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## *Conversation on Forgiveness*

Tim Hart-Andersen and Makram Nu'Man El-Amin

Sunday, March 26, 2017

*Luke 6:27-38*

**Hart-Andersen:** I'm pleased to welcome back to Westminster our good friend Imam Makram El-Amin, the leader of Masjid An-Nur, the Mosque of the Light, in north Minneapolis, on Lyndale at 17<sup>th</sup>. Thank you, Makram, for being here and helping us explore the complex and demanding call to forgiveness.

This morning's reading of the gospel in both English and Arabic, from the Egyptian Coptic Bible, comes from Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount. We call it the Sermon on the Plain, because Luke says Jesus delivers it on a "level place."

It's a pivotal sermon. Here Jesus puts forgiveness in the broader context of the wide-open love of God. Jesus delivers a string of commandments that represent a serious re-directing of our lives. This is Christianity at its most challenging.

"Love your enemies," Jesus says, the first hint that he expects us to live in a way that will be difficult. And then he goes on...

"Do good to those who hate you.  
Bless those who curse you.  
pray for those who abuse you."

Jesus is proposing an ethic that goes far beyond anything we would consider reasonable in the normal course of life and human relationships. If we thought following Jesus would be easy, we will have to think again.

“If anyone strikes you on the cheek,” Jesus says,

“Offer the other, also.

If someone takes your coat, give them your shirt, as well.

Give to everyone who begs from you.”

I wonder if those who heard these words of Jesus 2,000 years ago had a response similar to mine. To comply with these commandments, frankly, seems to be humanly impossible.

*But then Jesus reframes his teaching.* He shifts his emphasis from those on the receiving end – those who have been hated or abused or cursed or unloved, those who have little power in a relationship – and, instead, turns toward those on the *doing* end, those with agency and power in the relationship. To them, *to us*, when we’re in that situation, Jesus offers a summary imperative that underlies all his teaching. It’s deceptively simple: “*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*”

*The Golden Rule.* The foundation of Christian living. The core of the teaching of Jesus on how we are to get along as human beings.

*Do to others as you would have them do to you.* This teaching is not unique to Christianity. It’s found in other traditions, as well.

Makram, as we heard in our Children’s Sermon this morning, Islam teaches something similar to the Golden Rule. Would you comment on the Muslim version of this teaching?

**El-Amin:** Yes, Islam's Golden Rule is very similar to that which is in Christian and other traditions. I thank Doug this morning for stealing my thunder with this. I offer, a little in addition to what he said...Mohammad, the prophet to Islam, said, "You don't have faith, you do not have faith, until you love for your brother or sister that which you love for yourself."

So he made this a matter of faith, not just simply a good thing to do. It is not just a nice idea. But for those of us who want to be faithful and trusting to God, we are required to transcend our own desire, our own self-interest even, and to expand that to our neighbor, those with whom we share common space. Mohammad also said, which I have found to be a very transformational teaching, "Your religion, in fact, is in your human transactions, or your human interactions. It is one thing to profess faith, it is another thing to adorn the robes of faith. But how we interact with each other on a day-to-day basis, how we act in our local human interactions, this really determines and shows the quality of our faith together."

**Hart-Andersen:** Jesus uses the Golden Rule as another way to teach about forgiveness. We offer forgiveness, because *each of us would want to be forgiven*. It's a pragmatic approach to forgiveness. We do it because we would want it done to us. The next time you are asked to forgive someone, and you really don't feel like forgiving them, remember the rule and respond in the way you would want *them* to respond.

We can't ask someone to do something we're not willing to do ourselves.  
*Forgive our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

The danger here is that we begin to think of God's love as merely *transactional*, between us and God or between us and neighbor...an exchange. But Jesus teaches here that *we don't love others because we expect others to love us in return*. That approach to human relationships imagines an unwritten contract between people: we will do this - forgive, share, give, love - *if and only if* you will do the same for us.

