

# Interfaith Worship

## Worship

We had a wonderful Interfaith Worship Service on August 16. We invited Jawad Khaki, President and founding member of the Iman Center in Kirkland, WA., to join us. He and I preached a dialogue sermon responding to the same three questions. Several from the Muslim community in the area joined us for worship.

I wanted you to know who all helped plan the service. Lyn Lambert, Gary and Janet Skinner, Trish Rogers, Tony Copes, Farida Hakim, and I worked on the service, along with Jawad Khaki. Janet and I talked through the rest of the liturgy in the service making sure it would be inclusive while maintaining integrity with our Christian worship. Rhonda did an outstanding job picking the music.

Some have asked that we print Jawad's and my answers to the three questions. What follows is a summarized form of those answers along with the questions. Hope this is helpful.

### **Question #1 "How does your faith and your scriptures inform your ethical stance as a Muslim/Christian?"**

**Jawad's response:** He quoted several passages from the Qur'an (21:107, 2:256 and 2:177)

He said the Prophet Muhammad defined Islam as "Obedience to God, and kindness and compassion to humanity." He went on to talk about how only God is to be worshipped and that humanity is required to observe prayers, give charity, fast during Ramadan, and perform a pilgrimage to "the House" if one has the resources to do so. He quoted the Qur'an as saying those who believe in God, give to the poor, liberate those in bondage, keep the prayers and pay the prescribed alms, keep pledges, and are steadfast in misfortune, adversity, and times of danger are the ones who are true and who are aware of God.

He then concluded his remarks by saying Islam emphasizes character building to establish justice. This involves self-criticism, a revival of faith, and "taqwa" or God consciousness. "As followers of the purified progeny of the blessed Prophet of Islam we learn that pure, conscious and active people bring a healthy system and help maintain it."

**My response:** I said that love is starting point for a Christian's ethical behavior. I then read 1 John 4:16b-21. This is a passage that says "God is love." If we don't love our brothers and sisters we can't say we love God. It affirms that love casts out fear. I said fear (fear of the other, fear we won't get what we need, fear of those who believe differently than us) is at the bottom of much of our poor treatment of each other.

I said our ethical behavior issues from our faith and trust in God. But, as the book of James affirms, faith without works is dead.

And then I concluded that the ultimate way we live ethical lives is by imitating Jesus who cared for the marginalized, treated women with respect, who said compassion is more important than religious laws, and that we don't defeat evil by using evil's methods. We are to avoid violence whether that violence be physical, emotional, or economic.

### **Question #2 "What do you see as the greatest commonalities between our two faiths?"**

**Jawad's response:** He said the Arabic word "Islam" means submission and it is derived from the Arabic root meaning peace. He said in the religious context this means inward and outward peace through submission to the will of God or Allah. Allah is just the Arabic equivalent for the name of God and it is used by Arab Muslims and Christians alike. "Islam is a religion of peace, mercy, justice, forgiveness, tolerance, inclusiveness and human dignity for all." He went on to say how Muslims believe in a chain of prophets all the way from Adam, through Moses, and then Jesus, and then reaffirmed and finalized by the Prophet Muhammad.

He talked about how the Qur'an was received and that it has remained unchanged ever since it was received by Muhammad from the Angel Gabriel. "The Qur'an reads affirming our belief in all of God's Prophets without distinguishing among them."

He read several passages from the Qur'an (3:84, 3:3, and 2:62). Muslims believe in the Bible (Torah and Gospel) and that the Qur'an contains many references to the People of the Scriptures.

**My response:** I confessed that many Christians, including myself, are sadly ignorant about other faiths, especially Islam. But from what I know both Christianity and Islam revere Jesus (but believe different things about him), worship the same God/Allah, hold prayer as central to the faith (although Muslims have much to teach Christians about taking prayer seriously), and that both speak of non-violence as the best way to respond to our enemies.

I went on to talk about how Houston Smith, in his book *The Way Things Are*, speaks about the commonalities between the world's enduring religions. He says those commonalities can be divided into two categories: What we should do and what kind of person we should become.

What we should do—There are four problem areas in human relationships: violence, wealth, how we speak to one another, and sex. Most religions answer this with the following precepts: don't murder, don't steal, don't lie, and don't commit adultery. I said this was true for Islam and Christianity.

What kind of person we should become—The enduring religions promote three virtues: humility, charity, and veracity (put positively) or urge us to avoid three things: greed, hatred, and delusion (as the Eastern religions state it). I said this was true for both Islam and Christianity.

**Question #3 “What path into the future do people of faith need to walk in this tumultuous world that gives you hope for more understanding and peace between people of various faiths?”**

**Jawad's response:** He started by quoting the Qur'an (13:11) “Verily, God does not change the condition of a people unless they change their inner selves.” He said the world was shrinking due to “mass market accessible and affordable communication technologies and transportation systems.” Therefore we should not retreat to “islands of familiarity” and instead we need to “create bridges of understanding across these islands.”

He said we have a very pluralistic society in the U.S. and this contributes to our strength as a nation. “Pluralist societies are not accidents of history. They are a product of enlightened education and continuous investment by all of civil society in recognizing and celebrating the diversity of the world's peoples.”

He quoted the Qur'an (49:13) which affirms that God created us from a single pair to be many nations and tribes. We should get to know one another and not despise each other. He said our success as a nation will come from helping our citizens “realize the potential of all those that share this planet with us.” He said we need to define diversity in the broadest terms, to cover all the ways we differ. We need to move beyond just accepting to affirming our differences. It is our shared universal values that best define us as a people and they are the way to bettering our world.

He conclude with two comments. We need to be about “upholding universal values universally.” And then he quoted Hans Kung (Catholic theologian) in his book *Islam*, “No peace among nations without peace among religions. No peace among religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religion.”

**My response:** I affirmed we live in a shrinking world where we and our children know people of other faiths. Therefore we must not judge other faiths as being inadequate or mistaken. That is arrogant. I said the more progressive Christians are seeing that God is bigger than any one religion and that, while I am unashamedly Christian, no one religion has sole ownership of God's love and saving grace. I concluded by saying I was encouraged by all the dialogue going on between churches, mosques, and synagogues that help us move beyond toleration to respect.

That is a brief summary. I hope I did not distort Jawad's remarks in the process!

Following the service many stayed afterwards in the Great Hall as we had an opportunity to ask Jawad more questions. It was a very interesting time.

I hope many of you take Jawad up on his invitation to break the fast with his community during Ramadan. He says the best day for that would be on a Saturday after sunset. Ramadan goes from August 22 until September 19. Please let me (Jim) know if you are interested and which Saturday works for you.

I want to conclude by saying how proud I was of Newport in our hospitality and welcome of those from the Muslim community. I think it went very well. I look forward to the next steps we take in our dialogue with people of other faiths.

Jim