

Sermon 092015 Tolerance
Scripture Genesis 17: 1-8
Sermon Title- Peacemaking

Rather than tell you what I did on my summer vacation, today I'd like to tell you about what I did in late June of this year. I attended a weeklong program at the Hartford Seminary called BAP, Building Abrahamic Partnerships. It was a gathering of mostly religious leaders- clergy, seminarians, and the like but some lay people of the three world religions that trace our heritage to Abraham in the book of Genesis- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

There were ten people from each of the religions, maybe a half dozen teachers and the directors. We learned of each other's religions, studied text, Old Testament, New Testament, and Qur'an, talked, and broke bread together. These three religions that have opposed each other, often violently, through the centuries including today, had a small group who got to know each other. This was, I think, the 18th time BAP has been run. It's a big deal. We had an Episcopal Priest come from Kenya. Two Shiite Muslims from Iran attended. Two Sunni Muslims from Singapore were there. There was a Palestinian and an Israeli Rabbi who is a settler. They live near each other on the West Bank.

A Jewish woman who some of you have met and who has been a friend of mine since 1987, Mona, was there. Mona came to Union Church for a Maundy Thursday service and co-preached

with me about Passover Seders and how Christian worship is rooted in the Seder. Mona is now studying to become a Rabbi. I've had the advantage of almost three decades of interfaith dialog with Mona so I know more than most Christians about Judaism, but I knew almost nothing about Islam before BAP. I'm 64 years old and I had my first conversation with a Muslim at BAP.

There was a day focused on Christianity, it's history and beliefs and the same thing for Judaism and Islam. At the end of the Christianity day, there was an exercise called 'fishbowl' in which the Christians went into the middle of the room. The Jews and Muslims were watching but could not ask questions or comment. The Christians were asked to answer the question, "What do the other two groups need to do so that you will trust them more?" On the Jewish day, the same thing and same for the Muslims.

When a Jew named Ezra spoke during fishbowl, he made a poignant statement. He said the Jews there had the least amount of power. I had been thinking that we were equal. Ezra went on to say that Christianity is the world's largest religion and by 2050 it will be overtaken in adherents by Islam, but Jews represent a tiny group in terms of numbers in the world. I knew that going in but Ezra helped me see the world through the eyes of a Jew. I

repeatedly had those sorts of moments of revelation with both Jews and Muslims all week.

I can't give this sermon without sharing this story. A Sunni Muslim from Singapore named Farouk was there. The leaders encouraged us to eat lunch with people of different religions, which we did. Farouk was walking down the sidewalk on the way to lunch with a Christian from Hartford when someone flipped Farouk the bird. If you don't know what that is, ask someone. It must be universal because Farouk knew exactly what it was. He got very upset. He asked the Christian, "Can they tell that I'm Muslim? Do I look like a foreigner?" The Christian said, "Farouk, you're wearing a Yankees cap!" Sports... the great American religion.

One of the things that we did was what is called text study. That is, we read from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), the New Testament, and the Qur'an. We went into breakout groups and discussed the text. One of the instructions was that the people associated with a particular text speak to give information but spend more time listening to the reactions of the other two religions to the text. What a fascinating week!

By getting to know individuals, many long held prejudices that the religions have had about the others were excoriated. For example, money is not the only thing that all Jews care about. The

Muslims that were there, often with great emotion, are horrified that terrorism and violence are done in the name of Islam. They said that it flies in the face of the teachings of Islam. Jews and Muslims have prejudices about Christians, as well, much of it connected to the violence Christians have directed toward them.

One of the things that kept on happening was moments of illumination of how much more alike we are than different. All three groups kept on saying, “We do that.” And “That’s what we believe.” Granted, BAP is a self-selected group who are open and fair minded. There was plenty of acknowledgement of how much hatred, mistrust and violence exists between all three of our religions and that we represent a drop of water in a stormy sea.

I don’t want to portray this as a Kum By Ya week. There were harsh words spoken and strong views expressed. There were many tears shed and frustrations shown. We were encouraged to speak up when we had ‘Ouches and Wows.’ There were more ouches than wows. It was faithful people putting themselves out there. There was a book used that I own called “You Don’t Have To Be Wrong For Me To Be Right” by Brad Hirschfeld. The subtitle is, “Finding Faith Without Fanaticism.” As a Christian, Jesus is right for me but I have to accept that Christianity may not be right for everyone. Accepting that others have the right to their own beliefs opens the door to tolerance.

Unfortunately, I had to leave BAP early. I had a family wedding to attend. Meg's niece, whom I love, was marrying and Meg did the wedding. I could not miss Michelle's wedding. I missed a lot at BAP, however.

On Friday afternoon, they split into three groups and went to three different mosques to attend Muslim worship. Then, they went back to discuss the experience. They did the same with synagogues on Saturday and churches on Sunday. Mona, who reads my sermons each week, stayed through to the end. We talked when she got back and I asked her about the worship services. She said, "Jim, it could have been you up there." All three religions preach love, compassion, helping the poor, forgiveness, and kindness.

A major problem is that people in the three religions don't know that about each other. This sort of ignorance breeds mistrust and contempt. It leads to the ugly state of affairs that has earmarked history and still exists between the three religions. So, I asked myself the question, "What can I do?"

Here is what I'm starting to do. Mona and I have contacted and met once with a Muslim woman named Shareda who attended BAP in 2007. BTW, Shareda is a retired LT. Colonel in the US Army; a super impressive woman who has done much interfaith work already. We are going to put together a program, or

workshop that will be a mini-BAP. We want to get people of the three faith traditions together to learn about each other and get to know each other.

I believe that is our best chance to try to break through the ignorance, mistrust, and contempt that currently exist. We expect to start slow and small. We may meet with small groups in people's homes to start. Both Mona and Shareda have agreed to play a part in our upcoming Confirmation class. Meg and I want our Confirmands to have a healthy respect for other faith traditions.

One reason to start small and slow is that the three of us are busy people. Shareda travels a lot. Mona is in rabbinic school, which is a huge commitment of time and energy. I want to be crystal clear here. My top priority is you. You will experience no drop off in pastoral care, hospital visits, preaching, and all my duties as your pastor. If you question this, I invite you to talk to anyone or all of our ten Stephan Ministers. Lu and I co-taught the 50 hours of training last program year. It was a huge commitment for the ministers and us. My time and effort for the interfaith work will not come close to what I did last year with getting Stephan Ministry up and running. BTW, Stephan Ministry is doing very well here at Union Congregational Church.

There are a number of stories in the gospels of Jesus reaching out beyond his group, the Jews, to other groups and religions. He did it with love in his heart. The way Jesus lived his life informs we his followers on how we are to live our lives. This is what I am doing. One of the first, if not the first place, I would like to do whatever program we put together is here at Union Congregational Church. I ask for open minds and hearts. I ask that whatever is done is done in God's love. AMEN