

“A Christian Response to Extremism”

September 18, 2016

Can We Talk? Where Faith and Politics Meet series

I told you last week that I began serving as a pastor in July of 2001 just two months before September 11, 2001. Religious extremism was nothing new around the world, but September 11 and so many events after it have put extremism in the front of our minds. Fear and uncertainty are natural reactions to terror and violence in our world, especially as it's so difficult to understand and wrap our minds around when it's done in the name of religion.

Terrorists who connect their violent acts to Islam are extremists, and many Muslims seek to separate themselves from the Islamic state - or ISIS. Many Muslims are fearful of ISIS. Terrorism fueled by whatever fuels it is not mainstream; it is extreme, and our response matters. Though fear is a natural reaction; we must remember that fear is not the only choice we have. Our United Methodist Church has an advertisement online that states, “Fear is not the only force at work in the world today” calling us to be people of prayer and live our faith.

Even as we engage our response to extremism - I want to be clear that no one I know - of whatever faith tradition - condones or accepts what ISIS is doing. Terror and violence is terrible and needs to stop. But even more than our hope for it to end, what do we do? What can we do?

This passage from Romans is difficult to hear. Paul recounts Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Paul challenges us to never pay back evil with more evil. Seek peace. Never take revenge, but trust God to take care of it.

And then Paul ups the stakes. It's not just about the basics, but even more, it's a call to action - to feed and offer drink to your enemies. Overcome evil by doing good, Paul says. In another letter to early Christians in Corinth, Paul lifts up faith, hope, and love as those things that remain and make a difference when everything else passes away. John Wesley, who began the Methodist movement, called those three the marks of a Christian.

So, how do we make faith, hope, and love our response? First, we need to listen and learn. We need to be clear that ISIS doesn't represent all Muslims. ISIS doesn't represent the majority of those around the world who practice Islam. In fact, it's less than a fraction of 1% out of 1.3-1.4 billion Muslims around the world. That doesn't mean we don't need to pay attention, but we need perspective.

It help me to consider how we see ourselves in relationship to extremists who claim to act based on their faith in Jesus Christ. There are those who commit violent

acts and speak hatred in the name of Jesus, but they don't speak for me. When I use the term extremist, I'm not talking about those who simply might be more liberal or conservative than my position or yours. Extremism is the position that goes to the extreme - that seeks to get rid of – even to kill - those who disagree.

Extremists are those who believe that others should be killed because they disagree with an extreme view. ISIS is fighting a battle in which they are the one right version of Islam, and anyone who doesn't agree is threatened, including any Muslims who disagree. We need to be clear that they are fighting anyone who doesn't agree – not just other faith traditions.

We know that Muslims and those from Arab countries have been targeted and profiled as a result of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks. Many Muslims seek to dispel the connections to ISIS and extremism, but it's very difficult because we group everyone together. We may struggle with feelings of fear and prejudice. Part of that is educating ourselves and fighting against the fear that can come so quickly.

Our United Methodist Church has a strong stance against prejudice against Muslims and Arabs in the U.S. We stand against those images, stereotypes, and statements that label Muslims and Islam and Arabs and Arab culture negatively. There's a call for us to understand our Muslim and Arab neighbors through study and personal relationships and to participate with them in interfaith and community organizations. There's a call for us to pray that all of us might build community together.

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all trace our beginnings back to Abraham. Abraham believed in one God, which is an important point for all three faiths. Remember that Abraham is called by God to go to a new land, and he obeys God. Eventually, he fathers a son, Ishmael, with Hagar. Isaac comes later - Abraham's son with Sarah. It is Abraham and Ishmael to whom Muslims trace their heritage, and Abraham is called a prophet and a friend of God. Jews claim Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the covenant God makes with them. Christians claim that heritage, and hold Abraham as an example of faith, righteousness, and trust in God.

All three faiths are clear that the revelation of God - God coming to people - is important as is their Holy Scripture, prayer, and worship. There's a lot to know about the similarities and differences, and I hope to offer a more in-depth study in the near future. Interfaith gatherings are important for clarity on similarities and differences, and we also have to acknowledge both.

