

Heroes, Victims and Villains  
Preached Sunday 11, 2011 at South Bay (Veteran's Day)

In November, I went with a group of people to the Otay Detention center, a place just East of here, right along the edge of the US- Mexico border. I went with a group organized by this South Bay community, SOLACE, which is organizing an interfaith group to visit people detained in the detention center. I preached a sermon about my experience, titled "Heroes, Victims and Villains" in South Bay, and I wanted to pieces of this with the whole church community.

This was my first time inside a lock-down facility. You better believe I put on some armour. Now, I wasn't exactly preparing for battle – because what we were doing was a tour, it was possible because we were  
I was preparing to feel separated, both from the people working and the people being detained.

It was here I met Keta Gallaons. I was prepared to dislike her –at least a little bit. She was, after all, an ICE, an Immigration, Customs and Enforcement official. ICE was a familiar name to me. I'd been on the other side of a detention center, I'd been part of multiple protests and groups where we held signs that said "ICE stop breaking up families."

In the first few minutes of being on the other side of the double-gated thick barbed wire perimeter, into the building and on the other side of the security clearance and weapons check-point. Gallanos greeted us warmly, extending her hand and a smile.

We exchanged names and titles, and as we moved down the hallway, she mentioned how much she appreciated meeting with Angela, the SOLACE coordinator a few weeks ago. She said "Oh, you know, I started out teaching, but there just wasn't enough money in it!"

Slightly startled I said, oh, right. Yes. I wondered how much money ICE officials make. I wondered if she had a family to feed. I wondered how her family had come to the United States. I wondered what it would be like to be a Latina woman working in this capacity, in this field. I wondered how she told people what her job was a parties.

The officials we worked with were kind, a bit nervous, but making many efforts to be polite. Nonetheless, the tour of the detention center was gut-wrenching. One of the officials, a man who works for Corporate Corrections of America, which is a **FOR**-profit agency that operated the detention center in partnership with ICE, showed us the kitchen, which was filled with busy hands preparing lunch. He told us, with a proud tone, that all of the people working had

volunteered to do – that the “job program” inside the detention center had a waiting list. More people wanted to work than there were positions available.

“How much are they paid?” I asked. “A dollar a day” he responded. Seeing my shocked look, he assured me “This is the highest wage in the state. Most facilities only pay \$0.55 a day.”

\$0.55 cents a day. \$0.55 cents a day. I spent \$0.55 cents just to park my park to go inside the post office. And I need another \$0.55 cents to mail a letter.

We continued the tour, and entered a large, open room where people spent many hours of the day. It had a large glass wall, with double paned glass. We could see in, and the people detained, inside could see us. We stood awkwardly facing one another. Us clutching handbags and umbrellas, those behind the glass wall in colored jumpsuits.

I wasn’t sure if I should smile. My instinct told me to be friendly, but I also was aware I was wearing a lot of internal amour, and I was being closely watched. What I really wanted to do was pound on the glass wall and say, “Hey, I know you are human in there. I ***hate*** that you are stuck in this cage!”

People are brought to the detention center because they lack paperwork, they don’t have documentation of US citizenship. This, in the eyes of the state, makes them criminals – villains.

Most immigrants come to this country because they are seeking a better life for themselves and their loved ones. This is why my ancestors came generations ago from Europe. They were immigrants too. And they didn’t have paperwork when they showed up, but they did have white skin.

Many of the people detained at Otay are **heroes** to their children, to their elderly family, who they often support financial and emotionally for years living and working, paying taxes in this country.

Throughout the tour, we were accompanied by a staff of about seven people. They had various roles and responsibilities, the ICE official, the official from the Corporate Corrections of America, another others included a nurse, a representative of the US Marshall, and a man who was furiously writing on his notepad.

“What are you writing?” I asked him. “Oh, I am writing down your questions” he said. “Why?” I asked. “Well, we always make a report of what happened.”

I nodded. I was being documented, in a different way. I didn't like the feeling of it. I thought, "Well, I am going to go home and make MY OWN report!"

Immigration is a difficult conversation to have at the table in my family. My family represents the whole political spectrum (including an uncle who claims he will vote for Sarah Palin until he dies). The conversation can get ugly fast – and painful, for everyone involved.

This is also what happens on the larger political scene. The dialogue is turned up, and turned up, and the roles of heroes, victims and villains are presented over and over again, in such exaggerated ways.

When the categories get stuck, we end up with enemy images. We end up locked into positions and arguments. We end up frustrated, burnt out and overwhelmed.

In the complexities of life, the simple categories of hero, victim and villain fall apart. The truth is, we are all actors, who alternate the roles. We are *all* hero, victim and villain.

Let me be very clear – this does not mean there is no place for morality and integrity. The arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice, as Theodore Parker, a Unitarian theologian wrote, and Martin Luther King Jr. made famous. And *we are the ones who bend it*. We don't need our superhero outfits to do this.

We do need to be clear about our values, about what does and does not honor human dignity. We need to be cautious about assuming others are helpless victims *or* cruel villains, or that someone or something is going to swoop down and save us.

Parker Palmer, teacher, activist, writer and Quaker has an attentive ear and a soulful voice. His latest book is called *Healing the Heart of Democracy*.

Parker Palmer says, "when people want to argue with me about issues, I try to say something like "Please, tell me your story. I want to listen. I know I can learn from your experience."

Parker Palmer suggests we begin by ask ourselves this question: "*Am I here to win this argument, or am I here to create a relationship?*"

The next time you find yourself on the verge of a political argument – ask yourself this question. And let me know what happens...