

## GOD IS GREATER!

What's the gospel word on Christian-Muslim relations?

*Genesis 17:1-6; 22:17-18; John 4:19-24*

It might be important to note

that this sermon was planned quite a while ago.

Well *before* the threatened Qu'ran burning fiasco.

Well *before* the frankly, *shameful*, public media storm  
that actively aided a handful of disturbed, fear-driven people  
who claim to follow Jesus,  
in my former hometown of Gainesville, FL,  
to broadcast their hateful, judgmental, and deeply offensive  
words and images to the whole world,  
paid in full by corporate media.

But the timing of this sermon was *not* a coincidence.

It comes on 9/12/2010,  
one day after the anniversary of the event  
that has for the past nine years, so deeply defined and shaped  
the state of Christian-Muslim relations in the Western world.  
And these relations *are*, it could be argued,  
at one of the lowest points since the Crusades.

We desperately *need* to hear a Gospel Word on this subject.

We need to stop, and take a deep breath,  
maybe a *dozen* deep breaths,  
and listen, in quietness, to what the Gospel has to say  
about how followers of Jesus relate to those of Islamic faith.

This is a very specific sermon.

This is not a lecture on the principles of interfaith relations  
in general.

Although maybe some of what you hear could *apply*.

This is an in-house conversation among Christians,  
focused on the narrow question of our posture toward Muslims.

And this is the kind of conversation we *need* right *now*, I think.

The conversations happening in surrounding society  
are driven by anger, by fear, by prejudice,  
by misinformation and grandstanding.

They are driven by political agendas left, right, *and* moderate.

Frankly, I am disappointed by nearly *all* of them.

*First*, we Christians need a conversation among ourselves,  
driven *not* by politics, but by the Gospel.

Then we might start to have a clue how to converse  
with our neighbors who adhere to the faith called Islam.

So let us this morning tune our ears to a gospel word.

A gospel word, as I'm using it, is a word of good news  
that sheds light on the core nature and character of God,  
and shows us how to relate to this God and to each other  
in a way that makes a good life possible.

The scriptures we heard this morning do that, I believe.

So let's remind ourselves what we heard.

From Genesis 17 and 22,

we heard of God's attempt to form a people through Abraham.  
God entered into a formal covenant

with Abraham and with all of Abraham's descendants.

And remember, Islam *also* looks to Abraham  
as a father of their faith.

Mohammed, and most people of Arab ancestry,  
are believed to be descended from Abraham's son Ishmael,  
through Hagar.

*Parenthesis.* Right off the bat, let me be clear about something.

There are Christians who say that Allah,  
the God worshiped by Muslims,  
is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob . . . and Jesus.

Well, first, let's point out the obvious.

Allah is simply the Arabic word for "God,"  
like El is the Hebrew word for "God."

The word El occurred several times in today's Genesis reading.

Furthermore, the Qu'ran clearly identifies Allah  
as the same God of the Jews and Christians.

Let me quote from an English translation of the Qu'ran,  
from the second Surah, v. 136:

We believe in God (Allah), and the revelation given to us, and to  
Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, *and* that given to  
Moses and Jesus, *and* that given to (all) prophets from their Lord:

We make no difference between one and another of them: And we bow in submission to God (Allah).”  
Muslims believe that God has revealed himself truthfully, through Abraham, and *both* his sons, and the prophets descended from them, including Moses and Jesus.  
They make no distinction.  
They submit to God who reveals himself through them all.

So asking whether we worship the same God, is not a helpful question. It’s too simplistic. The real question is, “What kind of God is revealed in Islam, and in Christianity?” How is that revelation the *same*? and how is it *different*? We’ll get to that in a minute.

So back to Genesis.  
God is here revealed as a covenant-maker.  
God wants to be in covenant with a particular people so that God might bless *all* the peoples of the earth.  
God wants *all* his people to be a fruitful blessing for the benefit of all creation, to work with God in restoring the goodness, the wholeness, the shalom, salaam . . . peace that the world had *before* the rebellion, and fall.

And then, in today’s Gospel reading from John 4  
Jesus reinforced this notion that God has love and compassion for all nations and peoples, and is not confined to any one humanly-constructed religion and its own holy places and holy rituals.  
The day is coming, said Jesus to the woman at the well, when faithfulness to God is *not* defined by whether we worship in Jerusalem, in the temple, in accordance with the rituals of Jewish religion, or on a mountain, or in some other place and tradition.  
What will *matter*, Jesus said, is whether we worship in spirit, and in truth.

That is, whether our offering of ourselves to God, is done in a way that honors the spirit, the character, the essence of God, and whether it is done truthfully, with integrity.  
God is the all-powerful creator of the universe and seeks our loyalty, our undivided worship, and demands truthful integrity from us.

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Those are the gospel words for Christians today.  
Non-negotiable words about God and about true religion.

*Everything* about our religion must be in line with God’s purposes for the peace, wholeness, healing, and redemption of all creation. God’s agenda *must* be our agenda, *always*.  
Our religion must *always* call us toward covenant with, and toward complete obedience to, the one, and only, and great God who deserves our undivided loyalty.  
And our worship, our prayers, our religious life and practices, must be true to, and consistent with, the character and spirit of God, who we understand most fully in Jesus Christ.

