

### **Love your neighbor as yourself?**

In the name of God, the compassionate and the merciful, it's really an honor to be with you here, in this holy space.

I grew up, again, at Bethel College. I'm sure some of you are familiar? It's really a time when I, as a Muslim woman, came into myself and I came into myself at the heart of this Mennonite institution. As I saw the people around me, I wanted, so badly, to be exactly like them... the love, the kindness, the mercy, the compassion... to the point that I didn't see myself as any different. And then, slowly, I started to see that the differences were important. It was actually something to be celebrated. But a time it really rocked me was my freshman year. We were required, in our sociology class to walk up the stairs to chapel and be in that space. And so, I walked, one creaking step at a time, to this beautiful space that was completely full of people. We talked about service, we sang about love. It was about kindness and compassion. And I remember looking around me. This Muslim woman who felt a little bit awkward and out of place. And I was so welcomed! So much *in* the space and *of* the space. And it really rocked me. Because as I walked down the steps, I started thinking about this exclusivist theology that we wrap ourselves with, except at the time, I didn't know it was called "exclusivist theology"!

I went to the campus pastor who, at the time, was Randy Smith and I said, "You know, it's interesting... I grew up and my mom is Christian and, I grew up in Jordan, in a predominantly Muslim society. And I remember the kids taunting me and saying my mom wasn't gonna go to heaven. So I would go home and, of course, mom couldn't know why I was crying, so I would wait until dad would come home. And my dad would say, "It's ok, honey. We'll just pray for your mom." So we'd pray. And then I went to Bethel and I saw all these really great people who were doing really amazing things and just doing service, like, people would ask me, "Do you want to go do meat canning?" And I'd be like, "Do I want to go do meat canning??"

But it was a beautiful thing and I wanted to be part of that beauty. And so I went to Randy and Randy said, "Aziza, don't worry about it! That's actually up to God. The judgment is actually up to God. So what should we focus on?" And so I started this path, this pondering and reflecting. And through my readings, I came across this book by Diana Eck. It's called *Encountering God* and in it she explains, "The moment we human beings grasp God with jealousy and possessiveness, we lose hold of God." And one by one, I went through the different responses to religious diversity that Eck explains in that book. The "exclusivist response" which is that "our truth is the ONE truth". Then the "inclusivist response" which acknowledges many paths, however, either ours is the best one or it's inclusive enough to encompass everyone. And then there's a third path which is called "pluralism". In pluralism, the idea is that respect for diversity of all traditions among us is something that will allow us to learn about the people around us, but also to revere those people as well, and their teachings. That we can actually have the audacity to learn from each other. Wow!

There's this Quranic verse that says (and I'm paraphrasing now) pluralism is the will of God. Diversity was intended and had God willed it, God could have made us all the same, but God intentionally made us different, so that we could be tested in our diversity and be judged by our good actions. And at the end of that verse, the good action part actually says that you should vie against each other as if in a race to do good deeds, that *that's* the true act of faith.

So if God's will is diversity and we're supposed to love and embrace our neighbor, what does that really mean? To honor the differences among us and respect God's plan? There's this Muslim author, and a dear friend, who we all lost in January of last year. His name is Dr. Maher Hathout. He said, "God does not belong to a religion. All religions belong to God." This is the God that you create, and not the God who creates you. We respect God's will when we respect diversity, when we respect and appreciate God's will as the things we have in common are our moral agenda, helping the weak, catering to the needy, working together to build a more beautiful and just society.

Whether it's the teachings of Abraham, Moses, Noah, Isaac, Ishmael, other prophets. Whether it's Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God and the word, the Virgin Mary, instead of getting busy and proving who is better, as people of faith, we have the opportunity to DO what is better, to do good together, and prevent what is wrong. To stand for justice and truth even if we put ourselves at a disadvantage, as the verse that was just read. And sometimes, confronting ourselves is even harder than confronting another. When I walked up those stairs at Bethel, I was confronting myself. I was sort of terrified. What is this space? Why do I have to be there? And yet, going there opened my world.

