



The New England Church Pulpit

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KEEP THIS IN MIND

John 18.33-36
Qur'an 23.1-5, 50-60

November 22, 2015

John 18.33-36

At the trial of Jesus, Pilate entered the room and asked “Are you King of the Jews? If so, why would your own people and chief priests hand you over to me? What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the authorities. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

Qur'an 23.1-5, 50-60

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful: Blessed are the believers who are humble in their prayers; who avoid profane talk, and who give alms to the destitute; who restrain their carnal desires; who are true to their trusts and promises, and diligent in their prayers. These are the heirs of Paradise; they shall abide in it forever...We first created man from an essence of clay...then the water, and cattle...Then we sent Noah...and Moses and his brother Aaron with our signs and with clear authority. We made the son of Mary and his mother a sign to humanity, and gave them a shelter on a peaceful hillside watered by a fresh spring.

Apostles, eat of that which is wholesome, and do good works; I have knowledge of all your actions. Your community is but one community, and I am your only Lord: therefore fear Me. Yet people have divided themselves into factions, each rejoicing in their own doctrines. Leave them in their error till a time appointed. Those who walk in fear of their Lord; who believe in the revelations of their Lord; who worship none besides their Lord; who give alms with hearts filled with awe, knowing that they will return to their Lord; these strive with each other for salvation, and shall be the first to attain it.

(translated by N J Dawood)

The recent attacks in Paris and Beirut as well as in the Republic of Mali raise complicated issues about the role of people of faith in all of this. We are bombarded not only with pictures of these horrible and inhumane atrocities but with the unfair association of all Muslims with the extremist Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, otherwise known as ISIS. Mainline Muslims will tell you that ISIS is neither Islamic nor a state except by its own designation, and saying that ISIS represents mainline Islamic beliefs is like saying that the Ku Klux Klan represents the beliefs of all Christians.

We see pictures of those who perished, of those who were heroes, of those who were perpetrators, and we hear from those children who are now orphans and those surviving spouses who will now be raising their children alone. We hear from survivors struggling with survivor guilt. We hear armchair politicians who advise arming everyone in our country in case we are attacked and would-be politicians promising to keep us safe.

Many religionists perpetrate the myth of a vengeful Christian god who punishes us for being inclusive and generous toward those who are outcast, promoting a righteousness that is prostituted to justify prejudice against other religions and a righteous vindication that is preached as our divine right. These people trade in fearmongering and should be called out for it.

Governments must seek out those who harm their citizens, to be sure, hopefully with the discerning eye of accurate intelligence so that it is ISIS that is targeted and not all Muslims, as is often the case. Even then, such retaliation should be done reluctantly and not gleefully.

But as Christians, we must keep this in mind: the kingdom to which Jesus calls us is one not of this world. It is a world that is centered on peace and generosity, of inclusion and hope. Keep in mind that the God who calls us is the God of all creation, not just a select few. Keep in mind that the journey we take to find God isn't the only option; that the God of Abraham is also the God of Judaism and Islam.

Bishop John Shelby Spong reminds us:

God is not a Christian. God is not a Jew, or a Muslim, or a Hindu, or a Buddhist. All of those are systems which human beings have created to help us walk into the mystery of God. I honor my tradition. I walk through my tradition, but I don't think my tradition defines God. I think it only points me to God.

At the end of Jesus's life on this earth, his disciples were confused with what was happening. One of them, Judas, was so frustrated and angry that Jesus did not stand up to defend himself and his people that he, Judas, turned him over to the authorities in an attempt to force Jesus to fight. All the disciples were angry that Jesus did not provide for them a kingdom that assured their safety as they walked the dark alleys of the city and free them from the tyranny of Rome. But Jesus was silent even as they condemned him to death, murdered by the same powers the disciples had hoped he would overpower. Jesus taught about a peace that comes from within, a peace that is found in non-violence, a peace that emanates from the presence of God in the soul. He didn't promise safety from external forces, even though his own people were pummeled day in and day out by the ISIS of his day.

Have you seen the Muslim man on Facebook who stood on a busy, public sidewalk, completely blindfolded so he could see no one around him, with a sign that said: I'm a Muslim. I'm told I'm a terrorist. I trust you. If you trust me, give me a hug. It was peoples' response to this man that gives me hope that the world will survive the hatred and atrocities that come from external kingdoms.

Keep this in mind: Jesus asked his followers to be disciples of love, not security guards. Those first disciples, like us, wanted guarantees of safety. They wanted assurance that God would vindicate them, that God would declare them more righteous than all others. They had as many misconceptions and questions as we have. But instead of answers, Jesus told them stories: a man was walking down the road when he was robbed, and beaten, and left for dead, and who should stop by to help him but the **enemy**; a son squandered his inheritance with prostitutes and living high on the hog until he ended up eating with the hogs, but when he came home, destitute

and broken, his father took him to Sax Fifth Avenue for new clothes and threw a party at the country club. The kingdom which Jesus brings is not a vindictive one; it is not steeped in answers; it does not provide a constitution of guarantees. It is a kingdom of hope; it is a vision of what the world could be if God's values were dominant without being dominating.

Jesus told them about the raven and the lily, how they live without worry for tomorrow, how they are valued by God for what they are not what they do, how they are beautiful in their own right without having to don the clothing of correct theology or national security or systems of botanical defense. Do not worry about what is external but concern yourself with what is eternal: love, justice, peace, forgiveness, joy. Put stock in the common good not the common hatred.

Another Facebook post shows a French father, in the aftermath of the killings in Paris, explaining to his very young son that though the killers had guns, we have flowers, pointing to the mound of flowers all over the city streets. The young boy repeated: "The bad guys have guns, but we have flowers. The flowers protect us?" he asked. "Yes," said the father. "The flowers protect us." The flowers pay tribute to a larger society of caring, loving people who take up the mantle of peace.

Keep this in mind today as we come to this week set aside for giving thanks. Keep this in mind as we gather in this church today to sing and make music. Keep this in mind as you hear the words of the man whose wife was one of the victims in Paris when he said that ISIS will not have the anger they would like from him. They might have taken his wife but they would not have his anger.

Keep this in mind: though governments will seek to protect their citizens, as they should, it takes more than guns and bombs to bring peace. Keep in mind as well that though evil prospers for a time, evil has never overcome good forever. Time and time again it has tried, but it always fails.

Keep in mind that the kingdom of God is not of this world, and therefore is not defined by labels, for there is neither Jew nor Gentile, Christian nor Muslim, slave nor free, male nor female, rich nor poor, gay nor straight nor transgender but all are one in a common humanity. Keep in mind that when Jesus's life was threatened by the barbarians that ultimately killed him, he transformed their hatred by loving them.

In her book *The Grammar of God*, Aviya Kushner writes in the chapter entitled "Song,"

What is worth singing about is deciding to live in a certain way despite all evidence to the contrary, despite all the knowledge that comes with time: this is what it is to be human, to hope, to believe.

As we come to this week of Thanksgiving, let us keep this in mind.
Amen.

—Gary L. McCann