

A People of Prayer

Scriptures: Daniel 6: 10-13; 1 Thessalonians 5: 14-18

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I. Introduction

A number of years ago, my wife Jeannine and I had the chance to visit Istanbul which is an amazing city and the first country that I visited that was predominantly Muslim, although Turkey obviously is a very secular society. But I was very struck as I spent my first day in Istanbul to hear that wonderful regular call to prayer that Mr. Chowdhury did for us this morning, reminding all of the faithful to gather for prayer together.

Because our relationship with Islam as Christian Americans has some volatile aspects to it, I've had a number of you ask me if we could spend a little time in worship reflecting on Islam and what that religion is about and where are the connecting points with our own Christian faith. We obviously see the images that predominate our media around Islam are images sadly of great violence and often terrorist attacks. And while the radical Islamists that are perpetrating those attacks represent a very small percentage of Muslims, less than a fraction of one percent, they dominate our media; 57 percent of the media that we see is about radical Islamist. And so, we've got sort of a skewed view of this and a lot of those images are very scary images, so there's a lot of fear that gets aroused and we hear a lot of that language reflected in our current presidential elections.

So, we are spending this month doing a little bit of reflecting on Islam. And I want to again reiterate what I said last week which was that as I have spent time digging into this, I have been more than anything else overwhelmed by my own level of ignorance, so I am not talking to you this morning as in any respect a scholar on this issue. I am speaking to you as your pastor and trying to share some of the pieces that I have learned and where the connecting points are as we seek to engage with our Muslim brothers and sisters.

Last week we looked at our common ancestry as children of Abraham with the Jewish and Christian communities tracing their heritage back to Abraham's son, Isaac, and the Muslim communities tracing their heritage back through Abraham's son, Ishmael. And we also talked about the fact that we share this common passion around our sacred texts, the Bible and the Qur'an.

II. Salah

This morning we're going to take a few minutes to look at another common passion which is our call to prayer as a people. And I want to start off picking up with some of what Mr. Chowdhury was telling the kids about the Muslim discipline of the *Salah*. *Salah* is an Arabic word that means prayer. It also means worship or bowing

down, which is an important part of that prayer ritual. And it refers primarily to the fairly highly ritualized set of five prayers that are common throughout the Islamic world.

Last week we reflected on the life of Muhammad and I talked about the fact that early in Muhammad's life he was very attracted to the Jewish and Christian communities that were part of his native city of Mecca and he started a discipline of prayer himself. Part of that discipline involved him retreating periodically to a cave outside of Mecca where he would spend time in prayer. And it was during one of those retreat times when he was 40 years old, so somewhere around the year 610 CE, that he received this very powerful vision of the angel, Gabriel, who started to teach him. Those teachings that Gabriel gives to Muhammad become what we know as the Qur'an, and those teachings extended over a period of 23 years until Muhammad died.

Fairly early on in that teaching process, Gabriel teaches Muhammad about the ritual cleansing of the hands, ablution, that was part of preparing himself for the experience of prayer. And he went home immediately, taught his wife that, and started teaching his followers that and started himself into a ritual of praying of twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. These revelations continued periodically through 23 years and about halfway through that period, about nine years into his experiencing of these visions, he had a very powerful visionary experience that in Islamic tradition is called the Night Journey, in which he experienced himself as being lifted up from his home in Mecca and taken to the temple in Jerusalem and then to the throne of God in heaven and receiving a number of revelations particularly about worship. And in that vision experience, he heard God tell him that Muslims should pray 50 times a day. So, later on in that vision he encounters Moses who suggests delicately that 50 times a day is a whole lot of prayer, right? And so, Moses suggests to Muhammad that he go back to Allah and re-explore that issue, which Muhammad does and gets told that five times a day would be a sufficient amount of prayer. And it's at that point that this structure of five daily prayers becomes what we call one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

III. Learning from Salah

The process of *Salah* is an interesting one for us as Christians to reflect on because it is not simply saying the words of a prayer. As you heard Mr. Chowdhury say, there's a physical element to this. How we use our bodies and how we prepare our bodies to experience prayer is an important part of this so that there's the ritual washing, as you heard, of the hands and the head and the face and the feet. There's the positioning of the body towards the Kaaba in Mecca. And if you go into any mosque in the world, you'll find a place on the wall called the Qibla, which is the direction towards Mecca, so everybody knows how to position their bodies correctly. Then, of course, there's the varieties of body motion, of standing and then how you hold your hands and the kneeling and prostrating one's self. They're all part of this practice of prayer. I'm going to come back to that in just a few minutes.

