

Our Vision: To Commit Ourselves to Social Justice, Outreach and Interfaith Cooperation

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Psalm 79:1-9

Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

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Is there no balm in Gilead? Do we live in a world without hope? It can seem that way when we hear about a threatened Qur'an burning and potential violent reaction from Muslim extremists. At times of tension like this, when countries are at war, when leaders are talking about a "last chance" for peace in the Middle East, when people are losing their homes and jobs, we can ask, "Is there no balm in Gilead?"

The Gospel message says, "Yes," indeed there is a balm in Gilead! There is hope for a better world. There is always hope. But in our Bible it also says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). So we need a vision.

The vision of our church is three-fold: to invite openly and accept all persons—this was last week's focus—, to commit ourselves to social justice, outreach, and interfaith cooperation—today's theme—and to grow spiritually as individuals and as a community through education and worship—for next week.

Our commitment to social justice, outreach, and interfaith cooperation is our commitment to take our personal faith and put it into action in the community and world. These terms may be new to some people: social justice, outreach, and interfaith cooperation.

Social justice is a term that refers to working toward a more equal sharing of opportunities and resources. It's the idea that justice—what is fair—should be applied not just between individuals, but also in groups in society. For example, all should have access to the necessities of life. At the heart of social justice is the concept of human rights—what everyone should have simply because we are human. Roman Catholics have traditionally put a big emphasis on social justice in their call to aide the poor. In Judaism, two concepts, *chesed*, "deeds of kindness," and *tikkun olam*, "repairing the world," teach ethical responsibility. I was interested to find in the Wikipedia entry on "social justice," next to Catholicism and Judaism, the Methodists are the *one* Protestant denomination mentioned that is actively committed to social justice. Historically, under John Wesley's direction, Methodists became leaders in many social justice issues of the day, including prison reform and the anti-slavery movement.

When we say we are committed to social justice here at St. John's, it means we want to be informed about issues of the world—issues like immigration reform, racism, poverty, literacy, health concerns, human trafficking, global warming, and sustainable development. The list is long...our commitment to these issues isn't to try to solve all the problems.—Heavens, that would be impossible! But it is to be informed so that we can be advocates for change.

After social justice, our vision names "outreach" as another area to which we want to continue to commit ourselves. I say, "continue to" because outreach has always been a priority at St. John's. We have promoted NOAH, COTS, and programs like The Livingroom for many years. These are local organizations helping the less fortunate. When we volunteer to distribute food or collect clothing locally, or give money to disaster victims around the country or world, we are supporting the outreach ministries of our church. The Board of Global Ministries of the UMC sends missionaries around the world to help provide medical support, economic development, and the building of churches and schools. This is all outreach work.

The third area, after social justice and outreach, calls for commitment to interfaith cooperation. I'd like to spend some time talking about this today in regard to the Islamic faith, because we know from recent events in the news that there is such a need to build bridges between Muslims and Christians in this country and around the world.

If I as a Christian wish to build bridges of understanding with Muslims, then I think I should begin by examining myself. I must start by looking inward to consider my own background before I engage in dialogue. Too often we lash out with criticism instead of looking at our own biases.

So I want to share with you a bit of who I am, and why I believe what I believe. This has a lot to do with what's called my "social context." Your social context may be similar to mine, or it may be quite different. Because we are cultural beings, our cultural background has a great deal to do with how we view other people.

I was born to American parents of European descent. My father and his father were Methodist ministers. Our family's highest values were religion and education. When I was a young girl, my best friend was Judy. Judy is Jewish, and when we were little, we played "church" and "temple"—at her house we had a star of David, a miniature torah, and we had "pretend" Friday night services. At my house we had a stained-glass window and a cross, and we invited my family and the neighbors in for what we called Sunday "church," and we always took an offering. I grew up in Berkeley; I had music lessons and our family traveled abroad one year. I realize now how privileged I was growing up. I went to college in Washington, D.C., and it was then that I realized that not everybody in America thinks like people from Berkeley. I worked in the college cafeteria with Puerto Rican and African American middle-aged women. I thought of myself as a person who knew people of many cultural backgrounds. Yet, *I* was a member of the mainstream culture. People have never looked at me as the "other."

After September 11<sup>th</sup>, many Americans have viewed Muslims as the "other." Even before September 11, immigrants from Middle Eastern and East Asian countries have been looked at as different—different in looks, dress, language, and different in religion.

Interfaith cooperation is based on finding opportunities for dialogue among people of different world religions. Cooperation needs to be based first on humility, listening with respect, and agreeing to go beyond conversation, and to serve and work together for the

common good. This kind of communication requires recognizing your own biases and shortcomings and listening to learn about the person with whom you seek to be in relationship.

If we look at Christians historically, and with humility, you may feel as I do, somewhat ashamed of some of the actions taken in the name of Christianity over the centuries. I am ashamed of the Crusades in the middle ages when soldiers swept through Europe killing Jews in their path and descended on the Holy Land wiping out Muslims. I am ashamed that Jews and Muslims were expunged from Spain during the Inquisition by the Church of Rome, and that when Christian missionaries spread the Gospel around the world they often eradicated local cultural ways.—I am embarrassed that Native Americans were forced to labor on Californian missions and that Christian churches did not protest more against slavery in this country. I am ashamed that Christian countries colonized and controlled countries in Africa and the Middle East, in this last century. Certainly not all, but much of human history and history of the Christian world has been driven by attitudes of superiority and racism. The psalmist says, "We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us" (79:4). There can be no dialogue—no true cooperation—without humility and respect.

