangers do not end when they travel through Mexico to reach the United States. Tens of thousands of Hondurans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans are killed or disappear along their journey north.

As is the case with Clementina, heart-broken loved ones of missing migrants are left without many options, because the channels to report and investigate disappearances are often-times unclear or unavailable, and rates of impunity are high. Last year was the most violent year in Mexico over the last two decades — yet of the reported thirty-seven thousand cases of missing migrants, less than four percent are being investigated by federal agencies.

Fortunately, one of UU Service Committee’s partners in Mexico, the Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law or FJEDD, is there to help families like Clementina find their loved ones and receive the information and justice they deserve. Through establishing a regional network of civil society organizations, FJEDD

formalizes pathways and government mechanisms to track disappearances and share updates with concerned family members. FJEDD also supports forensic research to identify migrants who have been killed, supplies psychosocial aid to families, and provides court accompaniment during hearings.

Before receiving support from FJEDD, Clementina had been searching for her sons for years. She even traveled from Honduras to Mexico calling her son's names and sharing their photos in city streets. It was not until 2017 — through FJEDD's regional network — that Clementina was finally able to find and reunite with one of her sons at a migrant shelter run by another one of UU Service Committee's partners, FM4 Paso Libre, in Guadalajara.

After a joyful and tearful reunion, Clementina has renewed hope for finding her other son. She also feels that the opportunity to directly communicate with government employees has made her feel stronger, confident and empowered. With FJEDD's support, Clementina is now going before the Supreme Court of Mexico. She explains, "My case at the Supreme Court of Mexico is about justice, the rights that I have to know the truth, and the obligations they have to find my son."

**Sermon: "Keeping Faith"**

In 1952, Mother Teresa began the work for which she became so well known. Founded as a Roman Catholic congregation that gives "wholehearted free service to the poorest of the poor", the Missionaries of Charity received permission from Calcutta officials to convert an abandoned temple to Kali, Hindu goddess of time and change, reopening it as a free hospice. Mother Teresa named it the Kalighat Home for the Dying, and she and her fellow nuns welcomed sick and destitute people who had been living on the streets of Calcutta, caring for them at the home during their final days.

In 1974, U.S. Senator Mark Hatfield was touring Calcutta with Mother Teresa and visited the Kalighat Home for the Dying. He saw that sick children were being cared for, and he saw poor people lining up by the hundreds to receive medical attention. Watching Mother Teresa and her sisters minister to these people, feeding and washing and caring for those left by others to die, Hatfield was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the suffering that they faced each and every day.

“How can you bear the load without being crushed by it?” Hatfield asked.

“My dear Senator,” Mother Teresa replied, “I am not called to be successful. I am called to be faithful.”

Since I first heard it, this story has stuck with me. Certainly there are critics of both Mother Teresa and the work of the Missionaries of Charity, but the fact remains that they continue to provide free care to people all over the world — people including refugees, sex workers, people with mental illness, sick children, people with leprosy, people with AIDS, the elderly and the convalescent — who would not receive any care — or much in the way of kindness — elsewhere. So far as I know, the story of the interaction between Hatfield and Mother Teresa is true, or at least this is a quote that has been attributed to her: “I am not called to be successful. I am called to be faithful.”

What I take this to mean is that there’s value in commitment, in dedication, and whether we succeed or not matters less than our commitment and dedication in doing good work. Now I’m sure that Mother Teresa and her sisters had some measure of hope that the people for whom they were caring might get better. I’m sure the Kalighat Home for the Dying was regularly filled with prayers to that effect. But their commitment to serve the poor, their dedication in caring for the sick, did not depend on that hope. Their faithfulness did not hinge on whether they thought people would get better or would die. As the development of hospice and palliative care in this country shows, the simple definition of “success” as curing a disease must sometimes be set aside in favor of someone’s comfort and quality of life. The good work is in service and caring and kindness, and everyone who comes in through our door deserves that, regardless of how they might eventually go back out.

