

A Common Word

TEXT:
Isaiah 42:1-7
Acts 10:34-43

January 13, 2008

We thank you, God of the universe, that you call all people to worship you and to serve your purpose in this world. We praise you for the gift of faith in Jesus Christ. We praise you also for the diverse faith among the people of the earth. For you have bestowed your grace that Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and others may celebrate your goodness, act upon your truth, and demonstrate your righteousness. Amen.ⁱ

On the Sunday following the tragic events of September 11, several hundred residents of Claremont, California, gathered in the courtyard at the Claremont Islamic Center, to express our solidarity with our Islamic neighbors. We had been called together by the leadership of the Mosque in response to several incidents of prejudice and abuse directed to the Muslims in our community.

As one of the speakers representing the religious community, my words were set to evoke an enduring American tradition. In the towns and villages of New England, whenever there was significant news to share in the community, whether it be good times or hard times, the church bells would peal, and the townspeople would gather to hear the news together. As we gathered at the Mosque that Sunday afternoon, I thanked the members of the Islamic

Center for continuing that American tradition and calling us together to share our common fate.

This past October, a group of Islamic scholars, representing every branch of Islam and every major Muslim nation in the world, issued an open letter to the Christian leaders of the world, calling attention to the central tenet of our two religions.ⁱⁱ The organizers called this the first non-polemical consensus statement by Islamic political and religious leaders on Christianity.ⁱⁱⁱ

The letter, titled, *A Common Word Between Us and You*,^{iv} argues that at the core of our faith traditions lies a common belief in love of God and love of neighbor. In the imperative of these twin commandments exists a clear basis for interfaith peace and understanding.^v This letter, *A Common Word Between Us and You*, rings a symbolic bell on the town square of our global family.

The letter originated as a response to remarks made by Pope Benedict XVI in September, 2006, which angered Muslims worldwide. The Pope, who seemed to overlook the centuries of congenial relations between the two faith traditions, not to mention Christianity's own violent history of the Crusades, made a comment which seemed to suggest that Islam is a religion of violence, as was its founding prophet Mohammad. Over 130 Islamic

scholars and authorities joined together to deliver an answer to the Pope in the spirit of open intellectual exchange and mutual understanding.^{vi}

From the first paragraph of the letter, we are brought into a startling reality. It begins by noting that Muslims and Christians make up over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities there can be no meaningful peace in the world. "The future of the world," the writers suggest, "depends on peace between Muslims and Christians."^{vii}

And then it proceeds to offer the premise of the letter:

The basis for this peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very fundamental principles of both faiths: Love of the One God and love of the neighbor. These principals are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbor is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity.^{viii}

The statement looks carefully at texts from the Koran and the Bible which exemplify the two themes of love of God and love of neighbor. I was particularly intrigued by the reference in the Koran to love of neighbor. The prophet Mohammad said: *None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself.*^{ix}

Notice how similar this verse is with the Great Commandment taught by Jesus, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In their commentary on this (and similar) texts from the Koran, the Islamic scholars wrote, “In Islam, without love of the neighbor, there is no true faith in God and no righteousness.^x

This is, perhaps, what is most surprising to Christians in reading this letter, the assertion that the dual command to love is the fundamental principle of both Islam and Christianity. Listen to a group of scholars from Yale Divinity School in their response to the letter:

It is a deep insight and courage with which they have identified the common ground between Muslim and Christian religious communities. What is common between us lies not in something marginal nor in something merely important to each. It lies, rather, in something absolutely central to both That so much common ground exists gives hope that undeniable difference and even the very external pressures that bear down upon us cannot overshadow the common ground upon which we stand together.^{xi}

I trust that you quickly recognize the importance of this open letter in the light of the grave tensions in our global community today. John Allen, the Vatican correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*, called this letter the most underreported religious story of the year. The West, he pointed out, has been asking since 9/11, “Where are the moderate voices in Islam to counter the radical fundamentalism in the Middle

East?” This Letter, he suggests, is the first outline of a structure from such leaders. Here they are saying to us in the West, “Let’s talk.”^{xii}

A critical reading of *A Common Word*, would point out that its writers may have underestimated the place of religious faith in the political structure and foreign policy initiatives of the nations of the West. Since most of these scholars live in theo-centric state (that is, one where the tenets of Islam have significant influence over life and politics), the letter fails to grasp the secular political States of the West, and the religious freedom and diversity that exists within their population. Presidential election politics aside, for the most part our government’s functions and laws are not derived from the Bible or the Christian faith. We are not a Christian state. Our political leaders are free to enact policies without regard to establishment religion. Moreover, the Letter suggests that the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq reflect a religious battle between Christianity and Islam, rather than a war engaged by the government of the United States.

Let me, in the brief moments I have left, connect this impressive Letter to our biblical texts assigned for today. Our reading from Isaiah is the first of four servant songs, in which God tells the people that God will raise up a servant to lead the people in the way of justice to the earth. Notice three times in the first four verse, it says that the servant will bring justice. To whom will this justice be brought? To the nations – not to Judea and Israel alone, but to all the nations.

