

Reformation
 Anna Pinckney Straight
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
 October 29, 2017

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴² "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." ⁴³ He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ⁴⁴ "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet" ' ?

⁴⁵ If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" ⁴⁶ No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

In October of 2016, one year ago, the members of a mosque in Fort Smith, Arkansas woke up to something horrible. Their mosque, the Al Salam mosque, Arabic for "peace," had been defaced. Vandalized. Graffiti had been spread across its walls. Swastikas. "Go home, We don't want you here U.S.A.". And "Deus Vult," latin for "It is God's will," a rallying cry of the crusades that has been co-opted by the alt-right movement for their anti-muslim bigotry.

We are currently living in a world where this must be taken more seriously than ever. In 2017 anti-muslim crimes are up 91% from 2016, and 2016 saw more of these bias crimes than in 2015.¹

This was not the first exposure this mosque had had to threats. They had been the target of such threatening emails in the past year that the FBI had gotten involved. Mosque members weren't just worried about a safe place to worship, they were justifiably worried about the safety of their families.

When they heard about the vandalism. When they saw that hatred scrawled on the walls, they were, understandably, afraid.

But after the news of the vandalism broke, something amazing happened.

"The mosque's phone started ringing, and didn't stop. Churches called. A synagogue called. Buddhists called. So did residents who had seen the news or simply driven by. One man called, crying. His daughter had seen the graffiti on her way to work and told him about it. He said the vandals could not have been Christians. No true Christian would have done it.

¹<https://www.cair.com/press-center/press-releases/14476-cair-report-shows-2017-on-track-to-becoming-one-of-worst-years-ever-for-anti-muslim-hate-crimes.html>

the number of hate crimes in the first half of 2017 spiked 91 percent compared to the same period in 2016, which was the worst year for such anti-Muslim incidents since the civil rights organization began its current documenting system in 2013.

The number of bias incidents in 2017 also increased by 24 percent compared to the first half of 2016.

<http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/30/us/islamamerica-excerpt-hate-crimes/index.html>

NOTE: Bias incidents are defined as cases in which there was an identifiable element of religious discrimination. Hate crimes are criminal offenses against persons or property, or incidents that can be charged as such under relevant state or federal statute.

Anas Bensalah, a mosque member who had taken the day off to help with the cleanup, told the man that he understood completely: That was exactly how he felt every time there was an attack by the Islamic State.

Over the next week, the mosque was snowed under with cards and letters. Some people brought flowers. Most of the letters were from Fort Smith and the surrounding towns, but some were from as far as Reston, Va."

But after the flurry of activity, the reality of the situation sunk in. The police did their work, and after a few months, the perpetrators were arrested. One of them was Abraham Davis. A child who had grown up in Fort Smith. A child who was now an adult, who, after drinking way too much with his friends, had participated in defacing the mosque.

The Muslims he knew who were members of the mosque were prosperous. Had money. Abraham did not. His family survived on less than \$2000 a month.

In the world of Arkansas, the muslims were threatened, but it was Abraham who felt like the outsider.

When the warrant was issued for his arrest, Abraham didn't deny what he had done. He turned himself in. His family can't afford the \$1500 it would have taken to get him out on bail, and so he stayed in jail.

And when, after a few days, he gets writing paper and pen, he writes his mother a letter. The second letter he writes is to the mosque.

"Dear Masjid Al Salam Mosque," Abraham wrote. "I know you guys probably don't want to hear from me at all but I really want to get this to y'all. I'm so sorry about having a hand in vandalising your mosque. It was wrong and y'all did not deserve to have that done to you. I hurt y'all and I am haunted by it. And even after all this you still forgave me. You are much better people than I. "I don't know what's going to happen to me, and that is honestly really scary. But I just wouldn't want to keep going on without trying to make amends. I wish I could undo the pain I helped to cause. I used to walk by your mosque a lot and ask myself why I would do that. I don't even hate Muslims. Or anyone for that matter. "All in all," he concluded, "I just want to say I'm sorry."

Abraham's brother, Noah, had to deliver the letter, because Abraham didn't have the address. When Noah took it over, it was after Friday prayers. When he arrived at the Mosque he took his shoes off.

They read the letter, aloud. And then nothing was the same.

The stranger they had feared, with every good reason, became their neighbor rather than their enemy.

Abraham hadn't asked for it. He knew he didn't deserve it. But they went to bat for their neighbor, spoke to the prosecutor on his behalf. They forgave him.

