

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
January 21, 2018 – Elizabeth Bryce**

Reading: Romans 12:6-16

Sermon: “I have a dream” Sunday

Well, clearly I am not Imam Mohamad Jebara. And I do not know the Imam well enough to tell any stories about him, or to speak on his behalf. If you came to church this morning specifically expecting to hear Imam Jebara, then you have our abject apologies. Due to illness, Imam Jebara will not be with us today. However, he (and we) will reschedule his visit to our pulpit as soon as we can. We are all looking forward to His visit, and hearing what a Muslim leader would like us, as Christians, to know about Islam.

And so, being the eternal optimist, I like to think that this morning’s service offers us an excellent opportunity to do some preparatory work for the Imam’s visit.

When I was putting the bulletin together for this Sunday, I was trying to choose an appropriate scripture for this morning. I knew that the United Church of Canada had put together a study and a statement about Muslim-Christian relations a few years ago (it’s actually more than a few years, I’m embarrassed by how little we have done with such a significant piece of work, which was approved by the General Council in 2006.) There’s a whole chapter about the Bible and the Qur’an – I was hoping to find something that we might hear from both of those sacred texts.

But what it really did was to highlight how little I know about Islam, and specifically the Qur’an. Steve and I confessed that we don’t even know how scripture is used in worship. We probably can’t just take a Christian order of worship and plunk another tradition’s sacred scripture into the slot we would use. We did use a short quote from another Islamic reading, the Hadith, as part of our children’s time today. In the midst of all the other quotes, I guess you could say at least we offended all our neighbours equally.

Inter faith dialogue is either the most sensitive thing or the easiest thing, I haven’t decided which.

A number of years ago we hosted a birthday party for my son Luke, he was probably about 5 or 6 at the time. The last friend to get picked up was one of his Muslim friends, so by the time his mother got there, Luke and his friend had opened one of the games he’d received, and we sat and talked while they played a few rounds. At one point I could overhear the two boys talking about going to Arabic school and Sunday School, and comparing the names of God. “Yah, it’s really just the same thing,” said Luke’s friend. “Just different names,” said Luke. “There’s only one God,” his friend agreed.

And that was it. There was no conversation about better or worse or right or wrong – just two different realities in their lives that were basically the same. At least from their perspective.

For many of our children, every day at school is interfaith dialogue, and if not interfaith than intercultural. They live and move in a pluralistic world where they do not take being a member of the majority as a given.

Steve asked the confirmation class last week if they had any specific questions they would like to ask the Imam this week. By and large they replied that if they had a question about Islam they would just ask a friend at school. And there's nothing wrong with their approach. If we have a question, we should just ask someone who is most likely to know.

So how is interfaith dialogue hard?

The United Church's 2004 study document on Muslim Christian relations, which led to our 2006 statement, is 116 pages long. It was commissioned by the General Council in 1997 – which means it took almost seven years to write. Make no mistake! It is a wonderful document, and well worth reading – even 14 years later. But reading it does make the case that interfaith dialogue might have more to it than my 6 year old son seemed to think.

As Christians, we have 2000 years of history which proclaimed, by and large, that Christian belief was the only way to God. At least, that was the way many of us were taught. Along the way, there were a number of thinkers who suggested that Christians should approach people of other faiths with the humility of knowing that God is a bigger mystery than any one faith story can contain. But the louder voice was always the church authority who said they were heretics.

In 1966 the United Church of Canada passed a revolutionary statement on Mission which suggested that the church “recognize that God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of all humankind” (actually it said mankind... but that's another debate.)

This meant a change in direction for our mission personnel and for the church in general. Most likely, they were already on board. It was something that bubbled up through the church until it was officially recognized. It was the product of contact with people of other faiths, both overseas and here at home. It was the friends and neighbours and coworkers meeting and saying “Yah, there's really just one God.”

That We May Know Each Other talks about four phases or four ways of understanding interfaith relations.

There is the traditional Exclusivist Approach, where the only path to God and salvation is faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, because Jesus Christ is the sole mediator between God and humanity. For the exclusivist, those who do not have faith in Jesus are excluded from heaven, and the redemption of God. Seems harsh doesn't it? There are lots of Christians who still take that approach to people of other faiths.

There is also the Inclusivist Approach, where Christians believe that the reconciliation of the world still takes place, and only through Jesus Christ. Whether Jesus is named or

not, the belief is that Christ is present wherever people experience the goodness of God's love. People of other faiths go to heaven, but Jesus is the silent partner.

If that seems a little patronizing, there is the Pluralist Approach, which preaches that there are many paths to God. And no one single tradition has the ability to speak definitively about God's ultimate truth. Jesus may be the way for Christians but is not necessarily the path for all. We just don't really talk about it.

Finally the report suggests a Transformationist Approach. We acknowledge that Christianity is a faith which is constantly evolving. Christian faith may actually be transformed through respectful dialogue and mutual learning, with people of other faiths.

A good example of this transformationist approach has been our dialogue with Indigenous people. As a church, we have learned about the harm we caused because of our Christian arrogance. We realize now that the faith and the gospel we believe to be liberating became repressive instead when it was approached like a one way street. We expected the other partner to change, but would not open our hearts to change. And so the faith we proclaimed became harmful. It's a lesson we need to learn over and over again...

In the scripture lesson from Romans today, we hear the words of Paul, calling on Christian people to express their faith NOT only by the words they were saying with their mouths, but with their lives.

I chose the passage from one of my Bibles, then looked it up later in a different translation and found it under the heading: "the marks of a true Christian." That's sort of ironic for a service which we were planning to be interfaith in focus.

In a sense the best way we can exemplify the strength of our faith as Christians is to hear and to respect the faith of people who hold very different beliefs. The best way we can show our loyalty and love for Jesus is by hearing and respecting the stories of other prophets, other saviours and other disciples. You might not need to change anything, Paul says, but you might also be changed by keeping your heart open.

In trying to understand the impact of Christian mission on our indigenous people here in Canada, we say we are on a path of reconciliation. We're still trying to figure out what that means, of course. We know it does not mean a simple exchange of words and everything continues on the way it always has. We know that we cannot go backwards and reclaim a former state of innocence or ignorance. The path of reconciliation is one that will only be determined once we have put ourselves on the way to something completely new.

Martin Luther King Junior, for whom this service is named, Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream. Historically, in that time and place, this was not a dream that left things in the status quo. It was not a dream that proposed that things might go backwards, either, to some primordial state of pristine undamaged innocence. But realistically, taking stock of the hurt and the prejudice and the lies, Martin Luther King Jr dreamt that our differences might be the source of our healing, not our conflict.

When we talk about interfaith dialogue, this is the kind of dream we dream, and the kind of reconciliation we seek. We dream of a reconciliation that calls us to be transformed, by living in the world in the way that Paul thought was truly Christian. To love others, to stand against injustice, to be ardent in the Spirit, but always a servant. To rejoice with those who rejoice, to be patient when we are the ones suffering, to be generous with our sharing and with our prayers, and to extend radical hospitality to those who are different from us.

And “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Amen and Amen