

## BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOR

Our Muslim Neighbors<sup>1</sup>

Jeff Clinger

September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007

Genesis 21:9 – 20

<sup>9</sup>But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. <sup>10</sup>So she said to Abraham, ‘Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.’ <sup>11</sup>The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. <sup>12</sup>But God said to Abraham, ‘Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you. <sup>13</sup>As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.’ <sup>14</sup>So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

<sup>15</sup>When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes.

<sup>16</sup>Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, ‘Do not let me look on the death of the child.’ And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. <sup>17</sup>And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, ‘What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. <sup>18</sup>Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.’ <sup>19</sup>Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

<sup>20</sup>God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.

This morning we are nearing the end of our current sermon series, a five week project Steve and I are calling, “Being a Good Neighbor.” Three weeks ago now Steve began the series by talking about two different ways of knowing God and of understanding God’s work in the world. Two weeks ago then we began an examination of some of the different faith traditions here in Northwest Indiana as Steve talked about our Jewish neighbors. Last week I talked about some of the history and beliefs of our Hindu neighbors and this morning we turn to learn a little about the faith of our Muslim neighbors.

---

<sup>1</sup> I owe a great debt to [www.religioustolerance.org](http://www.religioustolerance.org) and Diana Eck’s *A New Religious America* for providing me much of the information about Islam in this sermon.

Our hope for these three sermons is that you might learn a little bit about your neighbors here in Northwest Indiana and, if you haven't already, that you might begin to see the ways in which God is at work in and through all of these faith traditions. In both of these ways we hope that as individuals and as a community of faith we can all continue to become better neighbors to people of different faiths. Next week Steve will conclude our sermon series with a sermon titled the Radically Inclusive Faith of Jesus. It is our hope that each of these sermons will have in different ways challenged you to expand your understanding of God while continuing to claim the things about Christianity and the story of Jesus that are important to you...

In the 2006 Academy Award winning film *Babel*, Brad Pitt plays an American man named Richard. Richard and his wife Susan have recently lost a young child and find themselves in the predominately Muslim country of Morocco, trying to get over their pain. As Richard and Susan travel through the Moroccan countryside in a tour bus, two young brothers are at play in the hills above the road. Their father has recently bought them a gun and the boys are playing with it, seeing if it will really shoot 3 kilometers as they had been promised. As the bus approaches in the distance one of the brothers takes aim and pulls the trigger. The bullet travels through the side window of the bus, hitting and badly injuring Susan.

Hours away from the nearest hospital, suddenly faced with the harshness of language and cultural barriers, Richard begins to panic. The tour guide, who lives near, offers to take the bus into his village believing that there might be someone there who can help Susan. Over the course of the next hours tension builds as other passengers on the bus grow increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of remaining in this small Islamic village. Ultimately the bus abandons Richard and Susan in this remote village and they are forced to rely on the care of their tour guide.

The tour guide goes out of his way to care for Richard and Susan. He uses his connections in the community to make phone calls, to get water and food, and ultimately to provide shelter for an evening. As Richard and the tour guide struggle to care for Susan and to find a way to get her evacuated to a hospital they talk about their families. Richard meets the tour guide's young daughter and shows the guide pictures of his children at home.

When a medical helicopter finally arrives to take Susan and Richard, Richard opens up his wallet and empties it, trying to give all of his cash to the tour guide. The tour guide flatly refuses. He had not been helping Richard and Susan in his role as tour guide. He had seen their shared humanity, he had seen Susan's pain, he had seen Richard struggle to care for her, and he had invested himself in helping them simply to be a good neighbor. A young Muslim Moroccan welcomes an American into his home, goes out of his way to care for him and his family, and does it all simply because he recognizes their common humanity, simply because it is the right thing for him to do.

One of the things that was most striking to me in this film was the way in which Americans reacted to the situation as it unfolded. The American media immediately began to report that it had been a terrorist attack on the tourists. The rest of the tourists reacted extremely negatively to the possibility of having to stay an evening in a Muslim town and were verbally and physically rude leading up to their ultimate decision to desert Richard and Susan. While the film beautifully portrayed the graciousness and hospitality of this young Muslim man, it also showed the harsh and negative realities of American Stereotypes of Islam.

This last week we commemorated as a country the terrible attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. And yes, it was Muslim extremists who flew planes into the twin towers and the pentagon and who crashed one in the Pennsylvania countryside. While those men represent only a very

small minority within Islam and not the whole of Islam as a faith, the media and religious commentators in our country were quick to point fingers at Islam as a whole following the 9/11 attacks. Remember some of the comments that Steve shared in his sermon a couple of weeks ago? Christian leaders from around the United States saying that the prophet Mohammed is a “demon-possessed pedophile,” that Islam is a “very evil and wicked religion” and that “The Muslim religion is an antichrist religion.” When Timothy McVeigh, acting out his Christian convictions, blew up the federal building in Oklahoma City there was no condemnation of Christianity as a whole – it wouldn’t have been tolerated – yet as a country we have done and are doing that very thing to Islam.

Islam as a faith has a rich history, a deep devotion to God, a passion for justice, and a call to serve the oppressed. And while Islam has been portrayed in some very negative ways in our media following 9/11, we owe it to our neighbors to take the time to learn more about who they are and what they truly believe. I hope that we can at least begin to do some of that this morning.