They've written him letters. Reached out to him in every way that they can. They've prayed for him. With no guarantee. For all they knew, for all they know, Abraham's words are just words.

As one of them said, in an open message to Abraham:

"I've heard a lot about about you, I'm here at the... mosque and I just want to tell you that we love you, man, and we forgive you. The moment you sent that letter we were done holding grudges with you. We all make mistakes. I hope you find it in yourself to forgive yourself. And

use this to move on with your life and be the best you can be. You can count on us anytime you feel like it. We'll never give up on you, brother."²

In a sea of news that is discouraging and frustrating, this is a story that says something about what is good in America. Something about where we need to get to work.

About how we see each other, and treat one another.

Since hearing this story in August I've revisited it in my mind. Over and over. And there's a question that continues to pursue me.

Would I have done the same? If I were in Abe's shoes, would I have had the wherewithal to write that letter to the mosque? To not justify, but purely apologize?

If I were on the receiving end of that hate. Would I have reached out to Abe? Would I have gone that second and third mile beyond acknowledging his letter?

This story is not a fairy tale, but a real life story of real life people trying not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Of trying to be neighbors, one to another.

Jesus said something about neighbors, didn't he? To those who were trying to trap him. Trying to get him to say something that undermined God's authority.

Jesus wasn't going to play their game, because Jesus didn't come to undermine. He came to build. And in his answer, using words those asking the question would have known. Words that appear in Deuteronomy and, according to instruction are to be taught to children so they know them as well as breathing.³

Unlike the Ten Commandments that we discussed a few weeks ago that set the outer limits of life with their shalls and shall nots, this is a very different proposition. These is what we are to do. What we must do. What we must be if we are to follow Jesus.

This whole passage is about authority. Who has it, Jesus or God. At the end of it, we're told that those who were questioning Jesus had no more questions.

But here's the thing. This is about authority, and I cannot help but wonder if we, sometimes, miss the point. If the questions I've asked myself after hearing about what happened in Arkansas missed the point. Would I have done the same? That's not the question, because there is no question.

We're not told to love our neighbors when our neighbors are nice. We're not told to love our neighbors only when our neighbors agree with us or are safe around us or look like us or talk like us or love like us. We're told to love our neighbors as ourselves.

² <https://play.radiopublic.com/the-daily-GMB3yp/ep/s1!245d43fdefd47dd048b3d0ab42314e5187aed5f4>

³ Deuteronomy 6: 4 - 9: ⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The real question isn't about how we would respond, it's about whether or not we welcome Jesus as an authority in our lives.

Do we let Jesus have authority, or do we let fear get in the way?

Have we gotten so used to these words about loving God and loving our neighbor that we have forgotten just what a radical life they suggest, to love our neighbors as ourselves?

Today, as you've heard, as Lee Webb mentioned in the pulpit last week, we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. We are singing hymns by Calvin and Luther. We will have a litany made up of our creeds in just a few minutes. It is a day worthy of honor.

But I can't help but think about the words from a sermon given by Dietrich Bonhoeffer on a Reformation Sunday many years ago, in which he offered these words, words called to mind by our scripture today:

"In celebrating the Reformation, the church can't leave old Luther in peace. ...we prop him up in our church ... Let us lay the dead Luther to rest at long last, and instead listen to the gospel, reading his Bible, hearing God's own word in it. At the last judgement God is certainly going to ask us not, 'Have you celebrated Reformation Day properly?' but rather, 'Have you heard my word and kept it? This love you had at first is the only love there is--for this is the love that comes from God and to God.'"⁴

The Protestant Reformation holds at its core "the church reformed, always being reformed, according to the word of God"

Are we open to being reformed? Are we open to the authority expressed here?

Are we willing to see the Abraham in us, and the members of the mosque, too?

One thing I know for certain, God is working through this love.

So let us honor this 500th anniversary by doing what Luther proposed, and Calvin and Knox and so many after him.

Let us make the true authority of our lives our Lord, Jesus Christ. And let us plant our roots so deeply in the words that Jesus gives us that we know no other way other than THE way, the way that loves God. Sees God's image in ourselves, and sees that image in each man, woman, and child that we meet.

That is a reformation worth celebrating. Indeed.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God.

⁴ <https://books.google.com/books?id=PF1cpVfZS60C&lpg=PP1&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>