

## ***A People of Generosity***

Scriptures: Leviticus 19: 9-10; 1 Timothy 6: 17-10

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### **I. Introduction**

The Prophet Muhammad was born in the city of Mecca in modern Saudi Arabia in the year 570. His parents died at a very young age and he was taken in by his grandfather for a couple of years. His grandfather also then died, and Muhammad was ultimately taken in and raised by his uncle. Growing up in that time and culture as an orphan, Muhammad grew up with a very keen sense of economic vulnerability and his own economic vulnerability, and he developed a life-long passion for the care for the most vulnerable in his society.

We are spending this month of April exploring the faith of Islam and we're doing that in part because so much of our news is dominated by images and stories of Islamist radicals and because that violence has generated so much heat, if somewhat less light, in the context of our current presidential debates. And we're doing this in the context of worship because we are also exploring what our Muslim brothers and sisters have to teach us as Christians about how we live out our faith commitments.

We began a couple of weeks ago looking at our common ancestry as children of Abraham and people of the book, people who understand God's word to be delivered through a set of sacred texts. We talked last week about our common call to prayer and how we live that call out in our lives. We're talking this morning about how we experience our mutual call to create a more just world through our acts of generosity, generosity of our time and our talents and our finances.

### **II. Zakat**

Last week I introduced our conversation around prayer by talking about the word *Salah* which is the Arabic word for the ritual prayer in which our Muslim brothers and sisters engage five times a day as the second pillar of the Five Pillars of Islam. The third pillar of Islam is a discipline that in Arabic is called *Zakat* which is an Arabic word that actually means to purify. It refers to the fact that God calls us to purify our living and our sustenance through our generous giving to those who are vulnerable in our society. It is the Muslim practice of charitable giving and is sacred to every Muslim.

Now at this point in the Five Pillars of Islam, we move away from the spiritual disciplines of the first two pillars, which are the affirmation of faith and the discipline of prayer, and we start moving to the outside disciplines, which is how we live out our faith in the world. And Muslim theologians have a wonderful image about this shift that I wanted to share with you, because I found it very helpful. They talk about their faith as a tree and the spiritual disciplines are the roots of the tree. They are the pieces of the tree that we don't see really but are the pieces that draw the nourishment from the earth

and nourish the growth and fruitfulness of the tree. The trunk and the branches of the tree are how we go about living out our spiritual disciplines in lives of service and generosity.

So, the Muslim community has never had the same struggle that we have in the Christian community with that tension between faith and works, because their worldview essentially is that the faith piece is the undergirding, unseen roots, and the works piece is the piece that's visible to the world. And you can't have a tree without roots because it dies and you can't have roots without a tree because they die also. So, there's this wonderful sense of interconnectedness there that I think is a helpful image for us.

Now the requirements of *Zakat* grow out of the witness of the Qur'an and also the *hadiths*. We talked about the *hadiths* in the first sermon. We talked about the fact that Muhammad during the latter part of his life after he turned 40 had experienced a recurring series of visions in which he understood the angel, Gabriel, to be teaching him God's words, and those teachings became the Qur'an. So, in Islamic tradition, the Qur'an are not Muhammad's teachings. They are God's teachings through Muhammad. Muhammad's own teachings and the examples of Muhammad's life are collected in other collections of writings called the *hadith* and there's a number of these. And the witness about generosity, about *Zakat*, goes out of both the Qur'an and the *hadith*.

Now in the Qur'an there is the assumption that all of us need a certain minimal amount of economic security to live. That minimal amount of resources for a healthy life is called in Arabic *nisab*, and the tradition says that all of us have that base that we need to build on and then any other assets and wealth above that are gifts that God has given us. It then invites us to share with those who have less and may not be at that *nisab* level. There's this very keen sense that it's all God's gifts, as it is in Christian tradition, and that we have an obligation to share those gifts with those who haven't reached the minimal.

Now in Islamic tradition, the rules about giving are that every year a Muslim is expected to give 2.5 percent of their total assets as a gift to the poor. That's what *Zakat* is. So, it's a little bit different than the way we do this in Christian tradition because in Christian tradition, as you know, we base our giving on our income and much of the scripture talks about tithing on our income. So, the ideal discipline in the Christian tradition is that we look at how much we earn in a year and 10 percent of that we give to God's work. In Islamic tradition that percentage is smaller, it's a quarter, it's 2.5 percent, but the asset base is quite a bit larger. Because when you think of all of the assets that we have that include things like our houses and our savings accounts and our retirement accounts, that's a much larger pool on which to make that 2.5 percent calculation. So, that's part of the reason that for example in a recent study of charitable giving in the UK, of all the different faith traditions, Muslims were at the very top of the per capita giving that they do.