Life in the realm of God is not like that. It is not contractual, not a negotiated deal between people or between God and us. The Bible is not the story of contractual love, but of *covenantal love*.

Life in covenant with one another begins with our first extending love to the other, *with no expectation of anything in return*. God loves us like that, with no conditions. God forgives us like that, as well.

It is really the core, defining quality of our understanding of who God is. *God is the Generous One*. *Generosity* underlies the ministry and teaching of Jesus, his entire life, and certainly his death for us on the cross. We hear that in his Sermon on the Plain.

“If you love those who love you,” Jesus says, “What credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.”

*Generosity*. No expectations.

“If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. But love your enemies (and) do good...expecting nothing in return.”

*Generous living* in the way of Jesus *compels* us to forgive, to share, to love one another. Expecting nothing in return.

Makram, is there a similar mandate in Islam to live generously toward others, including people of other faith traditions?

**El-Amin:** Yes, my understanding of our religion is that Islam, in and of itself, is about generous living. It is about living abundantly, a life of abundance, versus a life of scarcity. The idea that we are to go beyond our very selves and to convey courtesies and peace upon one another. There

are many attributes of God that we call upon throughout our religious tradition. Two of them are Ar-rahmaan the merciful benefactor. The one who gives all of the benefits, everything that we enjoy in life, everything that we sometimes think of as small and insignificant, the breath that you just took. As well as Ar-raheem, the merciful redeemer. The one that, after we have enjoyed all of these wonderful gifts from God, and we make a mess of things, we go astray, we error, we sin, it is the Ar-raheem now that we call to redeem us, and who comes to put us back on a firm footing with God. Mohammed, peace be upon him, used to say, "Oh God, you love to forgive. So forgive me."

Again, we are called to abundant living. This idea of forgiveness must not get stuck in a grudge. Not to stay small in our own disturbed sensitivities. But to live a life that is truly free.

**Hart-Andersen:** It sounds as if the teaching of Islam on forgiveness and generosity is very similar to Christian teaching on those subjects. We might think Islam and Christianity would be getting along pretty well these days. But just because Makram and I get along and are good friends, we don't want to sugarcoat the reality in other lands and in our own nation. The reality is that we don't live as friendly neighbors. We live as people suspicious of one another, assuming things of one another, afraid of one another.

The events in London this past week underscore that a lot of the world is tempted to view our traditions as being opposed to one another or somehow enemies of one another. We speak of generosity in our traditions, but what we're experiencing oftentimes is a distortion of that teaching. Current politics, the campaign last year, and our governments' recent proposals to ban anyone coming from several Muslim-majority nations tend to exacerbate the tension. We've seen a rise in America of crimes against people of traditions other than Christianity. The politics of intolerance make the situation worse, and move us from the religions

traditions we have described today into a more extreme view of one another. I'm sorry that that happens in our tradition; you in your tradition are often on the receiving end of that, as we have our own extremists. But I want to make clear: *that is not the way of Jesus*. The way of Jesus is a loving path, a generous path, a forgiving path.

**El-Amin:** I really appreciate this recognition of what we experience in the world by those who operate under the cloak of faith, and, instead, the attempt to discern what is really the essence of faith. I believe that, also, we can see the fate of our country, and many of those who are suffering at the hands of this intolerant rhetoric that we hear day-in and day-out begins to play itself out in hate crimes and discrimination and other forms of oppression and we have experienced this, many times, at our mosque and against others of the Muslim tradition. Even here in Minnesota, where there are those who have experienced a degree of anxiety and fear. We have also seen those who have been driven to cause physical harm to others, as well.

But one thing that I would have to say, in all honesty, is that I've also seen the opposite. I've also seen good people of faith to come to the support of those who are under siege. To come the support of those who are in need the most. When we are under fire, when we are not having a good day, when things are not going well, we call upon our friends. We call upon those who care about us. We call upon those with whom we have established relationships for a comforting word, for some peace to be conveyed, and we have that. And we share that. I would hope that we would model this more in this time when leaders must lead.

