"The Faithfulness of Unlearning"

Isaiah 55:1, 6-8; Matthew 15:21-28 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be soft and malleable, to receive your teaching. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

I need to tell you all part of the story of my summer today. As you know, we've been going through a lot in the past few months, with losses coming one after another and partnership conversations getting more serious. But there's a whole other thing that's been pulling on my heart, and I want to share it with you. If you're a close reader of our Friday email newsletters, you'll have noticed that there was an invitation there most of the summer to join me at the Islamic Center in El Cajon on a Friday. I want to give you the back story on that invitation today.

You will remember that back in May, on Monday the 18th, there was a shooting at the Islamic Center in Clairemont. That is the main campus for the Islamic Center of San Diego, the biggest mosque in our County. Three men – their security guard, another staff member, and an active member who lived across the street – were killed, doing what they could to protect the students and teachers at the school inside. The shooters were deterred by the swift and sacrificial protective actions of those three men and drove away before taking their own lives. It was a horrific tragedy that could have been so much worse if not for their quick and courageous responses.

In the days that followed, our wider community stepped in to surround the Islamic Center community with love and care, hoping to assure them that those who spread hatred and violence are vastly outnumbered by those of us who want to spread understanding and compassion. The leader of the Islamic Center, Imam Taha Hassane, is a dear friend of mine and a valued colleague in interfaith efforts for justice. That very afternoon, before I knew much about what had happened, many colleagues were contacting me to find out if I knew how we could best respond. One person suggested that we could just go stand outside with signs of love and support. While it was clear it was too soon for more people on the scene to be helpful, the idea was good. On Wednesday of that week, I read an article in the newspaper that quoted a young woman who was identified as the administrative assistant at the satellite campus of the Islamic Center of San Diego in El Cajon. She said that people were calling in to the office, saying they were too scared to come to Friday prayers. So by Friday, we had organized to have people at both Islamic Centers – or masjids – on Friday, as people were arriving, with friendly faces and signs expressing our love and solidarity.

This kind of demonstration of support had happened before at the main masjid in Clairemont, but the Islamic Center in El Cajon is a somewhat more insulated, immigrant community. We weren't sure how it would go: if they would appreciate our presence, or if it would feel like an intrusion, just more outsiders who

might trigger anxiety. So we decided to try it once and see how we were received. If it went well, we would keep coming, till… well, we'd have to see about that.

It did go well. People were curious, but once they saw what our signs said, they would smile and thank us for being there. It went so well, in fact, that Sheikh Sa'ad, the imam of the Center in El Cajon, asked if we would come back early the next Wednesday for their morning Eid service. Eid Fitr is one of the main Muslim holidays. We were given candy and dates and cookies, and even some potted mums! And then we settled into a rhythm. Other folks were covering the masjid in Clairemont, so I took on El Cajon as my special responsibility. What you need to know about midday prayers at the El Cajon Center is that the community who gather to pray on Fridays numbers about 1000 people. And their building comfortably holds about 250. So they have four services one right after the other. Unlike the shift in Clairemont, those of us gathering in El Cajon were trying to cover the entrance from 11 AM until about 2:30 in the afternoon. It was kind of a big ask, especially as summer set in in sunny El Cajon. But it was worth it.

From the very beginning, the experience was one of deep hospitality. They set up a pop-up tent for us, with folding chairs and a bench. Within a couple weeks, the main facilities guy, my new friend Ziad, was bringing out tea for us each week. He called it "Iraqi tea" at first, because he made it and he was Iraqi, which he found hilarious. I was just glad he understood that some of us take sugar in our tea and

always made sure there was sugar and spoons. The tea was usually accompanied by some of the best dates I've ever had and sometimes cookies or candy.

The tea was just for the quiet moments though. Most of our time was spent waving and greeting people. The parking lot there is not big enough for everyone, so there was usually some drama as people would arrive, seeing who would get a spot. Nevertheless, people would pause and roll down their windows to thank us for being there. I assume there are varying levels of comfort with speaking English, so it wasn't all in words. I remember in particular one older man who would always put on his brakes long enough to make a heart sign with his hands and smile. Many folks would park farther away and walk in, so we had the chance to have longer conversations. It was sometimes an awkward position to be in. I am here because something terrible happened to your community, so being thanked for showing up feels a little strange. What do you say? "You're welcome"? We usually settled on "it's our pleasure" or "it's an honor to be with you." As you can see, my sign said "We love our Muslim neighbors" so sometimes people would just call out "We love you too" which would usually catch me by surprise, because it took me a second to realize it was a response to the sign. Sometimes it was just calling out "Happy Friday!" or wishing someone a good weekend. And sometimes we tried to be more culturally daring and greeted people by saying "Salam" which means "peace" in Arabic and is a common way to say hello.

I don't know that I am adequately expressing the impact that doing this week after week had upon my soul. Yes, it was hot. Yes, I was occasionally out there by myself for part of the time, especially as the summer got hotter. But the joy of experiencing the deepening of community in real time was incredible. We didn't learn many names, but we started recognizing faces, those who came every week without fail, those who brought their kids, those who rushed in over their lunch hour, those who assured us multiple different weeks that we are all one human race, the whole world round.

We believe that, right? That we are all beloved children of God, brothers and sisters and siblings to one another? I needed to tell you all this story today, because even as the memory of the May 18th shooting fades for those of us not directly impacted, the rhetoric of anti-Muslim hatred in this country has continued to grow. When our neighbors are constantly having to protect their children from discrimination and fending off daily accusations of being terrorists, we cannot stand by in silence. Christians need to get clear about our relationship to Muslim people, and that relationship needs to reflect our deepest convictions about the belovedness of all people and knowledgeable respect for a faith tradition that incorporates deep respect for ours.

