



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Who Is My Neighbor?”

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Presentation delivered by Members of the
Social Action Committee of UUFA

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Centering Thoughts:

“How you can have dreams when your neighbors have nightmares.” M.F. Moonzajer

“All human beings are my neighbors. We share the same planet.” Ana Monnar

“The second [commandment] is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Mark 12:31

Reflection by Greg Davis:

Who is my neighbor I ask? And ponder neighborhood, county, state, country and world. Who is my neighbor I ask? And ponder class, race, sexual orientation, national origins and legal status. Of the latter, I think of Joseph, a person whom I occasionally hire, and holder of the American Dream if only for a moment. I sat down with him two weeks ago to record his story. I invited him to tell his story in person; he was too afraid of attracting attention if he joined us today.

Joseph was born in El Salvador and grew up in a gang-infested neighborhood. Once he was threatened with a machete by a group who wanted his shoes. On another occasion, he was assaulted for his cap. Resisting a life of crime himself, he started working at age seventeen. After saving almost every coin of his earnings for three years, Joseph went to the bank to withdraw the full amount to give to his mother. As he left, he was robbed at knife point by two individuals who had followed his movements. “My 3000 colons is gone in 5 seconds,” he said. Returning home, Joseph told his mother that he would be moving to the U. S. An uncle in Georgia fronted him the \$5000 for the travel. He began his journey on February 14, 1998.

The journey from El Salvador to Georgia would take 45 days with various modes of travel. The first leg of the journey ended in a hotel in Tapachula. Twenty adults stuffed in a midsize car left there in short order and traveled to Mexico City. Once they arrived, the group was housed for three weeks in a one room apartment on the top floor. The windows were closed so there was no fresh air. With 20 people using the toilet, the frequent flushing attracted attention. Once the police arrived, and the group scattered to the roof top until bribes kept away any investigation.

After the three weeks, 450 travelers were placed in a large truck through a passage underneath the cargo container. Like chickens, they were stacked on metal grates in a fetal position, one beside the other. Given only an apple and a bottle of water, they traveled for 24 hours to Mexicali. There was no air circulation. Joseph had wisely packed a piece of cardboard as a fan, but soon that was being passed around and no longer available for his individual use.

When finally allowed to leave the truck, many did not move. “Were they dead?” Joseph asked himself. “What of those who crawled onto the ground but could not walk? Were they left to die in the desert?” He had no time to answer such questions. Making it to a small house in Mexicali,

Joseph was one of a thousand crammed into this living space. Once a raid scare had people fleeing in all four directions. Periodically women were singled out and sexually abused by the coyotes. This was not the only time that Joseph witnessed such exploitation as he made his journey to Georgia.

At the end of a week, Joseph was one of 45 people ordered into a small van and driven toward the US Mexican border. To avoid detection, the group was dropped off and told to walk miles around the immigration check point. It was a 24-hour trek by foot in the desert to enter the US and be picked up by the same van that had dropped them off. Not all of the 45 made it to the rendezvous point.

Driven to LA, Joseph stayed until his uncle financed the production of a counterfeit green card and fake Social Security Card. Upon arriving in Georgia, he joined the underground economy with the first task of paying back his uncle. He then worked to bring over his wife and two-year-old son. His wife made the same treacherous journey he had but in half the 45 days it took him. It was their two-year-old child who traveled in relative comfort. In a story reminiscent of the movie *Trading Places*, Joseph Junior took the place of another two-year-old with American citizenship. Once the child was safely delivered to the US, the passport was flown back to El Salvador for the owner to return home. The cost was \$8000; but father, mother and child were reunited at last.

In 2001, Joseph's life trajectory made a radical change. In January, an earthquake rocked El Salvador, a country two-thirds the population of our state. Over 900 people died with another 600 killed in the landslides that followed. Hundreds of thousands of buildings were damaged or destroyed. The aftershocks continued into February, leading to ongoing disruptions to the power grid and the clean water supply.

If this catastrophe had happened under our current administration, the response would have certainly been minimal. Just witness the post-hurricane plight of our fellow American citizens who live in Puerto Rico and are now escaping to the mainland in droves.

What 200,000 Salvadorians received under the Bush Administration was the opportunity to apply for Temporary Protective Status, otherwise referred to as a TPS. This classification legalized Joseph and his family. He received a green card and a driver's license and a legitimate Social Security number that allowed him to pay into the retirement of older Americans like myself. In short, Joseph had the prospect of earning the American dream.

Earn he did. With a landscape business that continued to grow, Joseph purchased a home in Oglethorpe County for his family and later bought houses nearby to rent to relatives. He bought nice trucks and employed others to help him expand his customer base. No need to advertise. His skill of irrigation, his artistic use of flagstone, and his knowledge of when and where to trim plants became highly valued.

On January 8 of this year, President Trump announced that he would terminate TPS for Salvadorans in eighteen months even though the government of El Salvador pleaded with the US Administration that this would further destabilize the country. Forty percent of the population lives in extreme poverty. The country has the highest homicide rate in world outside countries like Syria that are at war. The following warning is posted online.

THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE HAS ASSESSED SAN SALVADOR AS BEING A **CRITICAL-THREAT** LOCATION FOR CRIME DIRECTED AT OR AFFECTING OFFICIAL U.S. GOVERNMENT INTERESTS. When traveling to rural areas, try to use multiple vehicles. Refrain from driving outside the capital after dark, for both personal security and traffic safety reasons.

Organized crime in El Salvador escalated after the passage of the [Illegal Immigration Reform and](#)

Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 which called for deportation from the United States of "immigrants--documented or undocumented--with criminal records at the end of their jail sentences."

With a father and brother still in El Salvador, Joseph has first-hand knowledge of what life is like in his home country. "All my friends who stayed behind are now dead," he shared. For him, however, it would be worse. "It is easy for people to know that I have lived a long time in the United States. They can tell by the way I talk. They will think that I have money. I will be killed," Joseph said.

At the end of my interview, Joseph talked to himself aloud. "Do I go back? I can't take my family back. No, I will stay in jail. I need to sell what I have." Though not sure of time and place, he said he had heard the story of Asian immigrants who were imprisoned and forced to sell their property at a steep discount. "That is not going to be me," he said.

So selling is what he is doing. Joseph is closing on one of his houses and has put his newer truck up for sale. He and his wife have three children. One in elementary school, one in secondary school and one in a Georgia college with one of Joseph's customers as a benefactor paying half the young man's out-of-state tuition. That son is also working at Trader Joe's and has not yet applied for DACA because having a TPS was once seen as a better bet.

Joseph is my neighbor. I can look at him in no other way. But what responsibility do I have toward my neighbor? I told Joseph that with his reputation and network, there are many who will be there for him. But where will I be? Do I offer my home as refuge if need be and my car as a means of escape? Do I suffer the discomfort of being arrested as a protest against the division of Joseph's family through detention and deportation? In short, will I stop and tend to a neighbor who has metaphorically been left bleeding alongside the road?

These are the questions I ask and yet do not have the answers.

Remarks by David Jarrett, Social Action Committee Chair

I hope that this service has made you aware of how many of our neighbors in Athens have been suffering because of these policies and problems. If you are like me, when you hear of this sort of thing, you may be moved to want to do something to help. Here are some ideas to assist you in making a difference:

First of all you should educate yourself about the problem. You have already begun just by being here and listening today, but this is just scratching the surface. Go to the website and Facebook page of the Athens Immigrant Rights Coalition for a lot more information. There are numerous books, articles, and websites with even more to learn.

Next, support our Cause of the Month: Dignidad Immigrante en Athens. Not only should you give to the cause but you could also go to their website and learn about their other activities and fundraisers.

You might also contact Karen Solheim and get on the Social Action list serve to find out about what else is happening in the Social Justice world in both the Fellowship and in Athens. For example, the Social Action Committee of UUFA meets on first Sundays at 12:30 in the office.

You could also get involved in the UUFA Sanctuary Movement Team which is exploring how UUFA can work to help provide sanctuary for our undocumented neighbors. The next meeting is February 8 at 5 p.m. We are working with the Interfaith Sanctuary Coalition, a consortium of Athens faith-based communities exploring the issue of immigration in general and

creating a sanctuary congregation in particular. The coalition meets on the 4th Monday of each month at Oconee Street Methodist Church. They are sponsoring a party and Easter Egg Hunt on Saturday, March 31, to support, meet, and get to know Athens area immigrants and the people who are working to help that community. It will be partly a potluck but all are invited. This event is sponsored by the Athens Interfaith Sanctuary Movement. If you want to know more about this movement, see Nancy McNair, Karen, or me after the service.

If you want to get more deeply involved, you can become a “buddy” to help an immigrant family cope with some of their challenges in Athens. One thing that is really needed is drivers to help undocumented folks get to appointments and such because an undocumented person cannot get a driver’s license in Georgia. Talk to us after the service for more information on this.

Find out about groups like Jubilee Partners whose primary mission is to offer hospitality to refugees who have newly arrived in the U.S.

You can try to act politically to encourage our elected officials to change some of the policies that harm our neighbors, or elect officials who will.

You can make an effort to meet and talk to people who are different from you.

And, if you can do none of these things, you can still be supportive and encouraging of the folks here who are working to make things better—either by giving verbal support or by any of the things you do to help around the Fellowship, even by making coffee after the service or signing up for the Expanding Our Vision workdays.

Whatever you choose to do, you will be living our Seven Principles in action. Not only will you have the thanks of those you help but also you will have the satisfaction of knowing you have made a difference.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Whom do you consider to be your neighbor(s)? Does acceptance play a role in being neighborly?
2. Is welcoming your neighbor the same as accepting your neighbor?
3. Who is not your neighbor? Why?
4. Is loving your neighbor as yourself possible? realistic?