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February 3, 2008

Haslett Community Church

“In generosity and helping others

Be like a river.

In compassion and grace

Be like the sun

In concealing the faults of other’s

Be like the night

In anger and fury be like the dead.

In modesty and humility be like the earth.

In tolerance be like the sea.”

The Turkish poet Rumi wrote these words. Last year **UNESCO**, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, declared 2007 to be the year of Jelaladin Mevlana Rumi, a Sufi mystic who lived in Konya, Turkey over 800 years ago. To this day his books of poetry are some of the top sellers in the United States

Even though Mevlana Rumi's poetry is often packaged in a New Age style. Make no doubt about it: Rumi was a devout Muslim. However, his mystical experiences of God's love overflowed the boundaries of his own time and tradition. Rumi's longing for God brought him to a consciousness of gracious hospitality to people of all faiths.

“For those who Love, Rumi wrote,

Moslem, Christian, and Jew

Do not exist.”

And:

“IN every religion there is love,

But Love has no religion.”

It is little wonder that at Rumi's funeral, Jews and Christians alike mourned his passing with their Muslim neighbors.

I am a member of a Peace Circle begun by women from different faith traditions: Bahia, Jew, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Native American. We come together once a month and anyone is welcome.

But we do not meet to evangelize, debate, or proselytize. Rather, we gather at a round table to listen, to learn, to embrace the commonalties and the differences within our various faiths.

I have made treasured friends, and learned in dimensions not possible in my academic courses at divinity school. I have discovered that we share more in common than we realize. As Karen Armstrong, a world renowned religious scholar writes, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all of which arose from the Abrahamic tradition, should be viewed as one religion that went in three unique directions.

We worship the same God. A God of compassion.

Like our loving creator we are called to be compassionate. In fact, caring for others is at the heart of each religion.

There is a catch, though. You can't limit your compassion to those you know, those with whom you feel comfortable. All three faiths uphold that you must show compassion for the stranger. "Doing unto others as you would have them do unto you." Applies for everyone.

It is not the strict adherence to correct belief that makes us devoted followers of God, but daily acts of compassion, especially for others who are different. As my own father used to say: "If you were arrested for being a follower of Christ, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Would there be a strong case?"

As a result of my connection with the Peace Circle, I was invited to spend a week in Turkey. Being invited to take part in an interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians in Istanbul was an honor.

But I knew I would never go.

Because at the moment, flying across the Atlantic to land in a Muslim country, that borders Syria, Iran, and Iraq, was WAY out of my comfort zone. I'd much rather read the lilting poetry of Rumi from the safety of my own sofa, than be a stranger in a strange land.

But when I was asked again, I hesitated. For I heard a still small voice whisper one line from a Sufi poem which read:

“When you take one step outside yourself, you step closer to God.”

So I took one small step, climbed on the plane with Linda Peet, and Carol Ingells, carrying a comforting collection of Rumi's poetry, which I read off and on until we landed in Istanbul.

Now I was raised in south Texas. I grew up drenched in a world of southern hospitality. But I am here today to testify that I have never seen hospitality like what we experienced in Turkey. In fact, after three days I began to ache from receiving so much.

Turkish Muslims embraced us as if we were their long lost friends. With open arms they welcomed us into their homes, introduced us to their children and grandchildren. They prepared feasts in our honor. Made family dishes of pistachio baklava and sultan cookies and flat breads and shish kabobs of lamb-- and of course endless cups of Turkish tea. Before we said our goodbyes and exchanged e-mails, we were given hand crocheted scarves, gold gilt coffee cups, and hand knit socks. They embodied the hospitality of Mevlana Rumi.

Not only did this hospitality, come from people in Turkey who were expecting us, but also from total strangers. We received a last minute invitation to a wedding near Izmir, after we'd spent the day wandering the ancient ruins of Ephesus.

When I later shared this with one of my roommates from seminary she said: "Let me get this straight: You flew to Turkey and near one of the most sacred sites of Christianity, where Paul wrote his letters to the Ephesians, You crashed a Muslim wedding? --- That is SO YOU!"

It had very little to do with me-- and everything to do with people of Turkey.

Wearing our wrinkled slacks and dusty sandals we stepped beneath a rose laden arbor and entered the wedding party. Nobody knew who we were. Nobody even knew our Turkish guide and interpreter.

