

“We the People”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, on November 4th, 2007

I begin with the poem, *The Altars in the Street*, by Denise Levertov. On June 17th, The New York Times reported that, as part of the Buddhist campaign of non-violent resistance, Vietnamese children were building altars in the streets of Saigon and Hue, effectively jamming traffic.

*Children begin at green dawn nimbly to build
topheavy altars, overweighted with prayers,
thronged each instant more densely*

*with almost-visible ancestors.
Where tanks have cracked the roadway
the frail altars shake; here a boy*

*with red stumps for hands steadies a corner,
here one adjusts with his crutch the holy base.
The vast silence of Buddha overtakes*

*and overrules the oncoming roar
of tragic life that fills alleys and avenues;
it blocks the way of pedicabs, police, convoys.*

*The hale and maimed together
hurry to construct for the Buddha
a dwelling at each intersection. Each altar made from
whatever stones, sticks, dreams, are at hand,
is a facet of one altar; by noon
the whole city in all its corruption,*

*all its shed blood the monsoon cannot wash away,
has become a temple,
fragile, insolent, absolute.*

I don't know about you, but I can just picture the altars in the streets. And I can see in my mind's eye, the hale and the maimed together creating them. I came across this poem a few weeks ago, right after the military junta in Burma violently stopped the protests of the Buddhist monks and the citizens of that country. I wished I could send the poem to them.

The people of Burma are devout Buddhists. And I know they wanted to support the monks who risked their lives and took to the streets in order to bring an end to the oppressive and authoritarian rule that is stifling their country and its people. I suppose that most Burmese people

were scared or didn't know what to do. Imagine if the people all took to the streets and made altars in the intersections. They could have shut down the Capitol in Rangoon and the commerce. They would have created a moral blockade of an immoral system.

People have that kind of power when we unite in common cause. We witnessed it in India, when Gandhi inspired the farmers and the common people through faith and determination and guided by love and purpose, and they conquered one of the strongest empires the world had ever seen. We've seen it in this country, most powerfully, during the civil-rights movement. In order to end legal segregation Americans took to the streets guided by faith and love and offered a moral critique of our culture and our government and its laws. This is the power of the people -- when people are united in the common cause of justice.

I remember a story I heard some years ago about a town somewhere on the East Coast. It was during the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, and a group of neo-Nazis started to terrorize Jewish families by throwing rocks through the windows of Jewish homes where they saw a Hanukah menorah burning in the window. Within a day or two, the entire town had placed menorahs in their windows in solidarity with the Jewish community. They sent a clear message, that hate was unwelcome in their town. And they also showed the Jewish community that they were welcome.

About 10 days ago, I read in the newspaper that a state legislator from Oklahoma had declined the gift of a Koran that was being offered as part of the Oklahoma Centennial celebration. Initially I was disappointed that instead of graciously accepting this goodwill offering from his constituents, the legislator decided to make a political point. But I know as well as anyone that ours is a free country, and anyone can freely offer, as well as freely refuse, a gift. But when I read that the legislator, in his response to the gift had written to the people offering it, and said that "most Oklahomans do not endorse the idea of killing innocent women and children in the name of ideology," I thought to myself, "I hope most Oklahomans don't endorse the idea of maligning the religion of innocent woman and children in the name of politics. I realized that a representative of the people had just, in effect, condemned an entire religion and its people. And that's unacceptable.

There have been Muslims living peacefully in Oklahoma for over 50 years. They have contributed much to our state and its culture and economy. I expected that within a day the legislator would have clarified his remarks. I thought for sure I would hear the words, "I was misunderstood. In no way did I mean to imply that the Muslims of Oklahoma or that the Muslim religion endorses the killing of innocent women and children." Instead the legislator defended his

remarks on television and in the newspaper, and added fuel to the fire by accusing the Muslims of Oklahoma of not speaking out publicly against terrorism.

Now, I have personally heard Muslim leaders in Tulsa speaking out against terrorism, in interfaith worship services and at forums around Tulsa. I watched as the Muslim community invited the citizens of Tulsa to the mosque many times to learn about their religion and culture. I've seen the statements against terrorism and violence on their website. And I know that they have spoken in schools, to Rotary clubs and throughout our city and state. I will never forget watching the Muslim Children's Choir singing along side Jewish and Christian and Unitarian and Native American children as part of the September 11th memorial service at the Performing Arts Center in Tulsa in 2002. That service was a testament to the beauty and diversity of our city and country. And it was an example that the religious and ethnic divisions that divide people around the world have no place in Oklahoma.