Another thing we did at Bethel was that everyone is required to do a "Basic Issues of Faith and Life" class. And so, we would read all these different teachings. The one that really stuck with me is actually one that I learned as a child. It's the story about the good Samaritan. And the "take" on that story, reading it as an adult was a lot different than reading it as a kid. I would ask you to indulge me and walk through that story one more time.

The text says, "On one occasion, an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher", he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the law?", he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself." "You have answered it correctly", Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In reply, Jesus said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road and when he saw the man he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was, and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and water. Then he put the man on his donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day, he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him", he said, "and when I return I will reimburse you for any extra expenses you may have." "Which of these three, do you think was the neighbor to the

man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go, and do likewise."

When I re-read that text, it brought out something that I had no idea was there. If you go to the texts of theologians like Marcus Borg, in his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, he says that, "For Jesus, compassion was more than a quality of God and an individual virtue. It was a social paradigm, the core value for life in community. To put it boldly, compassion, for Jesus, was political. The story of that good Samaritan exemplifies what it truly means to be a good neighbor. To put yourself out there, to take a risk, to give, even when others are hesitating or even disgusted by the other people around you! To uphold the highest standards of compassion, especially in the face of perceived impurity. And I don't use the word "impurity" lightly. At the time of Jesus, purity was very important. Death was very impure, which is why the priest and the Levite just kept walking and they left the man to die. But the good Samaritan challenged that "purity system", and did what was right, and proved a very important parable, that "compassion" was a new "system" of operation. Jesus himself went much further by touching the impure in order to heal them. He touched lepers, hemorrhaging women, and in doing so, he challenged the system of purity that led to that revolution of compassion, that revolution of love.

Today, as a Muslim woman, I sometimes feel like I am "untouchable". When someone doesn't smile at me I am on hyper alert! I don't know if it's for something else. And yet, here you are. Honoring me in your holy space and respecting a Muslim voice. And I thank you. I thank you for the opportunity to tell a story. A different story. A different truth. And to be held, in your most important space. I was practicing (Islam) before I went to Bethel College, but I felt faith through my experiences there. I was grounded in Christianity and I was grounded in Islam and I started to seek the truth and the beauty in lots of other places too. It emboldened me, to have this shared agenda for love and generosity and service, and standing for justice. So I remember that when I'm nervous and I'm walking up those stairs and I don't know what's at the top, I remember that that's where opportunity lies, that's where love lies and where compassion is and sometimes we have to take a risk to even know the truth, to even know what's out there.

So as uncomfortable as it is, I hope we can all challenge ourselves to see people as they are, but to really look at them and see the beauty in them as well. We all have an important connection to our faith. And we have beautiful people who live among us. And we also have an opportunity to enrich our communities, and do so much more together.

I told this story last night, but I'll tell it again for the new faces. I'm also the daughter of a Palestinian refugee. My dad and his family lost everything after 1948. They lived in abject poverty and my dad would tell stories to us when we were kids, mostly to taunt us, because we had everything and he had nothing. But he would tell us about how, during the winter times, mostly they were barefoot, but during the winter times they would bind their feet with old rags just to take the sting of winter as they walked to school. And they would eat from the hillsides, until this day they love the shrubs on the side of the hills. I've never found a love for them! But one day, some jackets, some clothes, made their way to my family. My uncle found a note in one of the pockets. The note said, "Write to me." And it was an address of a Mennonite man from Vancouver named Mr. Brown. And so, a friendship was born. And that friendship led Mr.

Brown and some Mennonites from Goessel, Kansas to make their way to visit my family, my dad, my uncles, and it opened their world to something that was different. To being seen, to seeing opportunity, to seeing a new life. That love and that compassion – I can't tell you how important it is! It can be simple and yet powerful. And I hope that as we look at each other and our different neighbors, whoever they are, however close or however far they are, as we look at this interconnected world, that we can keep that compassion and that love and that connection back to text, so that when we're fearful and we're walking up the stairs of uncertainty, we can work together, and still be able to do something incredibly powerful through love and compassion. I leave you in peace.