No problem! People welcomed us at the dining table as if we were royal emissaries. They set before us a six-course feast. Musicians played Turkish folk music. We had our pictures taken with dancers from the Black Sea. And we heard the beautiful recitations from the Qu'ran drift up beneath a canopy of sparkling stars.

As we left that night, we were introduced to the bride and groom, at which point the groom placed his hand across his chest, saying:

“You have honored us by coming to our wedding.”

The tradition of offering hospitality to the stranger is a major theme running throughout the Bible. It is a moral imperative. For God’s people are people who welcome the stranger, provide water and food, and treat them justly. Not merely because you should. But because the God of Abraham has been hospitable and gracious to us.

Hospitality was central, not only in the Hebrew Scriptures, but in the Greek New Testament as well. In fact, one word from the Greek New Testament, “xenos” which means “stranger” also means “guest”.

Ponder that for a moment: The Greek word for stranger is also the word for guest

On the six am flight back from Konya, after a day in which we had visited Mevlana Rumi's mosque and museum and the stunning reverence of the people there, we sat towards the back of a Turkish Airline. The last to board were three men, dressed in flowing clothes and foreign caps. They carried onboard large containers of liquids, which the steward helped stow in a compartment behind me.

Since my three ounces of eye drops had been confiscated and put in a baggie on my transatlantic flight. How could this be?

The engines of the plane began to rev up beneath me, and we started to taxi down the runway. I began to feel afraid for the first time.

The steward standing next to me must have sensed this for he said to me:

“Its OK, it's zam zam water.”

“Oh,” I said, starting to breath again. “Zam Zam water.”

The steward stepped back. “You know zam zam water?”

In fact I knew a little about Zam Zam water. And so do you. Recall our first scripture reading today. Abraham's maidservant Hagar is cast out into the desert with her child who is sure to die without water. In desperation

Hagar runs back and forth seven times between the hills of Zafa and Marla, searching in the barren desert.

But the God of Abraham is a compassionate God, who hears her cries. And from the sun-baked earth of the desert, beneath the heel of her child, God's compassion spills forth in life giving water.

These men has just been to Mecca and were bringing back zam zam water, from the very same spring which thousands of years before the God of Abraham had provided to Hagar and her son.

But there is more to know about zam zam water: To Muslims it is their holiest water. For Zam zam water comes from heaven. Its unique healing and purifying properties make it a precious gift worth the effort to carry back for thousand of miles.

After we landed, while other passengers reached overhead for briefcases and shopping bags, one of the men came back for his water. But instead of departing like everyone else, he sat back down and asked the steward for drinking cups.

The morning sun was just beginning to tip in through the windows of the plane as the man took off the top of one container and began to pour.

Then, he turned in our direction, and reached across the crowded aisle of the plane. He leaned over to me with such eagerness, joy, and enthusiasm, offering to us, the strangers, his cups brimming with water from God.

Lights of the new day flashed in his dark eyes. I took the cup. The water in my hand felt charged. And I remembered these lines from one of Rumi's poems:

**“O friend, can't you see?
Your face is glowing with light.
The whole world could get drunk
On the love found in your heart.”**

With one gesture, this stranger, offered to me, the holiest thing he had. Water that renews and restores all of us as children of God.

The fear dissolved. The false lines that had once separated us fell away. He returned to me a belief, that in the midst of global uncertainty, the vast majority of people are just people, like you and I, like the person sitting next to you in church today.

The descendants of Abraham are those who answered God's call to journey from home, from their comfort zones, and enter a world in which we become a stranger and encounter the stranger. When we treat everyone with the same hospitality and compassion God has shown us, we acknowledge

each person's holiness, regardless of the faith tradition to which they belong.

We transform the world. We make a new thing.

Let us go forth this morning, and be like a river with our compassion and generosity. Let us renew our commitments to daily acts of hospitality. Let us reach across the aisle of this church and greet those whose names we do not recall. Let us take one small step outside our selves in our work lives and turn a stranger in our midst into our guest. Today, this week, this month, this lifetime. Let us embody the gracious hospitality that God first gave to us, the God of Abraham whose voice rang through Isaiah's words:

Do not remember the things of old

I am about to do a new thing:

Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert."

God has been gracious and loving and merciful to us, providing all of us with life giving waters during desert times. Let us now freely give back what belongs to God.

H.K. Swearingen, February 3, 2008