

When I read news articles online, I make sure to stop at the end of the article. I don't go further down into the "Reader's Responses," for the same reason I don't go down into sewers: I know what's down there, it is bound to be full of revolting things, and it leaves one longing for a hot bath when one comes back up.

I was asked to read some responses to the article in the OC Register and MSNBC.com that covered the story that our church was going to "bless" the Qur'an today in response to a church in Florida that planned on burning it.

Free of burdensome editors, any loon with a laptop and an open wifi-spot at Starbucks can now join the distinguished ranks of journalists at all of our top newspapers. All it takes is a long-nursed grudge, a sudden retreat from civility, and an irate index finger poised above the "send" button.

I have a modest proposal for our newspapers. Before the "send" button can appear, perhaps our online editions might consider providing a "think button." This would assist people afflicted with the sudden desire to declare their random thoughts for all to see. Before you can send your hastily composed opinion, you have to hit, "think." A message comes up asking you if you really believe you have observed the proper amount of time to balance your thoughts in such a way that best represents you to the world. If the answer is, "Yes," it then asks you to provide and verify your *real name* so that you can stand by it, rather than hiding behind such online monikers as, "Wackyboy2," "Sxygurrrl" and "Weaseltoy" (all three of whom recently dispensed their theological wisdom regarding our worship services today). Then, and only then, can you proceed to the "send" button. I wonder if these responding readers, who appear to have some time on their hands, might benefit from this exercise in emotional maturity.

The sum of what I read of the opinions of people who disagree with what we are doing today comes down to this: Americans are still frightened by the events of 9/11. Many are willing to keep in their minds the only images of Islam that they remember from that day, those of religious extremists, and are not capable of releasing the broad brush strokes that have painted and characterized their neighbors from prejudicial literature that goes back at least as far as the poet Milton.

Far from the mainline Protestantism and Vatican II Catholicism that carved out ground for us to live within a pluralistic world together in mutual respect, a triumphalistic, literalist American Christianity has become dominant, in which there is no room for respect or co-existence, unless one bows down before one understanding of this certain kind of Christianity. This is a recipe for disaster as it meets headlong with other forms of religious extremism. With fundamentalism of any kind, there can be only one winner—and we know that this is impossible in the world in which we live.

Today, we come together as a gathered community to begin a new church year together—to celebrate the start of a youth and young adults program enhanced by the hiring of a new leader who will begin next week, and to spend time with each other and all of our invited guests here today, at Mason Park for our annual church picnic.

In light of the small-mindedness of a small band of people in Florida who call themselves a church, we made the decision to reach out to our neighbors and make a completely different statement, and that is this: we welcome you without fear, and in a really very small and simple gesture show our desire to be neighbors and friends.

It was quite surprising therefore, to hear from a number of people who call themselves Christians, that I am an appeaser, ignorant of the teachings of Christianity, an abettor, a fool, a "sufferer of Stockholm Syndrome," crazy, and certainly, leading my church down the path to hell.

Well...I don't know what to say...but, "wanna come?" If the alternative is to end up with some of them, I wonder what new, fresh hell we might be talking about.

I wonder what some of these same people who stand against their neighbor, whether it is in the building of an Islamic center, or the denial of civil rights to people who wish to marry, and who claim to believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible would have to say about today's scriptures—because in the writings of the community of John, these are the strongest affirmations of Jesus' great commandment that we have:

"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us.

"Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

The great German poet Heinrich Heine once said, "Those who begin by burning books will end by burning bodies."