Now it has sort of amused me, as I have read into some of this over the last week or so that the Muslim community does the same sort of mental calculations that

we all do as Christians in terms of figuring out what should count in those percentages. Because in the Christian tradition, of course, whenever I talk about stewardship the first question that you all ask me is, "Is that before or after taxes?" And likewise, in the Islamic community, there is a lot of debate about sort of what that baseline should be, what does a *nisab* look like and then what of the assets should be counted towards that 2.5 percent and lots of scholastic argument back and forth about what is involved there. So, another point of connection with our Muslim brothers and sisters is this mutual avoidance of our religious obligations, right? That was a joke.

How *Zakat* is lived out in different parts of the world varies a great deal. So, in parts of the world, many of the governments in Muslim countries actually collect that *Zakat* in much the same way that our government collects income tax and then distributes it as needed. In other parts of the world where there are no Muslim governments, individual Muslims are responsible for making the decisions about where those gifts go. And again there's a lot of guidance about what constitutes that giving. For example, I couldn't give to a family member as an act of charity because I've already got an obligation to care for my family. *Zakat* giving needs to be to people that I don't have a vested interest in but who are vulnerable economically.

And as in America and American Christianity, likewise in Islam, the mosque is often the place where the *Zakat* is given and then the mosque does the distribution of those resources to those who are in need. So, there's a fair amount of diversity in how this discipline is practiced. But there are some theological pieces that are very fundamental across the board and have a lot of resonance with our understanding of Christians about how our generosity transforms us and transforms the world.

### **III. Learning from *Zakat***

A huge part and motivation for the giving is to care for those who are most vulnerable in society and Jews, Christians, and Muslims all have this mandate. We heard it in the Hebrew Scriptures in this wonderful passage from Leviticus. We don't read a lot of Leviticus because it often feels very legalistic I think, but the message here is a wonderful one which is an invitation for us as stewards of all God's gifts to earn as much as we possibly can, and the image there is sowing a field and then reaping the benefits of the field, but with the caveat that we are not to harvest all of what we can. That we leave portions, the edges of the field unharvested so that those who don't have fields to harvest can come in and get what they need to live.

Likewise, Paul instructs Timothy to instruct the wealthy in his congregation that they are to care for the most vulnerable in their community as well, that a fundamental aspect of who it is to be a people of faith is to care for those who are marginalized and vulnerable. And this is very deeply enmeshed in Muslim tradition.

But there's the addition in Islam that is also part of our Christian tradition that our giving is not simply for the benefit of those people who receive our generosity. Our giving is also a tool for our own spiritual growth because we have realized from the beginning of time that we become owned by our possessions very quickly and that our

money has a wonderful way of feeling like a tool to be used but often becoming an end in itself and becoming the place that we rely upon. So part of our act of giving is a process of letting ourselves release that stuff that we want to cling to so hard. And we talk during our own stewardship campaigns on an ongoing basis about the fact that as we learn to be generous, we open ourselves up to receive God's presence in our lives in more and more profound ways. And this is also part of Islamic tradition, that God teaches us to release some of our attachments, our unhealthy attachments through the discipline of giving generously.

There's a saying from the Prophet Muhammad that a person is not a Muslim who sleeps with his stomach full while his neighbors are hungry. So, again, capturing that dual sense of we reach out to the people around us and that becomes an expression of who we are and what our relationship with God is about. Which sort of segues to the next point which is a very deep sense, both in Christian tradition and Islamic tradition that it is far too easy for us to rely and trust in our wealth rather than stepping out to trust in a God that we can't see. It is far easier to put our trust in the things that we could put our hands on.

And, of course, in America we've got this wonderful paradox that most of us trust most profoundly in our money while our money tells us that we should trust in God, right, "In God we trust"? So, there's a little bit of irony there. But again, in both Muslim and Christian tradition, part of the process of generosity is enacting in a physical way what our trust in God looks like. It is a way of saying that I don't have to hoard, I don't need to hold tightly to the things that I have received. I know that my ultimate security rests in God and that then allows me to share what God has given me, with joy and with generosity, so that trust is at the heart of the process of healthy stewardship, healthy giving, healthy *Zakat*.

