

Protagonist Corner

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I see myself as a normal, law-abiding, almost middle-aged, seminary-trained and ordained American woman. So why am I agreeing to break the law?

I very seldom slide through a stopsign in second or exceed the 4-to-9-mile-an-hour "safe zone" on highway speed limits. To tell the truth I'm always afraid of getting caught. So why am I willfully deciding to be a felon?

That question has haunted me since my church voted last month to declare itself a public sanctuary for Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees. That question has lead me to read the literature of the movement, newspaper and magazine articles, and *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, a moving account of a "city of refuge" in Southern France from 1940-44. That question has stirred me to try to re-hear the Scriptures from the point of view of the relationships between the sojourner, refugee or alien of Biblical days, the God of Israel and the Christian church, and those who call themselves "the people of God."

I share with you not pronouncement to inspire praise or blame or guilt, not a clear vision of right and wrong, but my struggle that may lead me to "harbor" and/or "transport" "undocumented aliens."

I inherited from my parents such traditional Presbyterian principles as the importance of obedience to the civil government and the necessity of laws, as well as the absolute freedom of the conscience and the inviolable right to civil disobedience if to obey the law is to sin against God. The answer to my original question then has become I am willing to break the law in response to God's claim on my faith at this point in my life. And that claim of God I experience through concrete persons and the affirmations of the Bible.

During my 8½ years in North Carolina pastorates, I was involved in activities around a number of issues, particularly hunger and economic justice. I was also on the board of a half-way house for recovering alcoholics, helped organize a community-wide clothing distribution center, and chaired a committee that won the county's approval for a WIC program (Women, Infants, and Children nutrition program). But always my part was several steps removed from the people in relation to whom the decisions were made. There were no faces, no names, no stories—just policies and strategies, meetings and more meetings. My move to Atlanta put me in touch with a night hospitality shelter. "Street people" became Louie and James and Danny. At the shelter are people with names and stories, colleagues in this business called living who call forth from me the easy love for the lovable and the hard love for the unlovable.

And then the church began to consider joining the growing sanctuary movement. I had studied Central America as an issue, but the stories of Joel and Gabriela and 4-year-old Lucy, of Lucio, of Juan, of Vargas and his family—these stories deeply disturbed me. Their names are fictional but they tell

of fear and murder and rape and torture, of "crimes" like union organizing or having driven a truck on a route where cadavers frequently appeared ("I think they thought I knew something," *Sojourners*, December 1982, p. 24). I read of Santa Chirino Amaya, his real name for his story is over; he was returned to El Salvador and a month later found dead, decapitated. My heart is not moved by issues and principles, but my head and my heart say the deportations are wrong. Some of the "undocumented aliens" are apolitical; some are Christians whose convictions that the poor deserve justice have political implications; some are "subversives" as members of farm-cooperatives, unions, medical or literacy teams that have worked with the peasant or Indian populations. I am convinced that these people, despite the policy of our Immigration and Naturalization Service, are legal refugees, fleeing persecution and deserving of sanctuary. Such is the opinion of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees; such is the understanding of our country's Refugee Act of 1980; such is the recommendation of both Houses of Congress as of February, 1984; yet the deportations continue. Hearing in these cries the claim of God on my life, I am willing to risk my freedom to protect death. And I am willing to give them an opportunity to tell their stories.

At the same time I was reading and listening to the voices of our Salvadoran and Guatemalan neighbors, I was also driven back to the Scriptures. I have known from childhood the story of the Good Samaritan who bound up the stranger's wounds and provided for his safe recovery at the nearby inn; and the image of Jesus as the stranger to be welcomed from Matthew 25 has taken on new meaning. But I was not expecting to find throughout the entire Old and New Testaments the repeated command to welcome the stranger, to protect the alien. Leviticus 19:33-34 captures the heartbeat of numerous passages:

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him [sic] wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him [sic] as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (RSV)

Care for the aliens in Israel's midst is characteristic of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, as well as the prophets. The New Testament continues this insistence on hospitality in Romans, I Timothy, Hebrews, the third letter of John, Titus, and I Peter. The Greek word for *hospitality* is *philoxenos*, which the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* describes as "entertainment of a stranger (sojourner) as a guest; recognized as a sacred duty throughout the Mediterranean world. . ." (Vol. E-J, p. 654). Perhaps this divine expectation that the covenant people provide a safe haven for the displaced is rooted in God's very nature. Time and again in the Bible and especially the psalms God is the refuge, the place of escape, the shelter, the stronghold.

Because I have said, "O Lord, Thou art my refuge" (Psalm 142:5, RSV), I am tuning my ears to hear those who cry, "Deliver me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me!" (Psalm 142:6)

May God grant to all those who struggle to be faithful in the midst of the world's cries open ears, hearts and that will not harden, and wisdom to act boldly.