We have a responsibility to be the same kind of "people of the book," as our moderate neighbors, Christian, Jew and Muslim, and actively repudiate any use of our tradition that calls for the disrespect of our neighbor, whoever they might be. In my opinion, we should be marking this day and this weekend, by looking with hope to the physical rebirth of the sites of destruction, in particular, the reflecting pools at ground zero, the four hundred trees that will surround them and the soaring tower 1776 feet high, that will go up again soon, rather than by protesting at a broken-down building a few blocks away. It is a far more fitting way to defy the hate-filled extremists who attacked the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, and to honor their victims, than to wallow in the intolerance and fear that have mushroomed across the nation. They are fed by the kind of bigotry exhibited by the would-be book burner in Florida, and, sadly, nurtured by people in positions of real power, and by an ideological sham dressed tartly as a news network.¹

Our Muslim neighbors have always been with us. In an article by James Hutson called, "The Founding Fathers and Islam,"² he writes,

"(People) may be surprised to learn that there may have been hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Muslims in the United States in 1776—imported as slaves from areas of Africa where Islam flourished. Although there is no evidence that the Founders were aware of the religious convictions of their bondsmen, it is clear that the Founding Fathers thought about the relationship of Islam to the new nation and were prepared to make a place for it in the republic.

"In his seminal Letter on Toleration (1689), John Locke insisted that Muslims and all others who believed in God be tolerated in England. Campaigning for religious freedom in Virginia, Jefferson followed Locke, his idol, in demanding recognition of the religious rights of the 'Mahamdan,' the Jew and the 'pagan.' Supporting Jefferson was his old ally, Richard Henry Lee, who had made a motion in Congress on June 7, 1776, that the American colonies declare independence. 'True freedom,' Lee asserted, 'embraces the Mahomitan and the Hindu as well as the Christian religion.'

"In his autobiography, Jefferson recounted with satisfaction that in the struggle to pass his landmark Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom (1786), the Virginia legislature 'rejected by a great majority' an effort to limit the bill's scope 'in proof that they meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan.' George Washington suggested a way for Muslims to 'obtain proper relief' from a proposed Virginia bill, laying taxes to support Christian worship. Officials in Massachusetts were equally insistent that their influential

Constitution of 1780 afforded ‘the most ample liberty of conscience ... to Deists, Mahometans, Jews and Christians,’ a point that Chief Justice Theophilus Parsons resoundingly affirmed in 1810.”

It is therefore not only Christian, but entirely an American principle as well, blessed and enshrined by the founders of this country, that we should be welcoming agents, and should expect in return, the embrace of true American values—those of freedom of religion, and separation of church and state, that allows us to live together.

The Qur’an says, “To God belongs the East and West; whichever way you turn, the face of God is there.”

As the Qur’an also says, “Had Allah pleased, He could have made you one nation: but it is His wish to *prove* you by that which He has bestowed upon you. Vie with each other in good works, for to Allah you shall return and He will declare to you what you have disagreed about.”

Vie with each other, Christians, Muslims, Jews. Vie with each other, all faiths on earth—vie with each other in good works. In this day and age, it will be disastrous to vie in the building up of power structures, for religious supremacy, or in claims to use our God as a weapon for means of separation. But vie with each other to live out the message that your faith brings you to believe above all other things.

Christians in America spend too much time trying to be right about the legalistic methods of salvation and not enough time on salvific living. If we ask, “What does salvific living look like?” the answer for us lies in following “the way” of Jesus.

What is the truth that you know as a Christian that is worth staking your life on? The liberating message of Jesus was to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and to love your neighbor as yourself.

As a follower in the community of the disciple John wrote, “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

For us, let us simply try to live the message that Jesus gave us. It frees us from all legalisms and any walls that separate us from our neighbors of any faith as well as our neighbors of no faith.

As different as our books are, the Qur’an and the Gospels share in places a similar message, and here is one: “You shall know them by their fruits.”

If your religion makes you judgmental and narrow, what does that say about how you come to know a God we define by the word love? What does it say about the church in America today? Would a carpenter and devout Jew named Jesus who preached a gospel of the radically inclusive love of God recognize it as being created in his name and bearing his message?

If your faith makes you more open and more loving, then what are the fruits of that particular interpretation of faith?

