

All God's Children in the Month of Ramadan

The following sermon was preached by Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune Sunday, August 15, 2010, at Broadview Community United Church of Christ in Seattle.

“For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God might and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the stranger, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt . . .” --Deuteronomy 10: 17-19

Three incidents in the news in recent weeks have been deeply disturbing to me.

- The announcement of a plan to burn copies of the Quran, the Muslim sacred text, on 9/11 at a church in Gainesville, FL
- The fierce conflict over building a Muslim mosque near Ground Zero in New York
- The assertion by Ron Ramsey running for governor of Tennessee that Muslims don't deserve the protection of the First Amendment

There is fear in the land, and this fear is being fanned by politicians and some religious leaders alike. There is fear of undocumented workers, fear of lesbian and gay people, fear of Muslims and Jews, fear of evangelicals and progressive Christians. We are afraid of each other.

Fear emerges from one of two places: the known and the unknown. If I know you to be a violent and irrational person full of hate, then I will fear you. If I don't know much about you at all, I will likely fear you . . . until I know better. If I am fed disinformation [lies] about people or a situation, I will likely let those lies feed my fears. But as a Christian and a thinking person, I also have choices about how I deal with my fears.

Most fear of other people is deeply rooted in our perception of someone as “other” —i.e. different than me. Perhaps it is human nature, but we are certainly taught that “different” is “dangerous.” And we think we know something about that different person . . . just by how they look.

So what does our Christian faith tradition teach us about “the other”? In the passage from Deuteronomy, “You shall also love the stranger, for you were stranger in the land of Egypt” refers to the Hospitality Code, which is a central teaching of Judaism and Christianity . . . and Islam. It is a common thread throughout the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible. It specifically lifts up three groups of people: widows, orphans, strangers. Why? **Because of their vulnerability.**

Jewish writer Sam Fleischhaker in his reflection on the passage from Deuteronomy asserts that “**God sees the tears of those who are oppressed and have no comforter**” and saves everyone

from those who are stronger than they are. The important challenge for us in this teaching is that it is not out of our altruism and goodwill that we are called to love the stranger; it is because we were once strangers in the land of Egypt, so we know what it is like.

How many of you have traveled some place where you didn't speak the language or understand the customs? Remember your anxiety just because things were so different and unfamiliar? Remember feeling dependent on the strangers around you because you were a stranger among them?

Unfortunately, what some of the "strangers" in our midst are experiencing from some of their neighbors is xenophobia. **This means the fear and hatred of "the other."** And it has haunted humankind since the beginning of history.

The Bible teaches us that God loves the stranger and provides for the stranger and calls us to do the same. This is the teaching of our Christian faith. But it is not reflected in the fear mongering that we are hearing right now. The ongoing conflict over the building of a Muslim mosque near Ground Zero is a case study in xenophobic fear. If we are ever going to counter the radical misuse of Islam to support acts of terrorism against innocents, we now have to support moderate Muslims who see things very differently.

The good news is that many in New York, including prominent Jewish leaders, have rallied to support the mosque. In fact, the building of this mosque may end up being the occasion of a powerful witness for all of us called to love our neighbor.

There is also good news in response to the announcement of burning the Quran: the National Association of Evangelicals along with Jewish organizations and Christian denominations have condemned the plan and called for American Christians to defend our Muslim neighbors.

And we are all called to engage. Gustav Niebuhr is the grandson of H. Richard Niebuhr and the great nephew of Reinhold Niebuhr, two of America's greatest theologians of the 20th century. In his book, *Beyond Tolerance*, he challenges us **to not just accept the fact of a multifaith world but to engage it.** Can we be different without being adversarial? So this is beyond tolerance of the other, which is a very low standard; it is actually engaging one another.

As Christians, we are called to be mature and to think critically, to recognize our fears and move beyond them, to recognize injustice when we see it and not hesitate to speak out against it.

One of the scariest posters I saw after 9/11 said, "All I need to know about Islam I learned on 9/11." No, what I learned on 9/11 is how little I knew about Islam and how important it was that I get busy and learn.

Muslims have just begun the month of Ramadan. It is a time of fasting every day, of prayer and reflection, and of focusing on good works to help others. It is sort of like Lent and Christmas rolled together for Christians. If you have a Muslim neighbor or coworker, approach that

person and wish them many blessings for Ramadan. Tell them that you would like to know more about this holiday and what it means to them. Engage. Look it up on the internet!

Finally, our work at FaithTrust Institute is multi-faith. We work mostly with Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists to address issues of sexual and domestic violence. What I have learned in this work is that when we finally come to the table as peers to share a common work, like ending domestic violence, we engage each other at a very deep level, and the result is that respect and friendship bridge the horrors of the history of our tribes. We don't agree about everything and that is okay. We do agree that women and children should not be abused in their homes. In the engagement, we begin to build trust.

For those of us who are Christians, it's never been easy to follow Jesus. And it's not getting any easier now.

Martin Niemoller was a Lutheran minister in Nazi Germany in 1945. To paraphrase his words for us today:

"THEY CAME FIRST for the undocumented workers,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't an undocumented worker.

THEN THEY CAME for the Muslims,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Muslim.

THEN THEY CAME for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.

THEN THEY CAME for gays and lesbians,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't gay or lesbian.

AND THEN THEY CAME for me,
and by that time no one was left to speak up."

But many people of faith are speaking up; I urge you to join with us in your neighborhood, your family, your workplace. As thinking, informed, courageous Christians, it is our responsibility to protect the "stranger"; as Americans, it is our responsibility to protect the First Amendment, which guarantees that everyone has a right to practice their own religious tradition.

"God of grace, God of glory . . . grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour."
Calm our fears; open our hearts and minds to one another as we seek healing of old wounds and the creation of a new future among us.

Amen