Yet the rhetoric last week in the media continued, and there was no public apology or effort to clarify to the public what was meant. So by Friday of last week, interfaith leaders, joined Muslim leaders for a press conference. I was asked to speak in my role as the president of Tulsa Metropolitan ministries. For me, the most powerful statement of the day came from David Bernstein of the Jewish Federation. He explained his many roles as a Jewish leader in Tulsa, but said "Today I am a Muslim standing with my brothers."

It reminded me of the menorahs in the windows. It reminded me that when a minority is being threatened or discriminated against, that *we the people* need to stand up together and say: no more. Not in this neighborhood, not in this city, not in our state. You may have seen me quoted on the news or in the paper.

Here is what I said:

Diversity is difficult, but it's worth it! One of the greatest gifts that America has offered the world is an example of how people of different religions and ethnicities can live together with respect and dignity and justice for all. As a representative of TMM, I want to acknowledge that I believe Governor Brad Henry showed Oklahomans the appropriate way to handle the situation. He received the gift of the Koran from his Muslim constituents graciously as a goodwill offering. He recognized it as a gesture of friendship, offered in the spirit of kindness and cooperation. Diversity is difficult, but it's worth it. And it's a defining characteristic of the best of America!

Our state representative has handled this situation in a way that is disrespectful of his fellow Americans. His comments have promoted religious bigotry against American citizens. At the

centennial of our state, we must all tell this representative that his discriminatory words and his unapologetic bigotry towards his fellow American citizens do not represent our great state or our blessed country. We are one nation, under God, indivisible – and we will not be divided by politicians who use religious and ethnic rhetoric to enflame bigotry.

I'm honored today to stand with my Oklahoman Muslim neighbors who have proudly stood with this nation in good times and bad and who have publicly denounced violence in the name of their religion time and time again. These are people dedicated to peace and justice for all. God bless Oklahoma. And God help our legislators learn what it means to represent America and all her people!

You should read the letters and emails I've received since last Friday. After reading the letters there is no question in my mind that the words and deeds of certain legislators have both inflamed and promoted bigotry and hatred. Whether they meant it that way or not, that has been the sad result. One letter-writer called me an antichrist, and quoted chapter and verse of the Bible to explain how I was condemned by the Lord. Most of the letters contained hateful words about all Muslims and about their religion. It made me realize all the more, that when an elected official or other public figure speaks discriminatory words, it gives permission to other people to do the same.

I believe that these people who have written these things to me feel even more justified in their prejudices since they have heard a respected leader quoted with prejudice. And that's why it is so important that public figures not discriminate. And if they are misquoted, they need to clarify that they were misunderstood quickly and definitively.

Now, I realize that if a person reads a translation of the Koran, and decides to take certain verses out of context, that it can appear to endorse violence. But the same is true of the Bible. And zealots in many religions, and many eras, have exploited scriptures to perpetuate their political agendas.

Let's look at the Bible for a minute. We all know it includes the commandment: Thou shalt not murder. But in the same Bible that God commands us not to murder, God also tells the Jews to annihilate the Canaanites in order to take over their land. This leaves the impression that there are two kinds of murder, and that one is apparently ordained by God. The human rights of the Bible evidently did not extend to the Canaanites. Reading the Bible literally makes it quite clear that killing and even exterminating people is part of God's plan.

In Deuteronomy 7:1-6: it reads:

When Yaweh your God has led you into the land you are entering to make your own, many nations will fall before you... Yaweh your God will deliver them over to you and you will conquer them. ...deal with them like this: tear down their alters, smash their standing stones, cut down their sacred poles and set fire to their idols. For you are a people consecrated to Yaweh your God.

Now, as we know, Moses never made it to the promised land. It was Joshua who led the Israelites into Canaan in 1200 BCE, and he followed God's instructions to the letter. We read in the book of Joshua 8:24,25,28 and 11:21,22:

When Israel finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the open ground and where they had followed them into the wilderness, and when all to a man had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai and slaughtered all its people. The number of those that fell that day, men and women together was 12,000, all people of Ai... Then Joshua burned Ai, making it a ruin for evermore, a desolate place even to this day. Then Joshua came and wiped out the Anakim from the highlands, from Hebron, from Debir, from Anab, from all the highlands of Judah and all the inhabitants of Israel; He delivered them and their towns over to the ban. No more Anakim were left in Israelite territory except at Gaza, Gath and Ashod.

For the next two centuries, the Israelites holy wars continued under the leadership of people such as Gideon, Deborah and Samson. So, to set the background for religious endorsement of violence against innocent woman and children, we now know that in the Bible we not only have a God that smites this people and that, but we have a God that chooses one people to be moral exemplars to the world, and this God instructs those moral exemplars to kill and exterminate other peoples.