Did you know that Muslims love Jesus? He is mentioned in their scriptures and revered as a prophet. There is a portion of the mosaic on the ceiling of the Al Aqsa

Mosque in Jerusalem that is dedicated to Mary, who is also held in high esteem. Meanwhile, Christian leaders throughout this country spread horrible falsehoods about this beautiful faith tradition and its adherents. We cannot let that hatred go unanswered.

But it may be that before we can speak up, we need to get clear about some things in our own hearts and minds. So let's look at this story from Matthew, and the hints we hear from Isaiah that can help us move in a more faithful direction. There are a lot of folks who try to explain away what happens here in Matthew 15. Because when it comes right down to it, this story can seem a little embarrassing for Jesus. Is he being rude? Is he being racist? Bigoted? "He's just testing her," some people will insist. Okay, but why would he do that? She's clearly desperate, so that seems mean.

Personally, I've long appreciated this story because of how human it shows Jesus to be. If Jesus wasn't immune to the prejudices that accrete on our souls, just from living in a society, we don't have to be so defensive when we discover that we harbor many of those same habits of discrimination. Likewise if Jesus can humble himself to listen to and learn from a woman his tradition told him he shouldn't even talk to, we can too. If Jesus can change his mind, maybe there's hope for us. Maybe we can follow Jesus on the path of unlearning the stuff that's kept us from living out the gospel more faithfully.

This week, as I read this passage, a somewhat new angle was revealed to me. I'd never paid that much attention to the line early in the story where it says Jesus did not answer the woman at all when she was first shouting at them. I guess I'd always dismissed that as rudeness or just wishing she would give up and go away. But this time, it made me wonder: did Jesus stay silent, not because he was hard of heart, but because he was of two minds? Was he already torn about what to do, and thus, frozen, unsure of how to respond? What if, when the disciples urged him to send her away, apparently just because they found her shouting irritating, and he said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" it wasn't him drawing a clear line, but rather asking himself a question? There isn't any punctuation in the original manuscripts of the Bible, so there many things that may appear more clear than they were intended. What if, once the woman throws herself at his feet, when he says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" he is repeating a saying he'd heard his whole life, and questioning how on earth that could apply to this situation?

What if, when the woman offers that humiliated but firm come-back – "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." – she was offering him the opening he was longing for – a way out of a traditional teaching that he was suddenly recognizing as far too limiting for the love and mercy of God? If we read the story this way, his relief is palpable when he declares "Woman, great is your

faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!" What if, he'd been moving in this direction all along, but was pushing up against centuries of tradition that reinforced tribalism and exclusivity? What if this woman's desperation and persistence was the thing he needed to break through? To finally let go of those constraints and be the Savior of the World he was sent to be?

What if interaction is what helps us move past our hesitations? What if developing relationships with people is what helps us unlearn our prejudices and gain the courage to speak up to defend our neighbors who are unfairly maligned? No, not "what if". It's not a question; it's a clear reality. When we get to know our neighbors of other cultures and other faith traditions, we unlearn the falsehoods we've been taught about them and see past the stereotypes. When we get to know our neighbors, we learn to see them as fellow human beings, shaped by different cultural forces than ours, but with beautiful ways of living out similar values. The hospitality I experienced from our Muslim neighbors in El Cajon cannot be overstated. As August ground on, it became clear that we weren't going to be able to sustain this solidarity effort in both locations. We told them on the 7th that the next week would be our last. I was making paper peace cranes that day, in memory of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, something I try to do as a personal spiritual practice each year. When I first offered one to my new friend Ziad, he dismissed it as something "for children." But then a while later, I asked him what his favorite color was and got

him to pick out a blue one. Just a little bit after that, he came out with an origami boat he had made and showed me how to make one too.

The next week, as we were there for the last time, Ziad brought me a gift, this beautiful scarf, from his wife. I was a bit anxious to receive it there, as our spot was pretty dusty, so I took special care to protect it from falling on the ground. I was so sad that we were having to "give up" on this effort earlier than I had hoped, but this scarf will remind me that we showed up when it mattered. We stuck it out for almost three months, and we declared to one another that this relationship is not over. Bonds were forged; barriers were broken down. I hope that you all will be part of future efforts to build bridges with our East County Muslim neighbors.

It's hard to know what the Bible tells us about a religious tradition that emerged some 600 years after the time of Jesus. But I see hints. Did you hear what Isaiah said? He was clear that everyone is welcome in the temple. And more: "I will gather others to them besides those already gathered," it reads, which honestly, is kind of mysterious, but could easily be seen as guidance for us in this situation. This hint is reflected in a verse in the gospel of John, where Jesus is giving his "Good Shepherd" monologue. There in the middle of all that, he slips in, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also." Now, of course, some would argue that those other sheep include us. But if it includes us, why not our Muslim neighbors? How can the Living God, the Creator of the Universe, be contained by

our human categories and requirements? Why would we dare limit who God might love or how God might want to be worshiped? If we believe, as I was repeatedly told, sitting outside the masjid in El Cajon, "we are all one human family," why would we worry about drawing lines where God drew none? Can we follow the example of Jesus and let our new friends, our neighbors teach us new ways of sharing welcome? Can we share that cup of tea? That glass of lemonade? Can we try to eat a date, even if we think they're not our favorite? Can we learn to make boats and not just paper cranes, because someone has dared to teach us something?

I pray that we can. Because God needs someone to, and it might need to be us. Will you join me on this journey? It's a path that will hold a lot of uncertainty and potential for misunderstanding. But it will also include deep hospitality, new friends, and fascinating things to learn more about. May we follow Christ on the path of faithfulness. Hallelujah and Amen.