

**“Building Sanctuary”**  
**A Sermon by**  
**The Reverend Bill Clark**

There is only one in Tennessee. There is something very similar in New Bedford, Massachusetts. There is one in Brazil, Botswana, South Africa, Kenya and France. What are they you ask? Any ideas? They are elephant sanctuaries. Stay with me here.

The elephant sanctuary in Tennessee exists to provide captive elephants with individual care, the companionship of a herd, and the opportunity to live out their lives in a safe haven dedicated to their well being – and to educate the public of the complex needs of elephants in captivity *The elephants’ habitats are closed to the public.*

Since 1995, The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee has provided elephants retired from performance and exhibition with a safe refuge and the companionship of other elephants. The facility has grown from 110 acres to 2,700 acres and has provided sanctuary to 27 elephants, making it North America's largest natural habitat refuge for captive elephants.

The Sanctuary is currently home to 10 elephants retired from zoos and circuses, many of whom suffer long-term health and behavioral issues common to elephants that have spent their lives in captivity. The Sanctuary employs a fully integrated team of veterinarians and caregivers who provide high-quality care by using positive reinforcement and protected contact to safely meet the needs of each elephant in their care. **Elephant Sanctuaries.**

Now with the title of today's sermon being Building Sanctuary, I am, in no manner of speaking, suggesting, that we Build an elephant sanctuary here on Martha's Vineyard – BUT – and this is a big BUT – so to speak – if we can build, create and sustain sanctuary for the beloved elephants –can we not do the same for human beings?

Now let's be clear on our definitions and meaning here. A **sanctuary**, in its original meaning, is a sacred place, such as a church, temple, mosque or shrine. By the use of such places as a haven, by extension the term has come to be used for any place of safety. This secondary use can be categorized into human

sanctuary, a safe place for [humans](#), such as a political sanctuary; and non-human sanctuary, such as our previously mentioned elephant or animal sanctuary.

The word Sanctuary is derived from the Latin *sanctuarium*, which is like most words ending in *-arium*, means a container for keeping something in—in this case holy things or perhaps holy people, *sancta* or *sancti*. The meaning was extended to places of holiness or safety. Many of our UU churches refer to their spaces for worship as the sanctuary. I recall when I was the minister in Texas we rented space in an industrial park (it was like a strip mall) for our church services – but we had a “sanctuary set up committee.” This group was responsible to place the chairs in rows, bring out the pulpit, candles and cloths. It thus, became, to those who entered on any given Sunday, a holy place. In the words of ministerial colleague, The Reverend Becky Edmondson- Lange: “Come into this place, where the ordinary is sanctified, the human is celebrated, the compassionate is expected. Come into this place.

Together we make it a holy place.

So it is not just the furnishing; altar cloths – benches – chairs- chalice – candles – which make this a sanctuary – our sanctuary – it is all of us here together – when this space – this brave space is sanctified. As the poet said; “together we will create brave space – space we seek to turn down the volume of the outside world – space we amplify voices that fight to be heard – space we call each other to more truth and love.”

This is the sanctified brave space we are building here together. Whether you call it building, creating, sustaining choose the verb you wish – this is why we exist as a religious establishment. This is why we must continue to exist long after many of us are no longer here.

I love that our brilliant and talented pledge team came up with this theme of Building Sanctuary. It ties in so well and meaningful to our history and purpose. The namesake to our chapel, The Reverend Daniel Waldo Stevens, was given the mission to minister to the sailors in Holmes Hole - According to our historian, Sarah Shepherd in her article in the Dukes County Intelligencer, “he was given the mission to make life more pleasant and spiritually meaningful for the crews of the estimated ten thousand ships plying the waters between New York and Boston as they used Holmes Hole Harbor in bad weather or when they needed supplies or repairs. Reverend Stevens also established Unitarianism on Martha’s Vineyard. (*Intelligencer*; 2017 p.3) He was building sanctuary!!

