

*Invocation:*

*Our world is changing. We are changing. There is promise in change. There is potential in change. As we come to worship today with so very many questions about where we and this country are headed, let us find the strength to stay in the present and accept that we don't know, that we can't know and that knowing would limit the greatness we might achieve. Come let us live into the potential of a truly limitless beloved community. Let us worship together.*

## *My Brother's Keeper*

*(July 14, 2013)*

I have agonized over this sermon. And I must also admit, this is not an easy sermon to deliver and it may not be easy to hear, so I give you fair warning...it is loaded. When I offered to do a message about Islam, I thought I was totally clear on why I wanted to do it. My brother adopted the Islamic faith 20 years ago this year and it has been quite a journey. Not just for him but for my entire family. I also started writing this sermon before yesterday's decision in Florida. I have chosen to deliver the sermon pretty much as written, but it will land differently as a result of the many different ways I'm sure you are all feeling about what this court case says about biases, hatred and fear in America.

My first idea with the sermon was to draw the parallel between my brother "coming out" as Muslim, with my coming out as gay. I then thought to explore how my sexuality posed serious challenges for my brother with his circle of Islamic friends, some even choosing to disassociate with him because of my sexuality. I thought to share the bizarre scenario of 9/11 where I was abroad and the first contact with my family after a week of not being able to communicate with them I was told that my brother and his family were in hiding because of death threats in their community. I thought of sharing how we both started in Episcopal school. I thought of

sharing how when my brother's first marriage to a Catholic woman failed, it cost him a fortune to extract himself from the Catholic Church. I thought of sharing how when someone who is Muslim mentions to me that it is Ramadan and I then mention that my brother is Muslim, they are suddenly kinder or more generous or more welcoming to me as if through his faith, I am a part of their community. I thought of many things. But I realized these are not my stories to tell...most of them belong to him. And I also realized that these are the easy stories. Sometimes the tough stories are not necessarily better, but they serve a much better purpose.

So instead, I'm going to talk about the tough stuff that seems today wildly pertinent; bias, narrow mindedness, bigotry and even on a certain degree hatred. It would be very easy for me to now launch into a lengthy description of the shortcomings of racists in America and give my perspective on why we have race hatred. I lived in Florida for a long time first in the 90's and then right before coming here for school. I left because it is a place where I was regularly tailed by police for DWB - driving while black. I was too frequently called 'boy' by older white men. It was on the whole a distasteful experience. But no, instead, I am not going to talk about anyone's biases, narrow mindedness, bigotry and hatred but my own. You see for all of my noble aspirations, I am deeply flawed and I have limitations; *my* struggle is with Islam and that struggle represents to

me a much more valuable lesson than verbally bashing a racist culture that is already its own worst enemy.

So, there it is, I struggle with Islam every day. Islam is in my community, it is in my work, and it is in my family. Despite my very close proximity to it and being a student of theology, and being a fairly enlightened and educated person, I don't understand it. I have tried for 20 years to understand what it means to be Muslim, to embrace that level of religious commitment; to have that many rules; to follow something that requires so much spiritual rigor. I read Islamic scripture and I feel dictated to. I see the life requirements and I wonder where is the space to live? For whatever reason, it doesn't fit me. But, I own my conflict over this. It is nothing I am proud of. I just don't get it.

A perfect example of the extent of my bigotry toward Islam concerns the arrival of Zaytuna College next door to the Starr King School. Zaytuna is the first Islamic College in the United States. Having previously researched the school's leadership when there was a question about their stance on gay rights and one of Starr King's professors, I immediately went into the mode of trying to figure out "how bad the neighborhood" was going to be now that they had joined us. I dug up quotes from the Zaytuna leadership that made reference to homosexuality being, according to the Qur'an, a sin punishable by death and whatnot. I reached out to the Starr King school

leadership and asked what this would mean for us and for the community at large. I was scared. Even now, nothing has presented itself to actually allay my fears that at some point there will not be a large conflict between the conservative Muslims who attend that school and the radically liberal UUs.