Islam is the second largest religion in the world behind Christianity. Worldwide there are currently about .7 to 1.2 billion Muslims – about 21% of the world’s population. Christianity, which is currently the world’s largest religion, is followed by about 33% of all people. The global population of Islam has been growing rapidly while the Christian population has remained about the same. It is estimated that if these trends continue Islam will become the largest world religion sometime in the middle of this century.

Here in the United States there are currently between 1.1 and 1.7 million Muslims. That’s more Muslims in this country than Presbyterians. There is no doubt that in our region, in

the U.S., and around the world, the Muslim population continues to grow and that as they do it will be to our benefit to understand our brothers and sisters of the Muslim faith.

The story of the beginnings of Islam is told in the Hebrew Bible. Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, is called an Abrahamic faith because it traces its roots to Abraham. Abraham, wanting desperately to have a child, ended up impregnating his wife's servant Hagar, and they had a son Ishmael. The scripture passage for this morning is the telling of that story from the book of Genesis (chapter 21:9-20)

*<sup>9</sup>But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. <sup>10</sup>So she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.' <sup>11</sup>The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. <sup>12</sup>But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you. <sup>13</sup>As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.' <sup>14</sup>So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.*

*<sup>15</sup>When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. <sup>16</sup>Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, 'Do not let me look on the death of the child.' And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. <sup>17</sup>And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. <sup>18</sup>Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' <sup>19</sup>Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.*

*<sup>20</sup>God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.*

Christians and Muslims both trace our history back to Abraham. As Christians we trace our line back through Isaac, Abraham's second son, born to Sarah. Muslims trace their line back through Ishmael, Abraham's first son, born to Hagar. And in verse 20 of Genesis 9 we read that God was with Ishmael, this dejected brother who marks the line that would become the Muslim faith.

Let's turn now then to look at some of the history and background of Islam as well as some of Islam's core beliefs and their sacred texts. According to the majority opinion of religious historians, Islam was founded in 622 when the angel Gabriel read the first revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. However, most, if not all, Muslims believe that Islam existed before Muhammad was born, that the origins of Islam date back to the creation of the world, and that Muhammad was the last and the greatest in a series of Prophets that included Abraham, David, Moses and Jesus.

The word Islam is derived from the Arabic word *salam* which is best translated to English as submission. A Muslim then is a follower of Islam, a person who submits themselves to the will of God. Faith in Islam is not so much about believing in certain things, it is about responding in a certain way. In this sense Islam is not so much a verb as it is an adjective – it is about the action of submitting.

In Islam there are five pillars of the faith, five things that Muslims are called to do as they seek to live their lives in a faithful way by submitting to the will of God. The first of these pillars is to sincerely speak the *shahadah*, “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is God's messenger.” When one speaks these words with true commitment they become a Muslim.

The second pillar of Islam is *salat* or prayer. Specifically, *salat* refers to the prayers that are offered by Muslims at five different times throughout the course of each day – before dawn, at noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and night. While most religious systems place some emphasis on prayer, Islam has systematized prayer to the point of making it an intentional part of each Muslim's day. In Islam the central human condition isn't seen as sin as much as it is forgetfulness. Because we as human beings often forget God and forget who we are supposed to

be, Muslims pray five times a day to remind themselves of and to connect to God's presence.

<Video Clip of Imam's Call to Prayer>

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is the third pillar of Islam. Ramadan is the month in the Islamic calendar that commemorates Muhammad receiving and revealing the Koran. From sun up to sun down each day Muslims do not eat or drink anything. Then in the evening, the traditional breaking of the fast is called *iftar*. Muslims commonly gather together in the evenings during Ramadan to have a glass of water and a few dates before joining together for evening prayers and then celebrating with a big meal. We are currently in the midst of the month of Ramadan and so when the Imam is with us on Wednesday he will not have eaten anything since before sunrise that morning.

The fourth pillar of Islam is *zakat* an intentional kind of giving. Traditionally, *zakat* is a giving of 2.5% of all earnings and wealth to the aid of relief of others. Money given as *zakat* can't be used to build buildings or institutions; it is only to be used to help people, specifically Muslims in need.

A pilgrimage to Mecca, the birthplace of Islam is the fifth Pillar of Islam. This pillar is called *Hajj* and while praying is a daily occurrence and the giving of *zakat* is an annual occurrence, the *Hajj* is something that Muslims are expected to do just once in their life. However, financial realities in many countries make it unlikely that some Muslims will ever be able to make that pilgrimage.

Through their daily life and their quest to fully submit to the will of God, Muslims rely primarily on a sacred text in much the same way that Christians rely on the Bible. The Qur'an is the most sacred text in Islam. It is believed to be the literal words of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the angel Gabriel over a period of 23 years. The text was originally collected and

transmitted in both oral and written form however it was eventually assembled together into a single book that is now known as the Qur'an, meaning the recitation.

Learning about people who are different than us and who understand God differently than us can present real challenges. Doing so also presents incredible opportunities for growth and partnership. In her research Diana Eck uncovered a community in California where an Islamic Center and a United Methodist church sit side by side and share a parking lot. The Muslim community gathers on Friday evenings and there is plenty of room for them to park. The United Methodists gather on Sunday mornings and there is plenty of room for them to park. What started as an opportunity to share space in a creative way has turned into beautiful opportunities for partnership between these two faith communities. They now share educational opportunities and work together in the community.

It is my hope that as we continue to get to know the stories of people of different faiths and as we continue to find ways to be good neighbors, we will be open to the work of God in our midst calling us as Christians to grow in the story of Jesus as we connect with others in the community.

<video clip from Imam>