

“Passionate Spirituality”

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This passage [John 6:35, 41-51] was shared with the community of the Jewish people. Now remember, Jesus was Jewish, so he was talking to his own people; but they couldn't see the mystery, and it is a mystery. How Jesus, who was born and raised in this small, little place, could then turn around and be the son of God - who was in heaven. It's no wonder the people couldn't understand the mystery. Frankly, most of us do not like mystery a whole lot. We cannot control mystery. We want certainty. One writer that I really like - her name is Anne LaMotte - said, the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty.

The Jewish people turned from questioning and confusion, to complaining and near derision, because they were so frustrated that Jesus was not giving them certainty.

“Say it so I can understand it, so I can follow it. Make my faith easy.”

Jesus never once made faith easy, and they resented him for it. Jesus gave them a mystery they had to struggle with that would never be easy. Even the brilliant Nicodemus struggled to understand what Jesus was trying to do. This mystery went beyond bread being spiritual and feeding people. It spoke to the incarnation. The incarnation is the embodiment and the deity in human form or nature: it is Jesus. God-in-the-flesh is what the incarnation is. The incarnation is the means by which we have access and partake of the life that God offers us. It is beautiful, just like Chapter 1, verse 14 of John: *The word became flesh and lived among us: Jesus.*

Again, Anne LaMotte said the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty. There is no certainty, but a lot of doubt for Christians and how we handle the Trinity. Here is Jesus trying to explain that, “Yes, there is God, but I am the son of God, one with God.” Then there is this Holy Spirit out there; so, somehow, together, although the word “Trinity” never does appear in the Bible anywhere, it is all over the New Testament, and in the Old. As we talk about God - the first person of the Trinity, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, has different aspects or persons of the one God. But in a society that is becoming more diverse like ours, we need to learn and understand; struggle with that mystery because we are no longer able to passively sit back in our lily white churches and our lily white neighborhoods and all live pretty much the same. Now we are focusing on having neighbors that are Muslim and Hindu, and more Jewish people in our community, and other religions, and no religion, and everybody else in between. What a surprise when there is a little more friction, as we begin to communicate with each other.

I used to get a kick out of my grandmother. She used to say, “I'm not racist,” and I said, “Yes, because you are from North Dakota, and there isn't anybody else but you up there.” When I go to North Dakota *I'm* the minority because I'm Polish.

But now all of a sudden we are all together, and we are finding out we are not similar. Sometimes when we see radicalized groups of these different religions and denominations we start finding out that we may not even like each other. Yet there are four Muslim mosques within a mile and a half of this church - in every one of the four directions.

We have to figure out how to live together, even when we don't agree on everything. This is all right. We have been teaching tolerance so long, that we talk as if we have to agree with everything. No, that would be untruthful to who we are. But it does mean that we have to tolerate each other - at the very least - and, you know, with God at work, maybe we could actually love each other and not just tolerate each other while we are trying to figure out how to do this.

When there is no confusion in our lives we can just nonchalantly skip around without having to think anything or change or do anything. Sometimes when people come into my office and say, "sometimes I'm so sick of thinking about everything all of the time; I wish I had so-and-so's life, because their life is perfect, they always have enough money, they always have their kids around them; they always have this and that, and their life seems so simple." But I don't think for Christians that God intended to make our lives *simple*, that we could just skip through life happy and blissfully ignorant. I think God challenges Christians and continually makes us uncomfortable, forcing us to deal with things we don't want to deal with, challenging us to argue with each other, to question each other, even while we are tolerating each other. Some of you really are good at tolerating me, even when I get up here week after week and you just don't know what in God's name I am talking about sometimes. That is the challenge to continue to affirm and trust each other.

Now I have had some very faithful people come to me recently about issues that are going on within the Muslim community. I have received books - and I appreciate them - and I have read them. I mean it's your fault I'm giving this sermon - the people who gave me books - because I read them, all week. I'm up to my neck with these books. Both pro and con, and what is the relationship of Christian and Muslim. So, it is in my head. So, because you put it in my head, you are going to get it back.