Now, let's skip ahead a millennium to the origins of Christianity. Jesus brings the world the teaching that if someone strikes you on the cheek, you're not to fight back, but are to turn your other cheek so the person can strike it as well. He emphasized loving your neighbor as yourself and forgiving others. He explained: "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God." He's been called the Prince of Peace. And yet, more brutality and killing has been done in his name than probably any other religion. Listen to the words of Pope Urban II who initiated the first crusade against Muslims in 1095 CE:

...I exhort you with earnest prayer – not I, but God – that, as heralds of Christ, you urge men... of all ranks, knights as well as foot soldiers, rich as well as poor, to hasten to exterminate this vile race from the lands of your brethren. Christ commands it. And if those who set out to do so should lose their lives on the way by land, or in crossing the sea or in fighting the pagans, their sins shall be remitted. Oh what a disgrace if a race so despised, base and the instruments of demons, should so overcome a people endowed with faith in the all-powerful God,, and resplendent with the name of Christ...

Here what we have is the most influential Christian leader of his time, a person who is thought to be God's representative on earth... imploring Christians to kill in the name of God and Christ and explaining that if they die in the cause, their sins will be forgiven. The Christian crusaders often slaughtered Jews in Europe as they set off on the crusades. Some, who didn't go on crusades, killed local Jews so they could feel like they were playing a part. They believed it was the Jews who killed Jesus, so they thought, "Why should we travel so far to fight the Muslims, when the killers of Jesus are right here among us?" For the next four centuries, Christians could be found butchering and driving out Muslims, Pagans and Jews. They were guided by religious leaders and a belief that their actions were ordained by God.

It is important to remember that during the years that the Muslims ruled Spain, Jews and Christians were protected and were able to hold political offices. Then after the Christians regained control of Spain in the 15th century, they slaughtered, converted and drove out the Muslims and the Jews.

So what does the Koran say? For one thing it states that "There shall be no compulsion in religion." (2:257) Therefore the Koran probably contains the world's first declaration of religious tolerance. Historically, it seems that when Muslims were in power, they were tolerant of Christians and Jews. It's only since losing much of their power and sovereignty, that some Muslims have begun to redevelop the notion of a militaristic jihad, or holy war. The word *jihad* literally means "striving or exertion in the way of God."

In Islam there's a notion that there is a greater and a lesser jihad. The greater jihad is the internal battle we all face within ourselves to act righteously. The lesser jihad is the external battle for justice and equality in the world. In a well known passage from the sayings of Muhammad we are told:

A group of Muslims soldiers came to the Holy Prophet [after a battle]. He said: "Welcome, you have come from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad." It was said, "What is the greater jihad?" He said, "The striving of a servant against his low desires." (Al-Tasharraf, Part I p. 70)

Nevertheless, the Koran is certainly not a pacifistic scripture and it clearly states that if it's necessary to fight to end oppression or tyranny, then it's a Muslims duty to do so. There are however restrictions on such fighting, outlined by the Koran. And in this sense, Islam is the only one of the Abrahamic faiths to have clear scriptural limitations on warfare. For example, war cannot be an act of aggression, only self defense. Civilians cannot be harmed, and prisoners of war must be dealt with fairly. The Koran even states that vegetation and animals are not to be destroyed in war. In all these ways we can see that what modern Islamic terrorists are doing does not meet the criteria of justifiable war as set out in the Koran. Those who use the Koran to promote violence against innocent people are misusing and exploiting the scripture for political purposes.

It is also dangerous and unfortunate when Oklahoma politicians misuse and exploit their interpretation of the Koran for their own political purposes. In this time of war and fear there are many misunderstandings about the Islamic faith. I imagine the Muslim community in Oklahoma is giving out copies of the Koran, in part, to help people better understand them and their religion. The incident that has occurred here in Oklahoma helps me realize how necessary it is for all of us, but especially for our public officials, to know more about Islam. Our founders brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men and woman are created equal. The American Revolution was won because in order to form a more perfect union, we the people joined together in common cause for liberty and justice. In doing so, our forbearers left us a new and different kind of nation. A nation based on human rights. A nation that has been drawn from all the peoples of the earth. A nation drawn from all nations.

We are not a country bound together by "blood and soil", but rather by faith in liberty, equality and justice. It is these noble principles that unite the people of America as one family. In fact, our faith in these rights is so strong that we believe they belong to people of every tribe, tongue, territory and tradition on earth. In that way, America is not so much a nation as it is a faith in the brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind. A faith that transcends nations and creeds and unites all people upon this earth in a mutual longing for a world of harmony and peace where no one is defiled, and no one goes to bed hungry, and wherein all God's children come to know and to cherish one another.

Amen.