It seems to me, as followers of Jesus, as people who claim the name Christian, that is one place we can stand without apology, without hesitation.

But of course, this brings us to another question.  
How does standing in that place affect how we relate to those who order their lives around the teachings of Islam?

I don’t have the time, or the expertise, to do a complete comparative study of Islam and Christianity, but let me briefly point out what I *understand* are some significant points where we come together, and where we diverge.

Both Christianity and Islam teach us to worship God  
as Creator of the Universe,  
as a Supreme Lord,  
and as a judge enthroned above all creation.

Both our traditions hold that God reveals himself  
through prophets, and the community of faith.  
[And remember, Muslims see Jesus as one of those prophets,  
just not higher than the others, nor divine.]

Both share common religious themes of  
forgiveness from God,  
extending forgiveness to each other,  
and submitting our lives to the one great God.

There are even some specific teachings in the Qu'ran and our Bible  
that are similar, in regard to prayer, fasting, and family.

One of the major ways Christians and Muslims part ways,  
in our understanding of God,  
is the matter of God's relational nature.

To *oversimplify*,  
Christianity begins with "God is love."  
Islam begins with "God is one."

To start with "God is love,"  
is to affirm that God actively participates with us,  
relates to us,  
chooses to be closely involved in our world,  
and in our life experience.

In Islam, God dwells *fully beyond* the limits of human comprehension,  
and our capacity to interact with God.

Where Christianity calls persons  
to enter into a loving covenant relationship with God,  
Islam calls persons to assume a proper position  
of reverent worship and obedient submission  
before God's will and revelation.

Those are significant differences.  
And there are many *more*, if we take time to listen and learn.  
But that does *not mean* we Christians stand here  
over against our Muslim neighbors,  
and say to them "our God" is true,

and "your God" is false.

We actually have much to gain from their view of God.  
We have something to *learn* about reverence,  
about how to approach a holy and powerful and just God,  
about how to order our lives around submission to God's will.  
And, of course, we say *they* have much to gain  
by opening themselves to a fuller understanding  
of God's relational nature,  
and by realizing that God reaches out, through Jesus,  
to restore a broken and estranged relationship with humanity.

We *do* have differences that actually get to the heart of the matter,  
in terms of our understanding of salvation, and grace,  
and the nature of Jesus Christ, on whom our salvation rests.  
Our two faiths diverge on critical points.

But *again*, how do we approach dialogue with Muslims?  
What is the purpose of talking with them,  
and what is the best method to *achieve* that purpose?  
I said earlier I have been mostly disappointed  
with the nature of the dialogue  
all along the political and theological spectrum—  
right, left, and middle.  
I think we're missing it on so many fronts.

Again, let me overgeneralize a little. Well, maybe a lot.  
For many Christians on the right,  
the only reason to talk to Muslims,  
is to convince them to give up Islam and convert to Christianity.  
So they argue a lot, and listen very little.  
For many Christians on the left,  
it's all about listening, and very little engagement on theology.  
Tolerance is everything, so they don't dare push any points,  
even if they *had* any points to push.  
But no, "Everyone has a different way to God,  
and each way is as good as the next way.  
Let's all be friends."  
And moderate Christians

might *recognize* the significant theological difference,  
but avoiding conflict is the main point, isn't it?

So if we *must* talk to our Muslim neighbors,  
at least we can avoid talking about religion.  
Even talking food is a little dicey.  
Sports, *maybe*.

I've grown weary of public speech between Christians and Muslims  
that's either hate-filled bullying each other,  
or polite, politically-correct, non-speech  
that doesn't take us anywhere useful.

Not long ago, I heard a speech by a Mennonite church leader—  
one actually *involved* in some very fruitful, substantive,  
and respectful dialogue with conservative Muslims in Iran—  
and he said he was told by an Iranian Muslim cleric,  
“I can have much better conversations with a Christian  
who believes in their own faith strong enough,  
that they try to convince me to become Christian.”

Almost by *definition*,  
Good dialogue with opposing parties  
happens when we put our most deeply held beliefs  
out in the open, on the table,  
and actively defend those beliefs in a respectful mutual struggle.  
Then we are most likely to be heard and respected by our opponent.

Isn't the point of inter-religious dialogue  
spiritual *growth*?  
getting closer to the *truth*?  
going deeper in our understanding of God?  
Isn't that also the point of evangelism?  
helping others discover deeper truths about God,  
and going deeper in understanding and commitment?

But no one will move off square one—either Christian or Muslim—  
if all we can do is, on the *one* hand,  
politely tolerate, without ever engaging each other,  
or on the *other* hand,

shout religious slogans and do physical violence,  
or religious violence to each other.

We see the violent side every time we glance at the news,  
since the press *loves* to give lots of air-time  
to fundamentalist extremists, both Christian and Muslim.

But polite, quiet mutual tolerance  
that *never* gets to the heart of our differences,  
is not *only* utterly boring conversation,  
it's not helpful in the least,  
it will not move us forward in faith and understanding.

