



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

CONFIRMED IN COMMUNITY

May 5, 2013

Psalm 67

*May God bless you and keep you.  
May God be gracious to you and bless you  
and make his face to shine upon you,  
that God's way may be known upon earth,  
God's saving power among all nations.  
Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you.*

*Let the nations be glad and sing for joy;  
for you judge the peoples with equity  
and guide the nations upon earth.  
Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you.*

*The earth has yielded its increase;  
God, our God, has blessed us.  
May God continue to bless us;  
let all the ends of the earth revere him.*

Islam

*God is All-gentle to his servants, providing for whomsoever he will. (Qur'an 41.29)*

*All human creatures are God's children, and those dearest to God are the ones who treat his children kindly. (Hadith of Baihaqi)*

*He it is who sent down peace of reassurance into the hearts of the believers, that they might add faith to their faith. (Qur'an 48.4)*

It is with the words of Psalm 67 that we bless the babies at their baptism: "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and give you peace all of your life." It is a rite of passage for parents and their children as the community of the church affirms again our call to care and support.

It is with these words that we bless each confirmand as they choose to confirm their baptism into the church community: “The Lord bless you and keep you.” It is our prayer for and our commitment to these young people as they continue their ever-changing journey of faith.

There’s nothing magical about baptism; nor does baptism in any way influence God to love a child any more than God already does. God is besotted with every human being already. There is nothing magical about confirmation. Most importantly it is the affirmation of the community to walk with one another as parents, congregation and youth to provide a safe place to explore, to doubt, to question, to engage, to affirm and to uphold. When we baptize; when we confirm; we do so into community, the importance of which is illustrated in the real-life stories of three sets of brothers whose lives were affected for good or ill by their involvement in community.

The first story is about two brothers who came to this country from Bosnia, Kenan and Eldin Trebincevic. Caught up in the bloody war between Bosnia and Serbia, they, along with their mother and father, moved to Westport, CT. in 1993 in order to avoid the slaughter of Muslims in their homeland. In Bosnia, their father was a successful businessman, but after moving to the USA, work was hard to come by. He “slung poultry in a fast-food restaurant” as Kenan says in an article in the Wall Street Journal, and took other low-paying jobs to try to provide for the family. Their mother babysat and found work at a data-processing firm. But there was too little money and finding better jobs was next to impossible without connections or language skills. (April 26, 2013)

Even so, Kenan says that he and his brother made many friends through a very interesting journey in this new homeland. While they endured and ultimately survived the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, Kenan said that his family did not seek to align themselves with any militant group. And though proud of their Muslim heritage, they didn’t see it as exclusive.

They came to this country through the concerted effort of several religious groups. Their move to CT. was sponsored by the Interfaith Council, a group of liberal churches and synagogues. A Methodist minister met them at the airport and brought them to his home in Westport where they stayed for four months.

Soon after they arrived, Kenan and Eldin’s mother found a lump in her breast and the Jewish surgeon who operated on her never charged them a penny for the surgery or for the subsequent radiation and chemo treatments. The surgeon told the family that the Bosnian genocide against Muslims reminded him of the Holocaust and the memory of those who cared for his family inspired his generosity.

A Protestant dentist provided braces and two years of dental care for Kenan and never charged a dime. And on his first day of school in Westport, the principal introduced him to his seventh-grade English class with his arms draped around his shoulders, explaining Kenan’s exile from his country. The principal explained that Kenan had a foreign name, spoke with a strange accent and barely knew the English language. And though scared and embarrassed, Kenan was immediately befriended by a Catholic Spanish-American student who offered him a seat. The Jewish bus driver that took him home that day went out of his way to take Kenan safely to his door and in the following months, his Greek Orthodox soccer coach gave him rides to practices and games when his parents couldn’t. Kenan said he and his brother thrived in spite of their displacement, persecution and years of poverty because of the stability of their parents, and help from many and diverse guardian angels of all faiths.

