

“WELCOME”
Psalm 13; Matthew 10:40-42
June 26, 2011
The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

A week ago Saturday night, I was in Portland with several others of the Corvallis community to accept an award on behalf of the community’s response to the fire-bombing of the mosque last November. I introduced a female friend to Mohammed Siala, the emir at the mosque, and as I introduced them, she started to extend her hand to shake his. I tried to stop her hand in its upward trajectory because I know that as a devout Muslim man, except in an emergency, Islamic law considers it haram—forbidden—for Mohammed to touch women except for his mother, his sister, his wife, or his daughter. I was not in time, however, to divert my friend’s hand, and Mohammed surprised me by taking and shaking it. Afterwards, he pulled me aside, and told me he had seen me try to stop the handshake. He thanked me for my efforts, then said to me, “I shook her hand because she did not know, and to not take her hand would embarrass her, and that would be a discourtesy on my part. The prophet, peace be upon him, would say that the obligation to courtesy and kindness was more important. She meant no disrespect, and my not shaking her hand would not have been translated in that moment as a gesture of disrespect for her.”

I am a member of the national Interfaith Alliance, a group of Jews, Christians, and Muslims committed not to religious tolerance, but to understanding, appreciation, and friendship between our religious traditions. This weekend is a celebration the institute calls “Faith Shared.” All of us who are members are committed this day to furthering appreciative dialogue among the three Abrahamic faiths. Over the past five years, I have learned more and more about the faith and practice of both Judaism and mainstream Islam, and the more I learn, the more appreciative I become. Saturday evening’s learning moment was just a small example. The stereotype of Islam is rigid; but Mohammed’s faithful response was anything but rigid. In the prioritization of his faith’s values, courtesy and kindness trumped a major rule of conduct.

Our gospel reading for today from Matthew is part of a longer passage where Jesus is sending his disciples out to meet the Gentiles and the Samaritans—those from whom most righteous Jews of the time would keep themselves apart. Their mission was to pronounce that the Kingdom of Heaven was coming near. And what that pronouncement meant was made clear in Jesus’ instructions to the twelve: Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. In other words, bring restoration to those whom you meet. Bring them welcome in the fullest, most profound sense of that term.

We, of the United Church of Christ, we challenge ourselves to be the church of extravagant welcome. We, at our best, work to welcome the poor, the marginalized, all of God’s people. But what does it mean to be welcoming? See, I think that for too long, the concept of welcome has been translated to mean, “We welcome you to become like us: to share our beliefs, to join us in our houses and ways of worship.” I’m not sure that’s what Jesus meant, especially when sending Jewish disciples into gentile territory. I think it’s more likely that the basis of welcome is more fundamental than that. It is the belief, the statement, that you—whoever you are—are already like me in the ways that count. You—whoever you are—are a beloved child of God. Period. And that’s all you need to be to be welcomed by me. And because we are alike in the way that counts,

being beloved of God, then I will extend myself to know you, to help you, to be in significant dialogue with you, to be your friend. That is the alternate definition of welcome to which I would hold: to know, to help, to be in significant dialogue, to be—in short—a friend. To be welcoming is not to convert, nor is it to say that our beliefs are alike. To be welcoming is to allow the other to be him or herself while we are our own authentic selves. And yes, there will be points of connection, but also points where we differ significantly. To be welcoming embraces the other in both likeness and differentness.

There are many people, some of them Christians, who do not hold to my definition of welcome. A week ago, someone hacked the Interfaith Alliance's membership list, and sent an e-mail to all pastors and churches who had agreed to be part of this morning's Faith Shared celebration. The e-mail pointed out, often by incorrect proof-texting, but also in real ways, how Christianity and Islam are fundamentally different and therefore we should have nothing to do with "them." The most egregious difference cited was that in the Qur'an, in the story of Jesus, Jesus is not in fact crucified. Judas, made by God to look like Jesus, was crucified on the cross that day, and Jesus was taken up into heaven without dying—the only prophet ever to do this—and in the last days, Jesus will come back to earth to teach all who will listen the ways of Islam. No crucifixion; no resurrection, Jesus converting the world to Islam. It's a serious difference in our faith stories.

To the writer of the anonymous e-mail, this difference means that we Christians simply can't extend a welcome to our Muslim brothers and sisters. I would disagree. Am I uncomfortable with the Qur'anic story. You bet I am. It takes the central story of my faith tradition and pulls the rug out from under it. But then again, Muslims reading the Christian Bible and the history of Christian interpretation are told that there is no sacred scripture beyond Christianity. We, in our tradition do not accept the Qur'an as a further revelation from God that trumps all that came before. That cannot be comfortable for our Muslim neighbors. So, there are irreconcilable differences in our faiths, differences that cannot be wished away, glossed over, or made insignificant. That is the truth.

It is also the truth that most Christians and most Muslims share the values of kindness, generosity, sincere worship, a commitment to justice and protecting the marginalized, and seeing all people as created by God, to be valued and respected as they are, for no reason other than that they are God's beloved ones.

So do we offer them our sincere welcome, inviting them to enter a space of relationship that respects and celebrates both their authenticity and our own? I guess what I want from you all this morning, what I want from myself, is not just a knee-jerk "yes" because it's politically or even theologically correct, but the thoughtful pondering of what it means to accept another as truly "other"—yes, a beloved child of God like ourselves with qualities that we admire, but also with differences that will complicate relationship, that will separate us on some issues, that will keep us from ever being in complete agreement. Have we the heart for that? Have we the faith for that?

One of the areas where my friend Mohammed and I disagree is on the issue of homosexuality. He finds it disturbing that our church marries gays and lesbians. I find it uncomfortable that he believes that homosexuality is a form of deviance. We discussed the issue one day; it was like

picking our way through a mine field, both of us wondering if the other would say something that made further dialogue impossible. Will our differences break the bond that connects us? Finally, Mohammed said to me, "Liz, I believe what I believe, but I also believe it is not my place to judge. Only God is judge. So, do I agree, no; but still I show them kindness and respect because they, too, are God's."

How many of us are willing, how many of us choose to offer kindness and respect to those with whom we have fundamental disagreements? Look at our politics: international, national, even local. Look at the divisions in the Christian church, divides between progressive and conservative that have become canyons too wide for most of us to even begin crossing.

We call ourselves the church of extravagant welcome. If that is to be more than words, we need to learn to do the hard work of true welcome, seeing in each one a beloved child of God, one with whom we might have significant, even painful disagreements, but everyone deserving of kindness and respect. This is no facile commitment, whether it is within our own community, within the spectrum of the Christian church, or in interfaith dialogue. Are you willing to be kind and respectful with those who are really different from you, who disagree with you even on issues close to your heart? And are you willing to believe that those with significant differences from you are kind, are respectful, can be significant dialogue partners and even friends to you? For that is the heart, that is the challenge of true welcome. So think about it. Really think about it and pray about it. I believe that until we are willing to cross that difficult chasm, there will be little chance to end the polarization among the politics and religions of the earth. Thanks be to God for all God's beloved ones. Amen.