In a flier, distributed by Reverend Stevens, to the ships in the harbor reflected his approach to his ministry. Under the headline “Welcome to Seamen” he

announced the existence of the “Reading Room, Library and Chapel on Union Bluff in VH; it continued: “All seamen of whatever nation, and the public are earnestly invited to visit the above named institution to attend public worship there Sunday afternoons and Thursday evenings. Free seats, free gospel. No contribution boxes. Bell rings half an hour before service. No respect to persons on account of dress, color or religious opinion. The word of God is not bound to any sect, party or nation.”

The name sake of our chapel founded and began this mission and vision here on our beloved Island home and it is now our joy and responsibility to keep it going – and not just going and running – but growing and thriving – so the ten of thousands – okay maybe not that many – but the thousands of persons – and not ships – that come to this Island – continue to receive the good news – NO – the great news that this faith has to offer: “In a world with so much hatred and violence; we need a religion that proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person. In a world with so much brutality and fear; we need a religion that seeks justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

In a world with so many persons abused and neglected; we need a religion that calls us to accept one another and encourage one another to spiritual growth.

We need this religion. You and I need this religion. Martha’s Vineyard needs this religion of Unitarian-Universalism – and, I ‘ll say it again, as I have said many times – we are the only UU church on this Island – the only church where you are not told what to believe – the only church where **this** life is far more important than any afterlife – the only church where it is Jesus’ humanity and NOT his divinity that is acknowledged and celebrated.

So what am I and our pledge team asking of you with this ideal of building sanctuary? First off, this is the theme of our annual pledge drive. This congregation, like most religious institutions, rely on the generosity of its friends and members. We are different in that we do not require a certain percentage of income as in the biblical theory of tithing. The minimum we ask is that you cover our expense of, I believe, it is \$80.00, which we pay to the UUA for each member. That is the minimum. However, this year we have expanded our Director of Religious position to add more hours, hence, more funding to the position. For me, this clearly demonstrates how much we are growing with our children and youth ministries.

With the hiring of our fabulous part-time Music Director, Emily Anderson, we are fortunate enough to still engage the great and creative Jeremy Berlin, on a part-time basis – hence the variety of music we get to hear each and every Sunday is outstanding. I know many still miss our organ being played but we are able to assist Emily in taking lessons on the organ. In a word our music

programming is thriving and what we want is for it to continue to thrive – more choir singing – more concerts – they leave us each Sunday with the feeling of more!

As I said earlier we hope to expand our Director of Religious Exploration Programming as we now have three groups that meet on Sundays as well as making the office – Lori and my office – into a nursery on Sunday mornings – so our babies and toddlers may have a safe place to play without disturbing the worship gathering – their own brave sanctuary space.

There is so much we are doing and much more we wish to do. We have nurtured and supported a ministerial intern and readied her to be sent out into the UU world. We have purchased the land behind us in a creative way that will allow us to expand our campus when the time comes. We have dedicated two – count them two – babies the first in over 12 years.

And we want to grow more simply to be able to offer those who come through our doors that safe, sanctified, and brave space to explore their own personal beliefs and values within a community of fellow seekers.

These are very precarious times in our nation and the world. With an administration recklessly developing policies, which hurt or harm both or earth and the most vulnerable among us, we must ready ourselves and this institution to be a sanctuary for safety and purpose. We have begun some of this work by participating in the Island wide Houses of Grace – helping to staff these shelters in the cold winter months. I would like to envision that someday – perhaps on our new land is a parish hall, a kitchen, and bathrooms which would allow us to truly be a Sanctuary church for the marginalized.

So this idea of building sanctuary is building for our future. We are building and sustaining this safe and brave space for our children and youth so they are free to choose a path not of creeds but of deeds – good deeds that help to change the world.

We are building this safe and brave space to stand up and speak out against continued racism, sexism, ageism and homophobia.

We are building Sanctuary so we are a financially robust institution where our money and resources are funding all of our staffing, programs and chapel so we may live out our mission of that church which is intentionally welcoming, with diverse faiths and shared values fostering spiritual growth, community action and universal justice. Yes, let it be our brave space together where we will continue to work in it side by side.

Amen and Blessed Be