That is the path I want to follow, and the church that becomes more open and loving in the exercise of love and respect for God and for the neighbor, is the only church I want to be a member of. How about you?

Sermon Resources

1. A portion of this paragraph alters yet mirrors material from an editorial in the New York Times, dated September 11, 2010
2. James H. Hutson, *The Founding Fathers and Islam, Library Papers Show Early Tolerance for Muslim Faith*, Library of Congress, May 2, 2002 - Vol. 61, No. 5

Scriptures for Sunday, September 12, 2010

1 John 4:16b-21

16b God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Litany for "Blessing of the Qur'an"

"Peace Be Still" by Stephen Iverson © 1998, one time use granted. (see bottom of next page)

Paul will introduce what we are doing and send the Qur'an around.

We, along with people of many expressions of faith, are alarmed by the actions of one pastor in Gainesville, Florida who had planned to commemorate the 9/11 tragedy by burning the Koran. Fortunately the plans were cancelled, however we, as Christians should be outraged at the misguided understanding of the Christian faith and the misapplication of the message of Jesus that has communicated to whole Muslim world. Much damage has already been done to cause separation and division between faiths - this division can only be healed by love and understanding.

In response to this crisis, Archbishop George Augustus Stallings, Jr., Founder and Senior Pastor of Imani Temple on Capitol Hill and Co-President of the American Clergy Leadership Conference, is calling on churches throughout the nation and the world to join in an "International Day of Reverence and Respect for All Faiths and Holy Books" at their Sunday services, today. We were already planning this.

Archbishop Stallings says, "In light of the immense sensitivities of September 11th and the tragedy that occurred nine years ago, Christians must stand up with the true spirit of Jesus and embrace and respect all people. This is a teachable moment. We must use this opportunity as Christians in America and the world to extend an invitation to the Islamic Community to celebrate the spirit of love and respect that is called for in the teaching of the Bible and the Qur'an."

Therefore, it is as a symbol of love and respect for our neighbor, and for no other reason but that Jesus commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves, that we pass this Qur'an around to be blessed today. From here, it will become a gift and a symbol of how some Christians practice their faith, to a local mosque. May they in turn, pass on a symbol of love and respect through their own faith in action.

John: *(singing)* Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.

All: (singing) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.

Paul: In this time of fear and rising hatred, let us be calm voices of reason—speaking up whenever prejudice rises in up any form, and gently correcting those who speak ill of any group of people. Let peace begin with us.

John: (*singing*) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.

All: (singing) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.

Elizabeth: Let us work to turn swords to plowshares; to be the hands of Christ at work in the world as makers of peace and forgers of friendships with our neighbors. Let us show respect to others not by compromising our own faith, but because as Christians we are called to love. Let peace begin here.

John: (*singing*) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.

All: (singing) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.

Paul: In this time of massive events, let us pray for the many who are forgotten, unnamed families and children in the path of destruction who have done no wrong but will suffer and perhaps die. Let us pray for all those who serve in our military and for those who are called to assist them, who today are in harm's way because of the actions of religious extremists of all kinds.

John: (*singing*) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.

All: (singing) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.

Elizabeth: Let us pray for all diplomats, ambassadors, world leaders, and all who continue to seek peaceful resolution to conflict. Let us pray for the agencies of compassion, who will try to feed the hungry, bind up the wounded, and find shelter for the displaced.

John: (*singing*) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.

All: (singing) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.

Paul: Let the events of these past weeks that have led up to today become a “teachable moment” for us. Let us pray for all people everywhere who live in fear and for our own fear.

John: (*singing*) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.

All: (singing) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.

Peace, Be Still

©1998 Stephen Iverson

Musical score for "Peace, Be Still" in C major, 4/4 time. The score consists of two staves of music. The first staff contains the lyrics "Peace, be still. Peace, be" and the second staff contains "still. The storm ra - ges. Peace, be still." The chords are: C, C/G, D/F#, F, Am, G, F, Am, F9, F, G, C.