**Hart-Andersen:** Makram, can you help us understand how a person who has a religious tradition rooted in peace, *salaam* -meaning "peace," *Islam* - moves from that kind of position and understanding of a tradition to an extremist position that might result in violent actions? We don't understand how that happens in our tradition. Maybe you can help us understand.

**El-Amin:** I've done a lot of work recently on this idea of de-radicalization. One of the things that I've found is whether it is a terrorist, under the cloak of Islam, or a right-wing group promoting a certain ideology, one of the things is that I've found that is very surprising to me, is when we took the labels off of each of these particular extremist groups, we found them to be eerily similar. So if we covered the label, and looked at the content of actions, thoughts, behaviors, and what ultimately began to be these acts of aggression towards others, we could not discern any difference.

So how does this happen? I think it happens to us who find it hard to forgive. We have some hurt that we've experienced in our life that blocks us from abundance. And it begins to taint and jade our thinking and our view of life. And it allows us to justify things that, when seen through clear eyes, we wouldn't even tolerate. So I believe there is a way that it happens and that in some way they have codified it and produced other minds that are radical and extreme. But I also think that there is a way of combatting this in my view, that we have the power of our traditions to reverse-engineer radicalization. And get us back to a state of peace. Because ultimately, to become radical or extreme, you have to depart from your tradition at some point and some time.

**Hart-Andersen:** In the text today, the Sermon on the Plain, we hear the heart of our tradition. "Be merciful," Jesus says,

"Just as your Father is merciful.  
Do not judge, and you will not be judged...  
Forgive, and you will be forgiven;  
Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down,  
shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the  
measure you give will be the measure you get back."

Following Jesus is not for the meek or indecisive. To follow Jesus is demanding and difficult work, and it all begins with living generously, by forgiving, by loving, even as we are forgiven, and loved, by God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

## **Pastoral Prayer ~8:30 and 10:30 am Worship**

Doug Mitchell

Holy God, fountain of life, to a humanity parched with thirst you offer the living water of grace, which springs up from our rock and Savior Jesus Christ. Grant your people the gift of your Spirit that we may learn to act out our faith as servants of all and announce with joy the wonder of your love.

In this season of lent, we remember, O God, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, and we strive to follow him. We follow with our minds the stories of scripture; we follow with our hearts the passion of Christ; we follow with hands and feet through recommitment to justice and reconciliation; we follow with the wings of the spirit in prayer and meditation. May our minds be open; our hands be strong; our hearts be gentle; and our spirits sing. May this worship transform us that we may humbly follow Jesus in the way of life.

God of compassion, we praise you that you look upon our frail lives with love and understanding, and that you desire for each of us new life in Christ. Help us, O God, to faithfully live out our desire to forgive others and to forgive ourselves as you command. We are overwhelmed by your love, which goes to the cross for us, endures the grave and leads to new life.

Gracious God, your Word, Jesus Christ, spoke peace to a sinful and violent world. We hold before you the millions of people who live in settings where violence dominates their lives. In countries like Syria, South Sudan and the Central African Republic and so many other places, where violence dominates life, including neighborhoods in our own city. Lead us to be peacemakers among your people. We especially pray for the people who

were killed and injured in London and in the ongoing killings in Manila. Teach us and all who bear his name to follow the example Jesus gave us. May our faith, hope and forgiveness turn hatred to love, conflict to peace, and death to eternal life, through Christ our Lord.

Holy comforter, healing Spirit, grant your peace to those who are sick, and to those who grieve this morning. We pray that your healing touch be felt by those who are in the hospital and those recovering from illness or surgery

We ask your comfort for those who grieve losses in their lives - losses of jobs, of relationships, of loved ones.

And as we remember your great love O God, we pray together the prayer your Son taught us... Our Father...