

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 28, 2011, 11th Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to Catherine Sophia Baird on her baptismal day and always to the glory of our ONE God!

“Allah: A Christian Response”

Part II of II in the sermon series “Islam and Christianity”

Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Knowing that today is a celebration of Catherine’s baptism and entrance into our community of faith, a day in which we gather to play after we pray, I have considerably cut the length of this sermon. Now, I know many of you are disappointed to hear that. I am most certain there will be another time when a long sermon will rise to your lengthy expectations. However, that time is not this time. Today, I am most concerned with extremism and how – in our faith traditions – we work to effectively and creatively respond to extremism. Let us pray:

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Extremism concerns all of us when facing the troubling times and challenges between 1.7 billion Christians and 1.3 billion Muslims. With the 10th anniversary of 9/11/01 only two weeks away, and shows, films, articles, You-Tube videos,

books and more about to hit the airwaves and print waves, I hope what I am about to say will help you put the armor of love and face those who may be seeking to vilify and separate people even more and once again.

Having spent time living, praying, fasting and worshipping with Muslims in Palestine, Egypt and here in central Ohio as well, I have experienced the love of God in deep and meaningful ways. It is **our charge** as Christians to reach out and build relationships with our Muslim sisters and brothers. Let me repeat: WE ARE CHARGED TO REACH OUT AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS - in this case Islam.

Perhaps no Christian has ever placed the charge in front of us more eloquently than the Apostle Paul has in today's passage from Romans 12:9-21. Listen again to Paul's words as I take excerpts of Paul speaking directly to the heart of relationship with people of other faiths (and no faith at all). Paul says:

Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ...Rejoice in Hope... persevere in prayer...live in harmony with one another, do not be haughty...do not claim to be wiser than you are...do not repay evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all...live peaceably with all... (AND MOST SIGNIFICANTLY), do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

To get there, let me suggest six elements we need in order to create an environment that discourages extremism and fosters communication and relationships between Islam and Christianity. I draw upon from Dr. Miroslav Volf's book, *Allah: A Christian Response* to guide our response.

1. We need a discourse about truth. Extremism thrives when reasoned debate about important issues of public concern is absent. Inversely, where extremism thrives, such

reasoned debate tends to shut down. At their core, the values of Christian and Muslim faith are not about irrational stances of blind passions. In both faiths, believers use reason and make truth claims. Reasoned and thorough conversations of faith are the only way we to look closely at our faith claims.

2. We need the acknowledgment of a common God. For Christians and Muslims to each worship a different God would mean that one group is made up of idolaters while the other worships the true God. It would also mean that the two groups have a very different set of ultimate values. It leads to divisions constantly growing and a divide never to be breached. On the other hand, if we acknowledge our one God, we will also be acknowledging our large and deep set of overlapping values, which provide a moral framework in which to debate our differences rather than seek to silence or stop the other.

Last fall, we held an event in our sanctuary which filled out pews. It was an interfaith rally for peace. We walked from here to the Statehouse. I was fortunate to walk and talk with a young Muslim woman who wore the traditional head cover. Her father is a Syrian Muslim and her mother grew up a Southern Baptist in the mountains of West Virginia. Here's a story:

Not only was mom Southern Baptist, but her father was a Baptist preacher. Needless to say, the first meeting between this young woman's West Virginian grandparents and her parents wasn't real smooth. But in time her grandpa accepted his son-in-law because they shared a faith in one God. She said, "Now dad is grandpa's favorite in-law. Think of it. They both pray five times a day, neither of them drinks or smokes; they respect their wives, love their children, and believe strongly in education and family values." She smiled and said, "You see! Southern Baptists and Muslims share a lot in common." I would add - they have a common God with a common set of ultimate values!

3. We need to stand strong in our belief that God is merciful, loving and just. We cannot simply stand in any set of values as we seek to walk together in the name of our One God. We could stand in the values that our God was a fierce and irrational deity whose angry whims must be obeyed. This would be false and untrue. Both Muslims and Christians agree that Allah - our one God - is merciful, loving and just. Our God is beneficent to all and merciful toward transgressors. Our God is just. These are bridges of grace and truth that no extremists can blow up - no madman in any faith tradition can destroy these beliefs. Love and justice, mercy and grace are divine and therefore ultimate values. All human practices and behaviors must be measured against these values.

4. We need adherence to God's command to love our neighbors. Miroslav Volf writes, "*If God commands believers to hate all infidels and love only coreligionists, extremism has a religious sanction. On the other hand, if God commands believers to love all neighbors - utterly irrespective of their creeds - then we have strong religious reasons to oppose extremism and work for caring and just relations among peoples of all religions*" (Ibid p.260). Frankly, the more we embrace and live into God's command to love neighbors, the more religious we are and the less extremist we will be.

5. We need to stand against injustice and prejudice in our religious traditions. One of the elements that feed extremism is real or perceived injustice. We need to find ways to listen to others who share the claims of injustice and then work toward justice for all. In addition, extremism thrives on feeding of prejudice and demonizing others. It starves when the light of knowledge falls on others and their humanity becomes manifest.

Dr. Volf writes: *Prejudice and demonization are forms of falsehood, and falsehood in assessing others is always a form of injustice. Commitment to love and justice is a commitment to*

learn the truth about others - the pleasant and the unpleasant (the ugly and the beautiful) - and to understand their motivations and aspirations. Commitment to love and justice is also to truth about oneself and to a deeper understanding about one's own relation to others (Ibid, p. 261).

6. Finally, we need to stand against disrespect. We are all aware of the Danish cartoons, five years ago which graphically insulted Mohammed. Perhaps you have been the recipient of hateful or even purposefully malicious emails about Islam - which are particularly troubling when they come from folks who confess the name of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, as their Lord and Savior. In the face of these kinds of insulting acts, we have seen that the ire and hatred of extremists inflamed particularly when the sacred symbols of the Muslim faith are desecrated. The command to love our neighbors demands that we refrain from such disrespect. We do not need to agree with the views of Muslims, we just need to be civil rather mean-spirited as we disagree (Ibid, p. 262).

I ask all of you to do what one member of First Church did last week. Upon receiving a vicious and hateful email sent to a number of people, she called me. We talked. She took my information and her information and responded with a clear, thoughtful and loving answer to the email - including a response which said that in generations past, women, blacks, (and today) gays could have been named in the lines about Muslims and we would have found the emails to be sexist, racist, homophobic and just simply hateful. At every turn, with every opportunity we need to stand up against disrespect.

On this 48th anniversary of "The March on Washington" in which The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. cried out to the heart and soul of America to end the trials and travails of civil injustice and racial inequality in our nation in his "I Have A Dream" speech, I call upon all of us to be the drum majors of peace and justice in this community in relations between Muslims and Christians.

We need to find a way out of the polarizing extremes dividing people of faith in Islam and Christianity. It begins with our conviction and commitment to find ways, in the power and the name of One God, to listen and learn; to challenge and be challenged; to worship and pray together; to break down walls that divide and build-up relationships that strengthen us.

Standing before 250,000 people at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., Dr. King said it this way to people in his time(and all time):

This is our hope. This is the faith that I will go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together... to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

Years ago, there was a young woman who pursued justice with all her heart, soul, mind and strength. Like Dr. King, she died at a young age. When others of her generation were looking for leaders to guide them forward - a Dr. King, A Gandhi, someone, anyone, she said, *"I believe that God is telling us that we are the ones we have been looking for."*

I believe you are ones God has been looking for to lead us in the ways of peace and justice within and between Islam and Christianity. May you come to know your way in this calling and step boldly into doing the right thing. God knows we need you. Amen.

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