I have heard my brother call the Adhan...the call to worship. He has always been a whiz with language and has a working knowledge of Arabic that allows him to quote the Qur'an and converse lightly. I have heard the call to worship in the early steamy morning in Senegal. I have also heard it called on board the various ships where I worked, where there was always a room set aside for Muslim prayer. Arabic at this point, is a familiar sound to me. It is a unique sound, but it is also sadly the sound that is broadcast to us in the context of some people who have decided that everyone who identifies as "American" is at war with how the world "should" really be according to Allah. I am not immune to this media driven hype and I don't think any of us are. It is the sound, we have been told, of the Taliban, the sound of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or for an earlier generation, the sound of the Ayatollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussein; a whole host of characters that have been painted as America's worst enemies. Imagine then hearing that sound from your brother?

When I was 9, my family moved to Framingham, Massachusetts from New York City. You may be familiar with Framingham, because of the Framingham Heart Study. What you may not be familiar with is that this study was started in 1948 in Framingham because it was the most homogeneous town in America at the time. The control group had the least genetic variation and was the most white they could possibly find. So there I was, in 1974, a little black boy transplanted to what had historically been the whitest town in America....right at the height of the Boston Bussing Crisis (black children being bussed to white suburban schools.) When we moved to our first house in 1975 it was no wonder then that our neighbors were...less than welcoming. Hostile with a healthy dollop of suspicion is how I would characterize things. My brother and I used to marvel at the old white woman next door who used to set up a chair and watch us through her sitting room window...for hours on end, yet would never speak when she saw us playing outside. Although we were on a very short street of 8 or 9 houses, we were not friendly with anyone and felt in that closed neighborhood, far more isolated than we did when we moved to our next house that was a half mile from the center of town, bordered by the Mass Pike an old cemetery and a creek. It was a cruel and challenging time for my entire family that certainly influenced how I felt about Framingham for many years, and scarred my parents in how they navigated life in the various communities in town.

Massachusetts was where I first experienced being the target of explicit hatred....the first place someone ever yelled "go home nigger" at me directly and the first place someone called me a "faggot" to my face. Until then, hatred had been an abstraction that my parents told me about. When I started spending time in New York as a young adult, my eyes were opened to even more harsh realities. In my furtive steps into adult gay culture I learned that white men could and would say things to me like "I don't like black guys" or "I'm into black guys" like picking candy off of a display counter...wielding white gay male privilege like a magic wand of validation at me. Or traveling with my college singing group to North Carolina and hearing an older white alumna who was hosting us say while pointing at me "when did we start letting them in here?" Or after college when marching in gay pride parades throughout this country and abroad and facing off with all kinds of religious zealots who screamed at me that I should die and how I was personally destroying the world with my sexuality. Even today where there are no positive images of black LGBTQ people in mainstream media...we always have to be either super butch women, or effeminate drag queens. Its been 40 years of coming face to face with other people's inability to understand me and my world... seeing their flaws and their struggle.

No, I don't understand Islam, and I struggle with it. It is my flaw. But just as this is mine to deal with, so are the flaws of those who cannot accept that

I love another man, or that my brown skin and the history that goes with it are here or living next door. As I struggle with Zaytuna, so the white Castro boys must struggle with their inability to see me as more than a sexual curiosity to be held at arms length.

Let me be clear; I am not here to go on an anti Islam tirade. Far from it. I am not driven by hatred...I am a pacifist and do not believe in war or violence of any kind physical or verbal. When I use the word 'hate' I am trying to reflect the language we use...sometimes too easily in America, to describe extreme distaste or inability to understand. I understand religious independence. In fact, I fiercely defend and believe in it. And it is directly because of the filter of my own shortcomings, my own inability to 'embrace' something that I am familiar with like Islam, that I am more capable of believing in that independence. This filter has given me a tremendous gift. Through it, I have seen myself as completely human. I see myself as incomplete. I see myself as broken...and maybe in some ways unfixable. The gift therein is that when I see someone who maybe shares these flaws, or when I see someone who holds other flaws that don't allow them to understand me as either black or gay or both...I get it. We all have flaws, biases, bigotry and hatreds.