I see something similar in the story of Clementina Flores. It’s hard to imagine that she truly expected there to be much of a chance that she would ever find her sons, given the tens of thousands of Central American migrants who are killed or who disappear on their journey north. For all her prayers to be reunited with them, a simple definition of “success” as finding them alive and well would be beyond any reasonable expectation, and yet such success is not really the point. For Clementina, it was about being faithful to her sons, not only spending years searching for them, but also searching for truth and justice.

Now, thanks to two of the UU Service Committee's partners in Mexico, Clementina was able to find one of her sons at a shelter and, given this good news, she hopes to be able to find the other. Furthermore, thanks to the support she received from the UUSC's partners in her search, she feels stronger, confident and empowered, to the extent that she is taking her case all the way to the Supreme Court of Mexico. However this turns out for her, Clementina is being faithful, not only for the sake of her own sons, but for the sake of all those missing migrants, too.

You may have noticed that I've been using the word "faithful". Most people, I think, have much the same idea of what it means to be faithful. Faithfulness, as we generally understand it, means being loyal, steadfast, honest, upright, sincere, constant, trustworthy, all qualities that we consider admirable in a person.

Now contrast our common understanding of faithfulness with our typical understanding of faith. While we admire faithfulness, those of us of a more skeptical persuasion have a problem with faith when it refers to believing some proposition for which there is no evidence, particularly when we're expected to believe it on the basis of someone else's say-so. Some years ago, my colleague the Rev. Jane Rzepka wrote an article published in *UU World* about how, in her opinion, Unitarian Universalism breaks the rules of religion. One of those rules, as she put it, is that "Your religious beliefs should be based on faith", to which she responded by explaining that "Our religious beliefs are based on reason and experience. Faith is optional." In other words, as Rzepka, like many UUs, sees it, faith is at odds with reason and experience.

This idea of faith as a set of belief statements for which there is no evidence, beliefs which may even conflict with everyday experience and common sense, is, however, an artifact of our cultural history, specifically Christianity as constructed by the Apostle Paul and filtered through Greek thought. The philosopher Martin Buber identifies this in terms of the Greek word "pistis", which is used in the New Testament to mean faith in terms of believing that something is true.

This type of faith is intellectual and individualistic and, I would argue, sets us up for failure by prioritizing what's going on inside our heads over what's going on in the real world around us. As an antidote to this, Unitarian Universalism does try to get us out of our own heads, emphasizing not only own experiences of a Universe of wonder, but also the knowledge discovered by science, the inspiration of people's life stories, and

the wisdom of diverse religious traditions, including Earth-centered cultures. This is not the only way of understanding faith, however.

Buber contrasts the Christian sense of faith in terms of the Greek word “pistis” with the Jewish sense of faith in terms of the Hebrew word “emunah”. Rather than faith as believing a set of propositions, emunah is faith as loyalty, belonging and trust. This type of faith is embodied and relational, connecting us with the world outside our heads, both in space and in time. This is faith as practiced in Judaism and, for that matter, faith as practiced and taught by Jesus.

This time of year provides a great example of faith as practice, thanks to Hanukkah. Every year around this time, millions of people in Jewish communities are lighting candles, telling their children the story of the Maccabees, playing games of dreidel, eating potato latkes and sufganiyot, which are jelly doughnuts. They don't do any of these things because they believe some abstract claim to be true. They do it because it's part of what it means to be Jewish. They don't do it because it's all spelled out in the Bible. The only written mention of taking back the Temple is in a book that is not officially a part of the Hebrew Bible, and the description of the miracle of the oil is in a set of commentaries by the Rabbis on Jewish oral traditions. Everything else has been built up over the centuries, layer upon layer of traditions that help the people who keep them stay connected with their culture and their ancestors.

Now someone who only understands faith as a set of beliefs would look at all of these practices and dismiss almost all of them as unfounded innovations with no real meaning because they're not based in “truth”. Never mind the jelly doughnuts, which exist in all sorts of modern variations from chocolate-filled to mini-sufganiyot for the health-conscious, even the menorah used at Hanukkah is non-Biblical, given that the Book of Exodus describes the lampstand used by Moses in the Tabernacle and later at the Temple in Jerusalem as holding seven oil lamps, not eight or nine. But that's not the point. This is not faith as belief, but faith as practice, not faith as intellectual propositions, but faith as community connection.

