

Does God Play Favorites?

Prayer

Lord, may the words from my mouth and the meditations on all our hearts be pleasing in your sight. Amen.

A CNN journalist heard about a very old Jewish man who had been going to the Wailing Wall to pray, twice a day, every day, for a long, long time.

So she went to check it out. She went to the Wailing Wall and there he was, walking slowly up to the holy site.

She watched him pray and after about 45 minutes, he turned to leave, using a cane and moving very slowly. She approached him, hoping for a brief conversation.

“Pardon me, sir, I’m from CNN. What’s your name?”

“Soloman Fishbien,” he replied.

“Sir, how long have you been coming to the Wailing Wall and praying?”

“For about 60 years.”

“60 years! That’s amazing! What do you pray for?”

“I pray for peace between the Christians, Jews and the Muslims. I pray for all the wars and all the hatred to stop. I pray for all our children to grow up safely as responsible adults, and to love their fellow man.”

Dissension between Christians, Jews and the Muslims is not new. We have similarities; we have differences. Let’s look at some of these.

Yahweh, God, Allah. Three names for God. Judaism, Christianity, Islam. Three religions. Jew, Christian, and Muslim. Three peoples, faithful to their respective religions. The three peoples – Jews, Christians and Muslims - all have common roots back to Abraham. We are all monotheistic faiths believing in the same God.

All three religions teach that Abraham was a model of how humans should live their lives displaying courage, faith, sacrifice, obedience and most important, trust in one supreme God. We believe that the heart of the Abraham story and covenant is to see Abraham as a role model -- to encourage all of us to live our lives with the same courage, the same faith, and the determination to be the best person we can be.

So we have three faiths all believing in the same God. Do we share other beliefs? How similar are we?

I want to read to you a passage from the Hebrew, or Jewish Bible:

'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.' (Dt. 6:4-6)

This is a part of daily prayer said by faithful Jews called the Shema, meaning 'Hear!'

Does this sound familiar? Note the similarity in the Jewish and Christian faiths. One God. We heard similar words spoken by Jesus in the New Testament reading. (Mt 22:34-40)

Now I want to read to you a passage from the Qur'an, the sacred text of the Islamic faith:

'Your God is one God. There is no god but He, Merciful to all, Compassionate to each.' (Sura 2:163)

And one more passage from the Qur'an; this is Jacob speaking.

When he said to his sons: 'Whom will you worship when I am gone?' They said: 'We shall worship your Lord. And the Lord of your fathers, Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac: One God. To him we surrender. (Sura 2:133)

We have heard a core belief again. One God.

So what we have are three Abrahamic people – Jews, Christians and Muslims all believing in one God – the same God. We of three different faiths worship our common God in our own way. Each faith has its own worship practice. None is right or wrong – just different.

Do we have other similarities? All of the Abrahamic religions focus on forgiveness and mercy. Likewise they believe in loving your neighbor as yourself and taking care of the poor. The list continues with those beliefs we cherish in our Christian tradition.

In *Diary of a Young Girl*, Anne Frank said:

How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.

There are so many unsolved issues in the world today. We must learn to respect, love, and understand those of a different faith and culture. I believe we *can* come to interfaith cooperation.

My dream is that in time we can go the extra step and come together as one body of believers of the same God to address today's issues. Imagine the power if all believers of God were to unite to address social issues facing society today!

Will this be easy? The short answer is no! Unfortunately, there are a small number of extremists in every religion and culture. We hear of these and need to remember that these people are not reflective of the true faith. The most pronounced example I can think of is the Nation's collective reaction to 9/11. The media portrayed Muslims as the enemy and the Qur'an as their holy book filled with hate and revenge. Unfortunately this was the twisted interpretation of the Qur'an by the extremists involved in 9/11. It was not until years later that we heard of love and peace as the truths found in the Qur'an practiced by the millions of Muslims.

How can we reach interfaith cooperation? As United Methodists, we have a long history of being socially proactive. Our social principles are a call to prayerful, studied dialogue of faith and practice. We need to be current with and willing to understand the issues in our world. I believe this call extends beyond the boundaries of Christianity into interfaith dialogue, as interfaith relations are clearly an issue in our contemporary world.

Right here at St. John's we have a vision statement that includes a call for us to address interfaith relations at the local level. Imagine if every church, synagogue and mosque were to participate in interfaith relations!

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Why do we honor this man? Was he not a prophet of the times? His changes and influence on civil rights for the suppressed African Americans offered and paved the way for opportunity. He faced multiple arrests and assaults, his home was bombed and he was subjected to personal abuse. Yet through all this he persevered and emerged as a world re-known African American leader. He was awarded many honorary degrees, featured as Man of the Year on *Time* magazine, and ultimately was the youngest person to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Can you imagine the societal changes he could have peacefully led had he not been assassinated? Is social justice not what the prophets sought in Biblical times?

Recently we saw Representative Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona shot in the head. While her progress is amazing, she remains in critical condition. Bystanders out to hear her speak were also shot and injured – including six deaths; one a nine year old girl, another a federal judge. The suspect who committed this horrific crime was known to be seriously mentally ill. Why did we as a society allow him to be untreated? Why did he legally have a gun?

We read daily about the conflict and violence in Palestine and the Middle East. Agreement is elusive; after years of fighting, there are still issues remaining about mutual recognition, borders, security, water rights, control of Jerusalem, and the many other issues we hear. Negotiations only a few months ago failed to enact peace.

Natural disasters occur. Haiti has yet to recover from the devastating earthquake. Last week torrential rains caused landslides killing hundreds of people in Brazil near Rio de Janeiro. Floods have left parts of Brisbane, Australia decimated. Here in the U.S. we have seen blizzards cause chaos, freezing homes of the elderly, wars and civil strife are seen throughout the world – the list goes on.

Why do I mention all of these international events? It's because we can come together as a community of believers in God to help those in need. It doesn't need to be one church or denomination of Christians; I dream of the day when all believers in our God can come together to aid those in need.

Here is a copy of the Qur'an. Nowhere does it advocate violence and hate. In it are found teachings about God, peace, love and taking care of the poor. This is a copy of the Jewish Bible – the Torah, Law, and Prophets. What are included in its teachings? God, peace, love and taking care of the poor. And here is our sacred book – the Holy Bible. What are its teachings? We know so many, but the same teachings of God, peace, love and taking care of the poor are part of what we know to be true – Just as the Muslims follow the Qur'an and the Jews follow the Hebrew Bible. We all worship the same God. We worship differently. None is right – they are just different. God does not favor one faith over another.

Our path to salvation is through the grace of Jesus Christ and our belief in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as one triune God.

As we read in the Bible, are you willing to open your mind and heart to be part of the changing world?

Let us pray,

O God, you are the source
of life and peace.

Praised be your name forever.

We know it is you who turn
our minds to thoughts of peace.

Hear our prayer in this time of war.

Your power changes hearts.

Muslims, Christians, and Jews remember,
and profoundly affirm,
that they are followers of the one God,
children of Abraham,

brothers and sisters;
enemies begin to speak to one another;
those who were estranged join hands in friendship;
nations seek the way of peace together.

Strengthen our resolve to give witness to these truths by the way we live.

Give to us:
Understanding that puts an end to strife;
Mercy that quenches hatred; and
Forgiveness that overcomes vengeance.

Empower all people to live in your law of love.
Amen.

(The Muslim, Jewish, Christian Prayer for peace: <http://www.paxchristiusa.org/>)