The words that are said during these five prayers vary depending on the branch of Islam that you're from and which of the prayers during the day you're praying, but they all start off with this first chapter, reciting this first chapter of the Qur'an. We talked

last week about the fact that the Qur'an is made up of chapters just like our scriptures are. The Qur'an has 114 chapters which are called *surahs* and I mentioned last week that they vary a great deal in length. So, some of them are 20 pages long and some of them are a verse. And many of the longer *surahs* are clustered towards the front end of the Qur'an, with this first chapter being an exception. It's a simple seven-verse chapter that proclaims the glory of God as creator of the universe and the extender of mercy and love, and those seven verses are recited for each of these five daily prayers. It's a passage that in Islamic tradition is called *Al-Fatiha*, which is Arabic for the beginning, and it refers to the opening of the Qur'an.

So, it refers to the opening of the Qur'an, it refers to the opening words of prayer, it also refers to the process of opening ourselves to experience the reality of God's presence in that prayer time. Now, *Salah* is a word that refers specifically to these more ritualized prayers, the set of five. There's a more general Arabic word for prayer which is *Dua* that just refers to the ongoing and other places in our lives where we pray. Because Muslims, just like Christians and Jews, pray all during the day, whenever they want. And there's also, as some of you know, a very rich tradition of Islamic mysticism as there is in both Jewish and Christian traditions. And in Islamic tradition, a lot of that is found in the Sufi sect of Islam.

So, there are a couple of places that I want to look at that I think have some helpful words for us regarding how we go about our prayer as Christians that I think we could learn from our Muslim brothers and sisters. One is that preparation for prayer is important, that how we engage in the process of prayer really helps to in very important ways shape how we experience God in that prayer time. So, I want to suggest that as we explore this together and as you take the opportunity during the week to explore some of these ideas, that you pay attention to how it is that you prepare yourself for your prayer time.

On a corporate level, obviously we prepare ourselves in a variety of ways in terms of lighting the candles and dressing in particular ways and opening up with songs that are intended to create a certain sort of environment in which prayer can take place. And part of what is in the Islamic tradition that I think we don't always pay attention to in our personal prayers is how we create the space where prayer happens productively. For a lot of people, that's lighting a candle, that may be a time of sitting in silence and opening yourself up to hear God's voice a little bit more. But the whole idea of preparing ourselves for prayer I think is a really helpful one as we reflect on our own prayer time.

Prayer is a serious enterprise. It is the process of our entering into, in a very intentional way, the presence of God and seeking to hear God's voice. That's not trivial stuff. And it behooves us to bring a deep sense of seriousness and sacredness to that journey. And I think that's part of what we see in this process of ritualizing actions as we prepare to enter into prayer time.

Another helpful piece that is again very much part of our Christian tradition but not a part that we pay much attention to in 21st Century America is our postures for prayer. We've got a rich Christian history of using our bodies to facilitate our prayer time. But prostrating one's self is not a physical posture that is comfortable psychologically for us. We're not really good at humbling ourselves in 21st Century America. We are used to standing tall and standing proud and the whole process of physically becoming humble, submitting in the Muslim tradition, is one that is really psychologically very uncomfortable for us and very, very important for us, that our demonstrating, our submission to God and our servanthood is a part of what worshipping God is about. And it's a really uncomfortable one.

We see this actually on a very regular basis every year when we do our Maundy Thursday service, because we do foot-washing and washing somebody else's feet is a very humbling thing. And you know what, everybody gets uncomfortable with that here, both the foot washers and the foot washees. And because it's uncomfortable, I think it is really important for us to look at how what we do with our bodies has a really dramatic impact on how we pray.