That story stands in stark contrast to two other Muslim brothers who came from the same area of the world to escape the same horrors. However, Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev, in their despair over their plight, their poverty and the prejudice against them, allowed an anger to swell up in their hearts and minds, which led them to align with a radical Muslim community. We all know their story and the destruction they caused in Boston several weeks ago, fueled by their involvement in a community that sought revenge rather than reconciliation. Tamerlan died by police gun fire and his brother is in custody, both prime suspects in the Boston Marathon bombing.

Kenan compares and contrasts his and his brother's story with that of the Tsarnaev brothers. "There is a well-documented connection", he comments, "between unhappy, disenfranchised immigrants who can't connect with caring people and the crime and terrorism that results. In the days since the Boston bombing," he said, "I kept comparing Eldin's and my circumstances with the Tsarnaevs' to see what saved us from being embittered." (The Wall Street Journal, April 26, 2013)

The most important factor, Kenan notes, is that of friendship, of community, of being connected with family and with people who care. Being genuinely welcomed and included when they first came to this country, befriended by people of different faiths and integrated into a foreign culture made all the difference for him and his brother. These aren't the only factors, he notes, but they were significant contributions to his different pathway than that of his Muslim extremist counterparts in the Tsarnaev brothers.

The third story is about two boys who grew up in a difficult home in this country but in the context of a caring church family that made a difference. Their parents brought them to church as infants when they first moved to the community because they wanted them baptized. The church readily received them as newcomers in the town, and though not members of the church at the time, the minister and congregation were willing and eager to baptize the boys.

As time went on, it was apparent that the stability of this new family was fragile. The mother's health problems, ultimately resulting in her long-term hospitalization; the father losing his job; the house almost burning to the ground, and the ultimate divorce of the parents finally took its toll on the well-being of the boys.

Some years later, the minister, who had moved away to another church, happened to run into Scottie, the younger brother. Now in post-college studies in seminary, Scottie said that he and his brother survived their distressed home life to become successful, happy, well-adjusted young men because of the caring congregation of that little church who, over the years, rallied to offer babysitting, covered dishes, friendship to both their parents and many prayers. The boys were in the Christmas pageants, found their best friends in the youth group and went on mission trips. Everyone knew the family concerns but there was never a word of judgment or pity. They were just being the church—the holy something else called grace.

Today as we participate in this confirmation, we must keep ever before us the vital role the church community plays in providing a safe, non-judgmental, loving environment for kids of all ages. With each child we baptize, with each youth we confirm, with each communion we celebrate, we renew our commitment to be community. We must never underestimate the effect of even small gestures of friendship, for seemingly insignificant acts of camaraderie and love are large investments in community. Here we share bread and wine, our personal resources, our time to care for another in order to be a holy communion of lovers and not haters, of caregivers and not judges, of faith in

people more than defenders of doctrine. Here we are reminded as confirmand and congregation that we are the body of Christ for all who come through these doors. May God confirm in all of us this calling and this privilege. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

## PASTORAL PRAYER

O God whose love is unending and whose joys are new every morning, we bring ourselves into your presence that we may find release from all that concerned us in the week that is now over and that we might find hope for the week that is yet to come. We gather to center ourselves in this moment, to find in this time and place all that we need to be your servants of love and goodwill.

We thank you for this church that nurtures and sustains us. We particularly thank you today for the youth of our congregation and for their innate sense of hope for the future. We are grateful for their indomitable spirit that challenges conventional wisdom and traditional ways. We give thanks for their dreams and their insights, for their energy and playfulness. Anoint them with the delight of their own lives that they may see and believe that they are made in your holy image and gifted in ways that will make a profound difference in this world. Inspire them to belief in all that is good about humanity and sustain them with a wisdom that comes from your holy presence.

Create in all of us today a sense of appreciation for all that is around us: the people, the places we visit, the people who serve us as police officers, medics, fire fighters, restaurant staff, garbage collectors, and the host of all who make life good for us. We thank you for the advances of modern science and medicine, the caring of those who nurture us, the political leaders who seek to guide the nations, the warmth of the sun, the fresh growth that comes from spring rains and the birds that fly in the air. May our appreciations guide us toward hope and peace, in the name of Christ, Amen.