I appreciate people making me feel uncomfortable and challenging me, because frankly I've been able to get by for nearly 30 or, now over 30 years of ministry - if you count Seminary - and not had to really work or challenge myself with the Muslim community. Now, all of a sudden, over and over again we have to deal with it. We ask ourselves questions, because we can't get away with it anymore. It is on TV, in the news, and in our neighborhoods. Are all Muslims radical? Because if you read the Koran; it is radical. But then I would say read the Bible - and I wouldn't want to take that literally either. In fact, I heard somewhere that there were 300 and something radical, violent statements, in the Koran and there are 574 in the Bible. Now, of course, the Bible is a lot bigger than the Koran, however it makes you - or forces you - on all sides to talk about interpretation.

Do we worship the same God in very different ways, or do we have different Gods? This is a very important question, because throughout history when we have treated people like heretics, when we have nothing in common, it is easier to dehumanize.

The challenge within the Muslim and Christian communities is to determine - being truthful and honest - whether we can bond over the same God or not. Now Islam is based all the way from the beginning of our Old Testament. The break came with Abraham. We - all three - monotheistic religions have the same father: Abraham. It breaks with Ishmael.

But some would argue that the Muslim faith is split so dramatically away from that, that there is no commonality anymore. They [the Muslims] are acting so differently and so inappropriately that there is no longer any relationship to the one true God and what they are proposing or proclaiming.

Common ground is hard because the Muslim community (it is easy for me to talk about Christians) let's talk about Muslim community and the way they look at us. They have a lot of trouble looking at the Christian community, because they do not believe we are monotheistic. They believe we are polytheists. They have a point because, I would gather that, maybe 90 percent of Christians cannot argue the Trinity well enough to be monotheistic.

I struggle with being monotheistic with the Trinity. It is a mystery. We are back to mystery! Thank you, Anne LaMotte! But how do we bring a father, a son and a Holy Ghost all under one God? When for Muslims, the most central part of their faith is the unity of one God. They could say we are polytheists. The Koran actually says they do blaspheme who says, Allah is one of three in the Trinity. But they are misunderstanding. Before I explain the misunderstanding of how they view us - I want to say one thing about Allah. They are not talking about a different God, Allah simply

means in Arabic, "God." If you go over to Cottage Grove Presbyterian Church - or what used to be Cottage Grove Presbyterian Church - there is a service going on in Arabic: a Christian Arabic service.

We support them. We are working with them. We are striving to keep them open, and when you go into that Arabic Christian service this morning you are praying to Allah; because it is an Arabic service. What they are saying when they say "Allah," is simply "God." That's it.

You go into a Croatian Christian service you are going to hear prayers to "Bog," a Croatian word for God. So when you hear Allah, we all jump to the Muslim, their God, but the name is simply Arabic for God.

You go to Egyptian Coptic Church in Egypt and they are going to call "Allah" in the Christian Church. So, that isn't the word you need to get hung up on. There is a lot you can get hung up on in the Christian-Muslim dialogue, but that [reference to God] isn't one of them.

The misunderstanding - to go back to the Koran - where they do blaspheme those who say Allah is one of the Trinity of three. Their own Koran misunderstands what Christians are trying to say. They misunderstand the Christian concept of God, because they see God as one part of a Trinity. They can't get their heads around the mystery that God and the son, the incarnation - that word I used earlier - and the Holy Spirit are just three aspects, or three personalities, or three ways in which there is one God.

There is no easy way to explain it. I have done three candles, tied together, and lit during a children's moment and nobody got it. You twist all of the wicks together. It was really cool, until you actually tried to do it. I have heard people get up and say, "Oh, the Trinity. It is like Scott is a father, and he is a Pastor, and he is a son of somebody." Yes, but no. It is just a mystery.

So how in the world do you explain a mystery to a group of people that are saying you are not monotheistic enough? I don't know. They are going to have to let us live, and live with us, in this misunderstanding that is very hard to work out. But we have to work at who they are and what makes them so vastly different in the Koran than what is in the Bible.

The only thing I'm going to argue today in the few minutes I have left is that we are talking about the same God. This will upset a few people. Even in the books that have been given to me. But I want to go all the way back to the 1400s, (Boy! You are going to be here awhile!) to Pope Nicholas V, have the Turks in the Ottoman empire charging through - that's why the Bosnian community was Muslim. They moved and they charged in the 1400s. They even came into Hungary, our sister congregation. They charged into Hungary, and were knocking on the door of Germany. There was great fear and trepidation. Other popes before Pope Nicholas V wanted another revival of the Crusades, and he said, "No. We will communicate and not fight, because fighting will only create more hostility for many, many years to come; even though they were scared to death that the Turks would ride in and bring Islam to the entire European continent. It didn't happen.