So, whether it's prostrating ourselves or the *Orans* posture, a very ancient posture of standing erect and holding one's hands up to heaven, that's a wonderfully and interestingly powerful way to open us up to experience prayer in a different way. And again, in a relatively affluent American congregation, raising hands is not comfortable for most people. It's a very powerful tool and a powerful gift that I would invite you to explore. Maybe you want to start at home or start here. We've got lots of people who love to raise their hands and frankly we sometimes squelch that. This is part of our tradition that we should celebrate and make use of. Watch how you use your body. This is why so many traditions around the world focus on making sure that you are erect and present when you're praying, not slouched over and huddled up. There's something about our posture that facilitates our ability to focus and our ability to be open to where God is talking.

The times of prayer is a really important piece too that we see modeled in Islam that is also part of our tradition. And we heard this in our two scripture passages today that part of Daniel's prayer discipline was three times a day going up to his room, facing towards Jerusalem in the same way that the Muslim communities face towards Mecca. The Muslim community actually early in their history started facing towards Jerusalem and then later in their history shifted to Mecca. But that's your trivia for today.

But Daniel starts off in his room three times a day, he faces Jerusalem and he says his prayers. Paul invites the Thessalonians to think about what it means to pray without ceasing. What does it mean to always be in an attitude of prayer? And one of the ways that that has been interpreted through our Christian history is what's called the Divine Office or the Prayer of the Hours. Have any of you run across this before? It's much more prevalent in Roman Catholic and Episcopal circles and Orthodox, not as big a part of Protestant tradition, but we've got this really long and rich history of taking times during the day to set apart for a few minutes of prayer.

They're not usually long segments of prayer, they're not like an hour or half an hour, they're usually just a few minutes that focus on praying a psalm, a couple of other prayers, but again this wonderful way of grounding ourselves throughout the day in God's presence. It doesn't take a lot of time, it doesn't take a lot of effort, but this wonderful reminder throughout the day that we are God's, that God is seeking to use us, to transform the world, and that we have the opportunity to center ourselves in God's presence throughout the day. That's what that Muslim call to prayer is about. It's about finding spaces in the midst of a busy, crazy life to make sure we're paying attention to who God is and where God is calling.

I brought a handful of books that you're welcome to look at after the service that are different traditions in terms of the use of the Hours or the Daily Office. Some of them are very simple, some of them are fairly complex. But all of them have this idea that during every day we can take a moment to remember who we are as disciples of Christ. It doesn't require special books though. It's simply a matter of setting aside some times to engage in prayer. It may be as simple, picking up on last week, as taking a moment in the morning, maybe after or during lunch, on your lunch break, after work is done, to read one of the Psalms, and again ground yourselves in those wonderful and ancient words of prayer that we have in the psalter.

But I want to again invite you all to experiment with that a little bit this week. Where are the places in your daily life that you could set aside just a couple of minutes to reconnect yourself with the sense of God in your day, where you take just a moment to remind yourself that God is present, that God is working, and be open to where the spirit may be leading you in that moment. It's a powerful gift as we move through very busy and often very fractured lives.

IV. Conclusion

A couple of months ago at the National Prayer Breakfast, President Obama talked a little bit about fear. He said, "Fear does funny things. Fear can lead us to lash out against those who are different. Or lead us to try to get some sinister other under control. It can lead us to succumb to despair or paralysis or cynicism."

Dear friends, I want to suggest that we as a country are wrestling with a lot of fear, and a lot of fear that gets projected on the Islamic community. Some of that fear is appropriate and rational. There is Islamic terrorism. There are groups of radical Islamists who read the Qur'an in ways that justify their violence. But it's so easy to lose perspective in that. And given the sort of overwhelming media coverage that we get of that tiny, less than one percent of the Muslim population, to lose track of the vast majority of Muslims who are deeply steeped in traditions that are not unlike our own and with values that are not unlike our own. We are all worshiping the same God. We are all praying to the same God. And we all have a call from that God to work with one another to build a sense of being part of one human family and to work together so that we can all be channels of God's grace and love, to heal a broken and frightened world.

Amen.