

**Sermon: Dry Bones Arise**

**Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

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There were no “dry bones” on Monday of this past week. If you remember it was a cold and rainy day, which did not deter hundreds of people from gathering with chants and songs and signs outside of the John F Kennedy building in downtown Boston for a rally against the arrest of farmworkers. I went with my winter jacket, umbrella and stole to be out there as well because the church I served in Vermont for 15 years had a ministry with the migrant farmworkers in our area many of whom were undocumented. Though they were essential to the Vermont economy, they were having to live in the shadows for fear of deportation. While there were a lot of good farmers who treated their workers well with fair wages and benefits, there were others who took advantage of their undocumented status to underpay them, overwork them and give them barely habitable living situations.

Kike Balcazar was one of the workers that we would sometimes offer transport from an Addison County farm to Montpelier for various advocacy days for farmworkers rights. He’s been a leader of the Milk with Dignity campaign which lobby’s companies in Vermont and around the country to commit to only buying milk from farmers who hold to certain basic standards in their treatment of farmworkers. By the way, Vermont’s pride and joy, Ben and Jerry’s, still hasn’t signed on while many other milk and ice cream companies have.

So Immigration and Customs Enforcement targeted Kike as a vocal human rights advocate, arrested him and his girl friend, Zully and another friend, Alex, and began proceedings to deport them out of the country, even though they were not criminals – having overstayed their initial work visas - but contributing residents of Vermont, Kike a genuinely sweet and gentle-hearted guy. So those of us who had any connection and many others, rallied outside in the rain on Monday while the court proceedings were going on inside. It worked to some extent for two of them. After 10 days in prison, they released Kike and Zully on bail of \$2,500 and they returned to Vermont with difficult stories of the daily influx of immigrant detainees in dark, overcrowded jails, separated from family and friends with no opportunity for outside contact.

Now I know there are different perspectives on this issue, even among us in this sanctuary and I think I understand that for both sides of this issue it's a matter of justice. For those who think undocumented people should be deported because they shouldn't be here and have committed a civil offense, it's a matter of justice. And for those who think that deportation is a human rights violation in many instances, it's a matter of justice. But in church here I mostly want the scriptures to be our guide beneath the political divide to consider the root sin in the human heart and our society that the whole issue points to. And the Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel, with his strange visions can help get us there.

Ezekiel received visions from God that he was called to communicate to the people of Israel, warning them about how their

sinfulness would bring calamity but also how there was hope. The first half of the book is more about the calamity and the second half of Ezekiel more about the hope, which is where we pick up this morning. As Joseph read, Ezekiel is brought out and set down in the middle of a great valley, which is full of dry white human bones. That represented how the Hebrew people felt exiled and separate from their land by the Babylonians, exiled and separate from their God in their own hearts. But Israel, through her prophets, usually understood much of their suffering was the result of their own unfaithfulness. They were besieged and exiled because they had turned aside from the worship of God to kneel before idols of a lesser nature AND they had broken the commandments of God specifically by leaving the orphan and widow, the vulnerable and oppressed untended and forsaken. Their lack of mercy and kindness to others was contrary to God's law and resulted in national calamity, the life and vitality drained out of the soul of their people and they became like the walking dead, a valley of dry bones with no more life in them.

It's this remarkable national self-critique in Israel's own history books that judges them based not upon how the richest and most privileged of them fared but how as a nation they treated the least of those among them – this from a people who themselves had experienced liberation from enslavement. So this critique from the under-side – you might say - is built into the Jewish psyche and through Jesus Christ and his followers was passed onto us eventually in the Christian West. Out of this consciousness comes all forms of justice movements that spring from sympathy for the victim and the

marginalized over and against the power and privilege of the status quo. The way it was named in the times of Liberation Theology in Latin America in particular was that God had a “preferential option for the poor.”

Compassion, justice, and mercy especially towards the most vulnerable builds up human society and makes for the flourishing of the human soul. It’s a clear, scripturally verified, spiritual principle. From a modern translation of another prophets famous words – Micah 6:8 – “God has made it plain how to live and what to do... It’s quite simple: do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love...” God has made it plain.

So in the debate on immigration we *can* have differences of opinions about what is a just response to the fact of 11 million undocumented workers in the US, but as Christians the debate must be formed around what is the most compassionate and merciful response – yes, and the compassion and mercy must extend to the undocumented and legal citizens alike. But considering what is best for legalized citizens regardless of the needs of the undocumented, is not open to us as a Christian option, only what is the most compassionate response for all involved. Those must be the terms of the Christian debate. If you are going to argue for mass deportation then that’s got to be understood in terms of it being the most compassionate and loving response for the greatest number. And if you are going to argue for automatic citizenship then it’s gotta be an argument based on care and compassion for all. But scapegoating immigrants or labeling them the enemy or separating into groups of us and them is not a Christian response rather it is the path to

spiritual dehydration, evaporation of vitality, exsiccation of life-force... and the land of our nation, as the Israelites learned, will be littered with the dry bones left by our sweltering fears, our tightening defenses and our suffocating paranoia of the other.

Until we listen and come back to the words of the prophets among us who call us: to justice so that our sinews can strengthen and to mercy so that blood will flow again through our veins and to compassion so that soft skin will cover us again and to love which alone can raise us from the dead, stand us upright and bring us forth from our graves! Our dry bones will arise again not because we have protected ourselves from others nor built great cities protected by great walls nor because we have finally been victorious over all our enemies... but because we have been merciful and compassionate and humble and learned what was needed for peace.

Kike Balcazar was brought here to Boston last week to be processed and deported and thrown out like so many dry bones, yet he was released and freed to return to his home in Vermont. He received a warm and loving welcome at the end of the week from his family, his friends and advocates there. But he's back in Boston today. He came yesterday to attend a day-long conference at Harvard University on justice for workers in the nation's food system. It did not take Kike long out of that dry boned jail to return to the life-giving work of justice for his fellow man and woman, his fellow citizens.

Let us pray for Kike and for ourselves and our country as we seek to live the most compassionate lives we know how in this land of the free and the brave, amen.