The Prophet Muhammad actually said very clearly at one point that to not engage in *Zakat*, to not engage in the discipline of giving is to deny one's faith, because essentially the idea there is if I don't give, I'm not trusting in who God is. So, it doesn't really matter if I say I believe in God, my words are meaningless. I show that I believe in God when I open my hand with generosity to my neighbor.

#### **IV. An Additional Thought**

I want to close the sermon with a couple of quick thoughts about an issue that has a little bit more emotional sensitivity to it, because *Zakat* as a discipline is part of a broader network of commands that are known in Islamic tradition as *Sharia*. Is that a word that you all are familiar with? We hear this in the news with some regularity. *Sharia* is an Arabic word that means "the way," "the path," and it is the network, the structures of laws and commands that are both personal and corporate in terms of how Muslims are instructed to live out their lives, both their personal lives and also their lives in community together. And there's a lot of anxiety in our country around this issue because we hear all the time that those people are trying to impose their laws on us, right? This sense that we often hear in the media that there's this agenda in the Muslim community to force all people around the world to live under *Sharia* law.

So, I want to just share a couple of quick thoughts about that, one of which is that *Sharia* law is a very, very broad network of laws and commandments. A lot of them are laws and commands that we would be very comfortable with. So, for example, some of these directions around *Zakat* and generosity and care for the vulnerable are very much part of our tradition also. There are other elements of *Sharia* law that are much more oppressive and difficult for us. So, that while for example *Sharia* law has been extremely progressive throughout history on issues around race and slavery, one of the primary uses of *Zakat* for a lot of Islamic history and tradition was freeing slaves from captivity.

So, while *Sharia* law has been very progressive on issues around race and slavery, it has sadly been incredibly regressive in areas of women's rights and rights in the LGBTQ community, for example. So, there's a lot of places that are very inspiring in *Sharia* law and a lot of places that are pretty disturbing in *Sharia* law, and it's important to acknowledge that. But it's also important to not paint the whole picture with a single brush because there's a lot of nuance in what constitutes *Sharia* law.

I will also just say I am troubled on a somewhat regular basis by the inconsistency of the way we condemn some of those portions of *Sharia* law, and what I mean by that, for example, is that we express as a society and as a government a great deal of outrage, appropriate outrage when we see Westerners being beheaded, for example, by ISIS. I am periodically a little troubled by the fact that we get quite outraged about that and we don't seem to express a lot of outrage when Saudi Arabia beheads its own citizens for similar infractions. And that bothers me for a couple of reasons: One is there is the implicit judgment that Western lives are more important than Middle Eastern lives. And I'm also troubled by the hypocrisy of condemning our enemies for one action that we don't condemn our allies for, and I think there's some opportunity for us to bring some more consistency to our outrage.

I will also just say that there is an element to the Muslim community's advocacy of *Sharia* law that should not feel alien to us in a church like ours that is very politically active, because we spend a lot of our time as we advocate for affordable housing and for homelessness and for education and hunger issues around our city speaking to the government out of our faith commitments to inspire social change. In many ways, that is what the advocacy of *Sharia* law is about, is that we as Christians have received what we understand to be clear directions from God about how we care for the most vulnerable, in a like manner our Muslim brothers and sisters are advocating for their revelation of who God is. And while I think we want to be clear we don't embrace a lot of elements of that, we should at least be sympathetic to the process of trying to advocate for systemic change, because we're all doing that and we should just keep that in mind as we reflect on this charged issue of *Sharia*.

## **V. Conclusion**

One of the great and powerful places of connection that we share with our Islamic brothers and sisters is this clear and passionate call to serve those in our

community who are in need. And one of the great things about this picture is other than the acronyms on the t-shirts and the bags, sometimes it's not particularly obvious who the Methodists are and who the Muslims are in ministering to the crisis in Flint, Michigan or ministering to the crisis in Katrina in Louisiana. We all have this call given to us by God to use all of the gifts we have to meet the needs of those who are most vulnerable in our community. And all of our traditions talk about widows and orphans and immigrants as some of the key places of vulnerability that we are called to minister.

So, I was very touched and moved as I have frequently been in looking from afar at Pope Francis as he visited Greece this week and yesterday brought home four refugee families, Muslim families, who had fled Syria and now will start a new life in Rome supported by the Vatican. I think that's a powerful witness about who God calls us to be as we share the gifts that God has given us, with generosity and joy, with children of God, brothers and sisters of many faiths, all of one family.

Amen.