So I call on us, the church,  
to *be the church*,  
be the bearers of the good news  
of God's love and mercy and justice  
that we come to know in Jesus Christ.  
Let us boldly articulate our faith.  
And engage the other with deep respect,  
and fully expect *them* to do the same.

Because devoted Muslims are *also* “evangelical” . . .  
in the generic sense of the word.  
They would like others come to believe and practice the good news  
of a life lived in submission to the one God who is great.  
They would have *us* repent of our materialistic ways in the west,  
and our immodest and pleasure-seeking  
and over-sexualized lifestyle.  
They would that we should not be so indifferent and casual  
about God's laws.  
They would have us take on a more reverent and submissive posture  
toward the great God of the universe.  
In their prayers, multiple times a day,  
they proclaim the greatness of God.  
“Allahu Akbar!” which means, literally, “God is greater!”  
That phrase, deeply ingrained in the prayer life of every Muslim—  
every peace-seeking, practicing Muslim—  
is only known to us, *unfortunately*,

because it's also a battle cry of the violent extremists,  
when they are taking a plane down,  
or setting off a suicide bomb.  
But that phrase is actually repeated many times a day,  
by peaceable, devout, practicing Muslims  
who are *our* neighbors in Harrisonburg, and U.S. citizens.  
“Allahu Akbar!” they say. “God is greater!”

Even that prayer phrase,  
if we can get past its distorted association with terrorism,  
could be one of the spiritual gifts we could receive from Muslims,  
if we dared to engage them, and their faith,  
with courage, and substance, and honesty.

Yes, we have good news to share with them, as well.  
There is good news for all humanity  
in God's everlasting covenant love toward us,  
revealed through God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Let no Christian claim that we don't *have* any  
“evangelical” mission before us in our relationships with Muslims.  
If we don't have any good news worth sharing with Muslims,  
we don't have any good news worth sharing with *anyone*.  
We don't have any good news worth holding as our *own*.  
Some people have a bad taste in their mouth for the word  
“evangelical” because of its association  
with some highly distasteful expressions of Christian faith.  
“Evangelical” literally means “characterized by good news.”  
That ought to describe us.

If we don't have any good news that transforms us  
into passionate people of a living faith,  
we are not likely to be respected by Muslims  
who have oriented their whole lives, and daily rhythms,  
around devotion to, and submission to,  
the One God who is greater than everything!

Of course, the sharing of our good news with someone,  
needs to be accompanied by a willingness to listen deeply,  
and learn from them.

Evangelical faith is compassionate faith.  
It is active faith that engages the other deeply,  
respectfully, and at their point of need.  
That's what Menno Simons said.  
“True evangelical faith *cannot* lie dormant.  
It clothes the naked, it comforts the sorrowful” etc.

I would love to have an opportunity to return to Gainesville, FL,  
and share the good news of a grace-filled, joy-filled life in Jesus,  
with Rev. Terry Jones.  
I don't think he knows or understands Jesus.  
I think he must harbor some deep fears and anxieties,  
he must be grieving some terrible losses.  
I wish I had the chance to share my “evangelical faith” with him.  
Of course, I would have to do a lot of listening,  
to *get* to that point.

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God is greater!  
Allahu Akbar! God is greater than any human barrier we construct.  
God can break down walls caused by hatred, fear, anger,  
misunderstanding, misinformation.  
God is greater than any of our religions—Christianity *or* Islam.

Being Christian is not about  
establishing, protecting, maintaining, or growing a *religion*.  
It's about getting Jesus right.  
It's about understanding the depth of God's love shown to us  
in the life, teaching, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.  
Jesus didn't come to earth to establish a religion  
that we need to fight to defend.  
He came as God's Son, to authentically represent his Father,  
and reconcile people with God.  
People and creation had become estranged,  
had wandered far, and become lost.  
Jesus came to restore the world that God loved,  
back to God's beautiful, whole, and shalom-ordered creation.  
That is the measure of true evangelical Christian faith.  
Do we get Jesus right?

All of us fall short of “getting Jesus right.”

We fail both to see the light of God’s love and truth  
that comes to us in Jesus,  
and we fail to share that light with the world,  
to fulfill God’s covenant with all descendants of Abraham,  
that they might bless all peoples and all creation.

Again, I call us to a prayer of confession and petition.

Turn to #371 in the blue hymnal,  
“Let there be light, Lord God of hosts.”

Read through the text quietly and prayerfully.  
and then we’ll sing it.

Let there be light, Lord God of hosts,  
Let there be wisdom on the earth;  
Let broad humanity have birth,  
Let there be deeds, instead of boasts.

Within our passioned hearts instill  
The calm that endeth strain and strife;  
Make us thy ministers of life;  
Purge us from lusts that curse and kill.

Give us the peace of vision clear  
To see each other’s good our own,  
To joy and suffer not alone,  
The love that casteth out all fear.

Let woe and waste of warfare cease,  
That useful labor yet may build  
Its homes with love and laughter filled;  
God give thy wayward children peace.

—*Phil Kniss, September 12, 2010*