So you can't say that those days were different from ours - we have some of the same fears. Nicholas V was worried. Yet he stood behind trying to communicate even though he didn't believe that there was Heaven for those infidels - whether they were Protestant or Muslims, the infidels may not go to Heaven - but he refused to say anything other than they worship the same God. They just don't do it right enough.

Now you can say that they don't do it right and they can say we don't do it right. But, if at least there is the same God then you can't write them off and dehumanize.

Now, let's move just about 30 years into the future to Martin Luther; the Protestant Reformation. Now we have a protestant, now we will talk about the real truth. I'm joking, folks. Martin Luther was brutish. If you read beyond the beautiful "Theological Treaties" to his personal stuff, the man was obnoxious - and that is Lutherans talking to you about it. He even called the Pope the anti-Christ and everything in between. You couldn't talk about a more frustratingly obnoxious human being than Martin Luther. Yet, while again he is condemning Muslims and Ana-Baptists and everyone else to hell, except for the people who believe with him the right way. Martin Luther stood there and said, "but we worship the same God."

I don't think we can let go of that as easily as so many are trying to do. They were on the door step in Martin Luther's day of also taking out Europe. But, he would not, in order to drum up support for a crusade with Nicholas V, or a violent overthrow in Luther's time, as armies were rearing up to attack. He would not dehumanize them by saying they were different gods, because in Luther's mind they were not worshipping a different God.

Plutarch - in the first century - was a great Greek philosopher. He wrote treatises called, "The life of Theseus." In that document it talked about a ship. In this ship - as it rolled through the Mediterranean Ocean and the salt water - the boards (that was all they had) would rot. Over time, as a board would rot - they didn't all rot at the same time - so as they did, they took it out and replaced it with a new board so it would have more time. Plutarch sat there looking at it one day and he said, "Is this the original boat - after 30 years - or have so many boards been replaced that it isn't the same ship as was originally built? What makes a ship, a ship? The name, the same size, or the wood that it is built on?"

What makes people of the same faith? How many planks need to be replaced before they aren't "us" anymore? We have the same father Abraham, but after that it gets pretty murky. Where are they acceptable and when do they become Heretics? And when I say, "they," they are us and we are them, we are both talking "they" language. Wouldn't it be nice if someday even when we are very different and disagree we could still say "us," because - in some way - we are worshipping the same God?

I think it is a starting point that we are monotheistic even if the Muslim community can say, "Well you are not as monotheistic as we are," we can disagree about that. We can say, "We don't like your Koran because it is violent and they can say they don't like our Bible because it is violent. They will point to a conversation and say Jesus said in the Gospels that, "I came not to bring peace but the sword," and - uninterpreted - we sound violent. We need to have conversation and dialogue about what it means and how you interpret and what is the difference - and is there a difference as some would say or there is no difference between the violence in the Muslim and extremism and any other Muslim community.

I can't go there because I'm uneducated enough, and I can't get my head around the idea that a Muslim community - which is one of the largest in the world - has no diversity. I would hate for some Christian denomination to say that is Christianity. It isn't my Christianity. So do we not have the same obligation to ask that of the Muslim community? While we are in this fray - and it will get more difficult before it gets better - we have to ask ourselves where are we similar; not where do we differ. That is easy. But how do we communicate?

Jesus - in the passage I read today - was not willing to write off the Jewish people he disagreed with. He said they did not have the fulfillment of the Gospel, but they worship the same God. I, as a good Christian or a bad Christian or some kind of Christian, would say that the Muslim community does not understand the true breath and grace of the Gospel that can only be found through Jesus Christ. But that does not mean that I am willing to say that they do not worship the same God.

We need to step up and speak about our commonality, so that we can do what Nicholas V did. That is to raise our voices before we raise our weapons. Because I have a feeling there are a lot of Muslim people who do not believe what the extremists are doing is Islam. We need to either empower them through dialogue and support, or we are all going to be fighting - and the fight isn't in the Middle East. It is in Beaverdale, it's in Urbandale, and it's in Waukee - because we are all together neighbors.

Let's use the character and the uniting of monotheism of "a love thy neighbor and a love of God" to bind us closer as we seek to deal with the vast differences, and may God bless our work.

Amen