

## Respecting Faith in a Time of War



Tonight, St. John's will be hosting the annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Service for our little interfaith community that lives along our side of Clearwater and Largo. I have been looking forward to this for several weeks, not just because I like a good party or a good liturgy, but mainly because I am passionate about ecumenical, interfaith, and inter-religious dialogue and ministry.

As most of you know, much of my ordained ministry has taken place in clinical settings as a chaplain, and our job

was to meet people where they were, with their own beliefs, questions, traditions, and stories and to walk with them as they seek to find strength, hope, meaning, and direction in their situation whatever that may be.

And in order to do ecumenical and religious dialogue really well, one must first be well grounded in one's own religious tradition and be an active participant in their own faith journey and, whenever possible, their faith community, too.

So it's not merely an intellectual exercise for me to understand other religions, but a faith journey that helps me learn and do the work of Jesus every day as his disciple—as his friend and apprentice. My faith in God and my trust in Christ allows me to rest in God, whose loving embrace is big enough and wide enough to encompass all the complexity, imagination, and context of every single person in every single place and situation, especially those whose faith-stories are very different from my own.

Now I believe that the Christian claims are true and available to everyone—that God created and is the source of all things, that we are free to use our conscience, freedom, skill, and reason for God's purposes (or not!); that through the incarnation, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus God has bridged the gap between God, creation, and humanity, and risen from death, intercedes for us at the right hand of God, and that God has sent the Holy Spirit to us to empower, direct, comfort, and teach us to live as Christ's living presence in the world today—Whew!!! That's a lot!

But my believing that with all my heart does not give me license to dismiss, let alone beat up, others who believe differently than I do, or whose faith is based on something else entirely. In fact, I believe that living what Jesus taught as his disciple requires me to live respectfully of others!

I also believe that our faith must necessarily make ethical demands on us. Most traditions espouse some form of what we learned in school or Sunday school as the "Golden Rule" that we are to treat others in the way we wish to be treated. And many traditions have some form the First Commandment, to love God with whole being—heart, mind, and soul. To love God with our whole being and to love our neighbor means that we respect our neighbor, that we seek to live peaceably with them in mutual

respect, that we seek their welfare, that we act honorably and ethically towards them in a spirit of love. This is not easy.

It is especially difficult when some of our co-religionists (or people who claim another faith) resort to verbal or physical violence, even deadly tactics, to get what they want or, worse, to deepen religious and cultural divides. It is not lost on me that Hamas chose to unleash their rocket attacks and kidnappings upon Israel last month just as Israel and Saudi Arabia were about to complete a long sought, hard won, peace settlement. They saw that the Arab and Muslim world was, one-by-one, was seeking peace with Israel that would have brought to conclusion that more than 75 years of unremitting conflict has solved nothing and only made matters more difficult. If that peace deal had been completed, Hamas and its sister organizations would have less support, less reason to exist. It would have been clear that the path to peace is not through violence and terror. Israel would have been in a position to deal differently with their Palestinian neighbors, especially in the territories. But the missiles, the kidnappings, and the retaliation have changed all that. Now the cycle of violence has revved up and the prospects of a lasting peace have been set back.

Which is why it is more important than ever for people of faith to come together to pray together, share their stories, eat together, listen to and learn from each other. Tonight and every day, we must show that our common search for God, our varied yet common responses in faith, and our various faith journeys lead not to division but to peace. That out of this process we practically respect the dignity of every human being, and usefully live out our faith as Christian people with people of other faiths. That it is possible to work for and live in peace on a daily, practical basis.

Above all, this is our chance to witness to a sinful, cynical, and divided world that, as our own Prayer Book says, through our faith in Christ and through the faith that others carry, God's work may be done on earth as in heaven (pp. 428, 364, etc.) and that under God's grace and power "unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair." (p. 429)

The world needs that witness now more than ever. Especially in times of conflict and war. The time to start is now.

Shalom. Salaam alaikum. Peace.

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