Beyond Abraham, Islam traces its roots to Mohammed in 570 AD in Arabia who was called by God to preach. Eventually he went to Medina and established the first Islamic city. He died in 632 AD, and from then on there's the growth of Shia and Sunni sects of Islam. History in the region is important, especially when the Ottoman Empire

fell in 1916 and Western powers divided up the Middle East. The situation is complex and very political.

I was helped by the reflection of Brian Steed, a professor of military history for the U.S. Army. He says that ISIS is fighting a narrative battle – a battle of stories. That is, they’re banking on the fact that the story they’re sharing is powerful enough to get others to join them. They want to attract people who feel disenfranchised, isolated, and outcast.

So, again, how do we keep telling our story as Christians in a way that counteracts what extremists are doing? Better yet, how are we living our faith so that anyone - no matter their faith tradition or background - can see the Good News of Jesus Christ reflected in us?

We need to know what we believe as Christians and why. What does it mean that Jesus is Son of God - Messiah, Savior, Lord? That he died on the cross? That he rose from the dead – that resurrection is real – and that he is alive? Jesus was passionate in his love for all humanity. That doesn’t mean we don’t struggle with our faith or have questions, but for us to show the marks of faith, hope, and love, we have to be just as passionate in word and deed. We have to clear about what we believe and why - about who Jesus is for us and how my life and your life is different because of my relationship with him. And most of all, we must treat one another as children of God – no matter our tradition, culture, or history.

It also means that we’re not afraid to talk to people. Our series is based on the question, “Can we talk?” We need to talk to each other about difficult issues, but we need to be willing to answer questions or engage people when they want to talk about faith. There are people you know who want to have those conversations with you.

Nabeel Qureshi tells the story of how a friend he met in college, David, was a powerful influence on his faith - and it began because of their friendship. Qureshi eventually converted from Islam to Christianity, but he highlights the willingness of his friend to engage him with gentleness and humility, with grace and love.

Read our Scripture again and the challenge Paul offers us. One commentator writes, “This passage is not a greeting card slogan, but a call to costly discipleship.” This is about how we treat one another in the church family and also how we treat those who aren’t in this church. It starts here. It starts in our homes, our workplaces, our encounters with strangers. How does this speak to us as we think about those we fear and those we struggle to love – those we would call enemies?

How do we pray for our enemies? That was the call when we began to meet on Wednesdays nights over a year ago - to pray in the midst of the terror and violence - to

pray for those who are part of ISIS that their hearts would turn to God's grace. Loving others is hard. Living our faith is hard.

I get overwhelmed by Paul's call to the church, but then I remember that Paul isn't simply offering us a list of what to do, but a life we live every day because of God's mercy to us. Growing in faith and living our faith in Jesus Christ means that we fight our desire to conform to the world every day - that desire to live in fear and hatred.

Paul was talking to church people. Roman Christians were facing a specific issue about how to treat refugees who were returning to Rome. Many of them had been oppressors to the Jews. So there was resentment, which is why Paul addresses how we treat one another even when there has been conflict.

Being transformed in Christ calls us to a higher response - to forgive and seek peace with one another and to live as those who follow Jesus. It's messy, hard, and inconvenient, and it's right where we have to be.

How do we respond to extremism? With faith, hope, and love - those marks of our Christian faith and life that matter every day. When we are fueled by fear and cruelty, those who would seek to do harm are victorious. When we assume that a small minority speaks for the whole and close ourselves off from others who desire to seek peace, then those who are extremists are victorious. Jim Wallis wrote these words after 9/11: "We deny them their victory by refusing to submit to a world created in their image. We must not allow terror to drive us away from being the people God has called us to be."

So, how will you and I claim and reclaim faith (not fear), hope (not despair), and love (not hate) as the marks of following Jesus?

I share this post that Dirk Fuller shared on Facebook. It offered some inspiration for me:

While much of America seems to be getting more and more divisive, I'm going to be holding doors for strangers, letting people cut in front of me in traffic, greeting all I meet, exercising patience with others, and smiling at strangers. I'll do this as often as I have the opportunity. I will not stand idly by and let children live in a world where unconditional love is invisible and being rude is acceptable.

Join me in showing love to others. Find your own way to swing the pendulum in the direction of love because today, sadly, hate is gaining ground. Love must begin somewhere, and love will overcome hate. Imagine the difference if we each purposefully love a little more.

Friends, may we listen, learn, and show faith, hope, and love.

Thanks be to God! Amen.