This is the importance of our reading from the Book of Acts. Here, Peter, the great traditionalist of the early church, has a revelation that the circle of God’s comprehensive presence is greater than just the Jews, greater than his people, greater than his understanding and greater than his imagination.

This has always been the tension within the Christian scriptures: God would say to the Jews and Christians, my love is not limited, it knows no boundaries, it is not bound by geography or theology. If this is true, then, while we may acknowledge that Islam and Christianity are two different religions (as the authors of *A Common Word* in fact do), nonetheless, we can come to see that these two faiths come ultimately from a common source, an interaction with the holy in our lives.

With this thought in mind, *The Confession of 1967*, offers some guidance to Presbyterians on the topic of our encounter with other religious traditions. It notes:

The church in its mission encounters the religions of [humanity] and in that encounter becomes conscious of its own human character as a religion The Christian finds parallels between other religions and his own and must approach all religions with openness and respect. Repeatedly God has used the insight of non-Christians to challenge the church to renewal.^{xiii}

And who is the servant? The text does not say. Scholars over the centuries have debated this point, some suggesting that the servant was one of the prophets, or perhaps a King, like Cyrus, who granted the Jews the

freedom to return to their homeland from exile. Others suggested it was the Messiah who was to come. The Christian Church has clearly identified this servant of Isaiah with Jesus, and many scholars would argue that Jesus adopted these servant songs as a model for his ministry. But there is also a school of thought that suggests that the servant is the people, the nation of the people of God.^{xiv}

If this perhaps is also true, that we have a part to play in God's vision for God's creation, then we should stop and be thankful for this invitation to dialogue with the Islamic community. Here are some things we can do.

We can learn more about our Islamic neighbors and begin a faithful and faith-filled conversation with them. First Presbyterian Church is one of the sponsors of the upcoming conversation with the authors of the book, *The Faith Club*. This is an important book, written by three women, a Muslim, a Jew and a Christian, describing their open and honest conversation about their concerns, stereotypes and misunderstandings about one another and their respective religions. The authors will be coming to Lawrence on April 9, and I hope you will make take advantage of this multi-religious conversation. This talk will, no doubt, draw our attention to the things of common value held deeply between our three faiths. In these tense times, there lies to key to hope for a peaceful future.

We can reject the pull and danger of fundamentalism in our religious traditions. We need to be honest in stating that Osama bin Laden no more reflects the true nature of Islam than Fred Phelps represents Christianity.

We can continue to pray and work for the reformation of our faith and that of our neighbor. God continues to speak to the people of God, in whatever variety we take, calling us, each of us, into God's ever-expanding circle of God's grace and God's peace.

Let me conclude this morning, with one last quote. Eli Wiesel, the holocaust survivor and humanitarian, who has seen the injustice that religion and ideology can inflict on humankind, offered these words:

The cycle of crime and punishment can be halted before it is completed. Evil can be aborted, diverted, vanquished, better yet, it can be transformed: it can undergo endless mutations—by choosing repentance.^{xv}

It is with humility and a sense of repentance, that we engage the world that God has made, and embrace the people within whom God has loved.

In the name of the Creator, the Christ and the Spirit of live. Amen.

ⁱ Book of Common Worship, (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 798

ⁱⁱ The letter was addressed to a wide array of Christian leaders in the West and the East, including Pope Benedict XVI; His Holiness, Bartholomew I, Patriarch of Constantinople, the head of the churches of the Orthodox traditions, and all other Patriarchs and Archbishops of Orthodox Churches; The Most Reverend Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, as well as the leaders of the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the World Methodist

Council, and the World Lutheran Federation.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Dart, "Muslims point to common ground," *The Christian Century*, (November 13, 2007), 13

^{iv} Subtitled, "An Open Letter and Call from Muslim leaders" The statement can be found at www.acommonword.com

^v Editorial, "Between Us and Them," *The Christian Century*, November 13, 2007

^{vi} "Introduction to *A Common Word Between Us and You*", at www.acommonword.com

^{vii} *A Common Word between Us and You*, p. 2

^{viii} *A Common Word*, p. 2

^{ix} Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Iman, 67-1, Hadith no. 45. Referenced at *A Common Word*, 11

^x *A Common Word*, 11

^{xi} Harold W. Attridge, et all, *Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word Between Us*, 2f, found at yale.edu/faith/about-commonword.htm

^{xii} "Year in Review", *Religion & Ethics Weekly*, PBS, broadcast on December 24, 2007

^{xiii} "The Confession of 1967" *The Book of Confessions*, 9:41-42

^{xiv} *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, (Oxford University Press, 1991), footnote, page 922

^{xv} Eli Wiesel, *Jonah in Five Biblical Portraits*. (University of Notre Dame, 1981) 150-51

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