Lack of respect for people who are different breeds enmity and resentment. And it also breeds ignorance of one's own religious values. This is why I come back to knowing myself first. We are more likely to mistreat "the other," when we ignore our own Christian teachings. Rather than be suspicious or critical of Islam, if we study our own scripture and strive to be disciples of Jesus Christ, we will be more loving and more accepting.

Today there are about 1.6 billion Muslims in the world (1/5 of the world's population), and about 10 million of those live in the United States. We do not live in an only "Christian" country! We live in a country of many cultures and many religious traditions. Our task is not to convert people who are practicing their faiths; our task is to live out our own faith with commitment and to encourage other Christians to do so also. As you can imagine, many who call themselves Christians do not practice their faith. Though about 76% of Americans (across the country) consider themselves Christian, only about 20% attend church regularly ([http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel\\_rate.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_rate.htm)). In the West, in the "unchurched belt," as opposed to the "Bible belt," only about 1/2 the people say they even believe in God. We have work to do. Our work is to critique our own community and to find ways to put our own faith into practice, and invite others to do the same.

So, I'm suggesting that our first task is to look critically at ourselves, to review our own background as individuals and as a Church. And then when we approach people of different faiths, perhaps we can do so with humility and respect, which are clearly qualities of Jesus, our ultimate guide.

The second task for us as progressive Christians is to learn about other faiths and build bridges of understanding with our American neighbors. If you have studied Islam, you know that, as religious people, Christians and Muslims, we have some important beliefs in common.

The 5 Pillars of Islam are common to all practicing Muslims. First, Muslims give testimony to the oneness of God and God's revelation through the Prophet Muhammad. Second, Muslims perform ritual prayer, facing Mecca, traditionally 5 times a day. Third, Muslims give to charity as a way of thanking God for God's blessings. Fourth, Muslims fast during the month of Ramadan (just ended Sept. 9). And fifth, Muslims perform a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca once during their lifetime. Of these 5 pillars, we share the beliefs of the first 3: We share in the first pillar: belief in *one God*—for us, revealed not through the Prophet Muhammad, but known through the Old Testament prophets and through Jesus of Nazareth—We share in the second pillar of *prayer* also, and the third of giving to *charity*. (Some Christians fast and some make pilgrimages to the Holy Land—but the 4th and 5th pillars are not expectations of our faith.) The source of our common ground is the Bible. Both Muslims and Christians are “People of the Book” because we accept the revelation of God in the Torah and in the Gospel. Muslims believe that the Qur’an is the final revelation of God.

So our first task is to understand ourselves and our own religion; our second task is to learn about Islam and demonstrate tolerance in a multi-cultural society. The Qur’an claims: “no constraint in religion” (Sura II, verse 256), that is, people must not be compelled to convert to Islam. And the Qur’an says: “your religion for you, my religion for me” (Sura CIX, verse 6).

Though we should be tolerant of our neighbors of the Islamic faith, we certainly must not tolerate international terrorism or the violation of human rights committed by some individual Muslims or some fundamentalist Muslim states. We must oppose uncalled-for violence, perpetrated by another country or by our own country. As we are critical of other people, it is important also to be self-critical.

Hans Küng, a Swiss theologian, has written:

“There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions.  
There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.  
There will be no serious dialogue among the religions without common ethical standards” ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHk4RD8Cp48](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHk4RD8Cp48)).

As we contemplate our vision here at St. John's, ethical standards are the starting point: What is right? What should we be working for? (Ethics are the “shoulds” of religion.) If we go to scripture as the source of our ethics, we find God's lament over society; “How long, O God?” says the psalmist. But we also find passages about speaking the truth and loving our neighbor. Neighbors are people we talk to over the fence, we invite in for coffee, and we chat with when taking a walk around the block. Neighbors are people we want to be on friendly terms with. I hope there will be ways our congregation can be on friendly terms with Muslim and Jewish neighbors, perhaps also Hindu and Buddhist neighbors.

I received a request from a Rabbi asking clergy of all faiths to sign a petition to support the Muslim observance of Ramadan. (This was to help build sensitivity to Muslim children in

public school, fasting.) *A Jew asking me a Christian to support a Muslim practice—this is an act of solidarity among religions....* At Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, the mission statement printed on the website reads: “We believe in one God, known to us in Jesus Christ, also known by different names in different traditions. We seek to challenge and transform the world, beginning with ourselves, and to celebrate the image of God in every person.” *A Christian church acknowledging publicly that there is more than one path to God and that transforming love begins with oneself....*

The task before us is humbly to examine ourselves, treat our neighbors of other faiths with love and respect, and dare to be in dialogue speaking the truth—as we see it—in love, even when we differ. This is our challenge. It's an important part of our vision.

"Is there no balm in Gilead?" Indeed there is, but it takes work. It takes a vision and a commitment to that vision.