I struggle with Islam. I am flawed. And I ask you to consider, what do you struggle with? How are you flawed? You are liberal, but you are not

perfect. You were brought up maybe in the Catholic church and left that tradition behind because of how it scarred you and you have spoken of it with venom and hatred and a language that declares it as inherently evil. That is your struggle and your flaw. Our struggles and our flaws are where our differences live and where we grow and heal. Not just through differences in skin color or language, but real differences in our values and in what we believe and how we manifest that in the world.

This is what we are. We are complete and we are a complete mess.

There is a strong trend among liberals these days to accept the big mistakes; white guilt is one of the most prevalent. But *my* disconnect with Islam is not about white guilt. In fact very little of my world has anything to do with white anything. My internal sense of agency functions outside of that framework. It is only in my interaction with that world that it becomes an issue. White guilt does not motivate me or hinder my thoughts. So although it is very real, I ask you to consider that **it** is only part of the equation where owning one's personal struggles and flaws is concerned. White oppression and white guilt should not be a group cop out from actually looking at our personal limitations. If you are immediately suspect of a young man of color wearing a baseball cap, hoodie and sagging jeans, is that white guilt at work? Or are you afraid because this is something you have personally been taught to fear? Don't

blame your race. Take personal responsibility. We all struggle; we are all flawed.

We struggle; we are flawed. Sounds a bit like a good ol' fashioned Baptist sermon on sin...full of fire and brimstone. Actually no. You see, I go back to the filter. If we see our struggles and our flaws and honestly embrace them...whether we are able to change them yet or not, but first acknowledge these flaws, we know where we stand. We have to experience our evolution through the filter of our flaws. We then have the opportunity to have a perspective, though it may be full of struggle, from which to grow. I go back to my own struggle with Islam. If I did not struggle with Islam, or rather, if I did not acknowledge that I have a struggle with Islam, I wouldn't know better to seek a resolution to that struggle. If you aren't willing to acknowledge that you have a struggle with your Christian past, how are you able to come to peace with it? If you do not personally accept that you have an issue with the male energy represented by certain kinds of clothing or mannerisms or that you have an issue with brown skinned men, you will not seek to fix that struggle. It is in that space, the uncomfortable space between assumption, fear and reality that we actually grow. As a baby grows in the womb, a woman's body changes. There is discomfort and distress sometimes, but the product can be brand new life.

We have an awesome opportunity as a spiritual and an intellectual community. Intellectually, we can look at our struggles and analyze them. We can decipher the meaning in our actions and anticipate our feelings and calculate all the shoulds, coulds and woulds; But spiritually, we can humble ourselves to the experience of existing, whether that means accepting God, or Allah or just being. We can acknowledge that we are limited by our experience, despite our most noble aspirations, and we can remain open to the discomfort and struggle of change. I may never practice Islam, I may never even fully accept Islam, but I am willing and committed to remaining in the space of trying no matter how much light that effort shines on my own flaws and how unpleasant that may be. Through accepting my struggle, I believe I do the greatest honor to my brother and his beliefs. I find a genuine and personal place for Islam in my understanding of faith and my world, without co-opting it or making assumptions about myself or Muslims. I keep it real.

Shine a light on your flaws; bring your struggles into the open; own the effort that comes with learning how to love the complete mess; there is something glorious to behold within. We are not perfect. Nothing truly beautiful is. Perfect beauty is sterile and cold. Better to be like the ripple in a diamond or the mole on a cheek...for, the simple imperfection is where we are both our most vulnerable and our most human. It is in those places

of humility and understanding where we are truly able to grow. May it be so.

***Benediction:***

*We have work to do. It may take many forms, but it is the work of peace. Yet we cannot have peace outside, unless we have peace within. Before you pass judgement on those with whom you disagree, dig deep. Look at your own flaws and find the uncomfortable growth space of humanity. There you will find the diamond; there you will find the flawed face of love. Go in peace.*