When Olivia was in pre-school at the United Jewish Community, we attended a community celebration of Hanukkah. After a meal, each family set up a menorah, placed candles in it, lit them and said the blessing. Now Olivia was fascinated with the flames — she'd never been so close to so many of them before — and because we could

stop her, she tried to touch one. Thankfully she pulled her finger back quickly enough that she wasn't burned, but it certainly hurt her and she was upset. Her teacher saw what happened and fetched a plastic bag with some cold water in it, so that Olivia could hold her finger against it. This is something she still remembers, and I'm happy to say that Olivia's never been so careless around fire again. Moreover, this story has become part of our Hanukkah lore, part of our own family tradition that serves to make meaning and reinforce our sense of connection.

I find many more possibilities for meaning and fulfillment in faith as “emunah” — loyalty, belonging and trust — than in faith as “pistis” — believing that something is true. Arguing over some belief for which there's no evidence one way or the other is of very little interest compared to doing work that matters, that actually makes a difference, striving to be faithful to the ideals we claim by demonstrating our faithfulness.

Just before Thanksgiving, I spent a good part of week with about thirty other people striving to be faithful. That's because I am a GreenFaith Fellow this year, and that week just outside Newark, New Jersey was the first of two retreats where Fellows spend time together. Now I'm the second person from this congregation to be a GreenFaith Fellow — Robin was the first a few years ago — and we're two of a hundred and fifty people world-wide to have participated in the program. It is intended, in GreenFaith's words, to equip “lay and ordained leaders from diverse faith traditions for religiously based environmental leadership, providing a unique opportunity for education, spiritual and vocational growth, and skill development.” Launched a little over a decade ago, such a program is all the more essential now, given the recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the United States' own National Climate Assessment that set forth in no uncertain terms an imperative on us to act decisively given the short amount of time remaining to us before the effects of global climate change are irreversible.

After all, religious traditions and faith communities have an essential role to play in addressing environmental degradation, in demanding environmental justice, making clear that climate change is a moral issue and that we are called more urgently than ever to care for the Earth. We are called to be faithful to our fellow humans whose lives are already being harmed; we are called to be faithful to the communities that support us and our families; we are called to be faithful to the planet that maintains our lives; we are called to be faithful to the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Now this year's GreenFaith Fellows are as diverse as any other's, representing many different religious traditions and coming from all around the world. I am sure that, on many points of religious doctrine, there would be disagreements. When it comes to the nature of God, the Universe and humanity, the understanding of existence, scripture, life-after-death, or any of a number of other theological staples, there is plenty to distinguish not only the major world religions, but also the branches within those religions, and the different sects, denominations and schools. And yet, there were no theological arguments.

There were a few cultural misunderstandings, sure — both of my room-mates were from Africa and had questions about some of the aspects of life in America, and for that matter I found myself translating aspects of American culture for a fellow Brit who was quite baffled by some of what she was hearing — but there were no arguments about whose holy book was correct, which prophet was better, who had the right understanding of God or any such nonsense. Rather, we were all there to be faithful, because each of us had witnessed pollution, environmental injustice, a world in suffering, and knew that we could not ignore the call to do something about it.

While we can disagree about what we believe — indeed, we will disagree, inevitably, because belief is intellectual and individual — we can agree on loyalty, belonging, trust, faithfulness. What we believe only matters to the extent that it determines our behavior, because it's how we behave that really matters. It's how belief manifests when embodied, in relationship, that makes a difference, but the good news is that many different beliefs can manifest in the same way. We can believe very different things about where we come from and how we got here and where we're going, but we can still have kindness and compassion and a willingness to listen and a helping hand in common. That is how we can be faithful together. That is the faith we can keep, the faith we can share.

May it be so.