

Throwing Stones

One of the things my Muslim friends have taught me is how to throw stones at the devil. When Muslims are participating in Hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam, pilgrims are encouraged to pick up stones and hurl them at the devil. It is a practice, which reinforces the notion that resisting the temptations of the devil requires vigilance, awareness and intentionality. Giving Satan a foothold in your life is not a good idea. Jesus taught the same thing. He would often confront Satan directly, and he encourages us to do the same. He never minced his words. To one of his closest disciples, Peter, he once said, "Get away from me, Satan!" (Matthew 16:23). One of the hardest challenges Christians can face is admitting that Satan has gained a foothold in their lives.



Pilgrims throw stones at a wall representing Satan.

Two weeks ago, I was privileged to participate in a most unique event. Members of my church and I asked our Muslim friends if they would like to offer a joint seminar to the wider Chicago community with each of us sharing and teaching how to build bridges and redemptive relationships between churches and mosques, Christians and Muslims. Our objective was to highlight our eight-year relationship as a model and encouragement to other churches and mosques in the area. Our Muslim friends loved the idea. So we began planning our event for Saturday, October 15. We agreed the program would begin at 9:30 a.m. and end after lunch at 1 p.m. We invited other churches and mosques in the area. If 50 people showed up, we would be delighted. But, God surprised us when 120 people came streaming through our church doors, looking to make a Muslim or Christian friend for the first time!

It was a glorious morning of sharing stories and experiences from our interfaith work; tears, laughter, and honesty permeated the air. People confessed hatred and resentment towards each other, while seeking greater reconciliation and love. Hasan, one of the Muslim speakers, drew laughter when he said he felt so comfortable in our church that he was no longer certain if he was a part of the welcoming community of Christians hosting Muslims, or a Muslim being welcomed by our church. Hasan was once a Bosnian soldier with deep hatred for all Christians. Today, he has become an outspoken advocate for interfaith dialogue and joint community service projects among Christians and Muslims in the Chicago area.

Satan has a field day when local Christian and Muslim communities have no interaction or dialogue. When there are no friendships being formed, generalizations often give birth to judgment, and judgment spawns stereotypes, and stereotypes invite demonization. Slyly, Satan can begin to control our thoughts, even while we try to maintain our righteousness and innocence. Too often, Christians forget what Jesus taught about anger and hatred. Anger, if not identified and confronted, is capable of blossoming into violence. In fact, anger is the principle root of all violence. Listen to these words of our Lord and Savior; "You have heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.' But, I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And, if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell." (Matthew 5:21-22)



In other words, forming bridge-building, interactive friendships among Christians and Muslims is the best way to nip potential judgment in the bud, disallowing Satan from doing his behind-the-scenes, conniving work, often unseen, suspected or detected. After all, what would Jesus rather have us do - run around trying to quell, manage, or contain one violent act after another? Or, would he rather see us taking the initiative to enter into the unknown territory of another culture and religion, and make friends? I believe the answer can be found in what Jesus once said to his disciples, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God." (Matthew 5:9)

I have discovered that many Christians are fearful of pursuing dialogue or friendships with Muslims because of not wanting to lose the distinctiveness of what they believe themselves. They think that peacemaking somehow waters down the strength of their own convictions. Actually, the exact opposite is true. By interacting with Islam, Christians are often given the gift of understanding more clearly the uniqueness of their own faith. Having to explain the atonement of Jesus, the nature of the Trinity, or Christ's second coming to a person of a different faith is a healthy exercise for any Christian.

Eight years ago, when my Christian friends and I began our journey with our Muslim friends, we articulated many important ground rules for our dialogue and engagement. We drew up a document called "Communities of Reconciliation." One of the most important principles of this document states that there will be no debate, argumentation, or persuasive talking during our interaction or dialogue. However, they could be full-throttle Muslims and we could be full-throttle Christians, but with respect for one another. In other words, neither one of us

would water down what we believed but we would respect each other.

When I first talked about these ground rules with the Imam of the local mosque, his eyes lit up, and he said, "Wonderful. If neither one of us debates or argues; if we discipline ourselves to listen with open hearts and minds to the other person, then we can allow the Spirit of God to sort out what is true, accurate and right. He will tell us the truth." When he said these words, I knew instantly we were on the right path. Sorting out what is true and right, after all, is the work of our Holy Spirit. My fellow Christians and I began praying earnestly and often before we met with our Muslim friends, asking the Holy Spirit to be present with us in all our dialogues and interactions. By offering these prayers, we became more relaxed and authentic, able to love freely our new Muslim friends with our words and actions, trusting that the Holy Spirit would reveal what we all needed to understand more fully about God.

It indeed takes humility and honesty to admit when anger or fear has taken hold of our lives. And, it takes contemplation and reflection to remember that Jesus leaves no room for anger and faith to co-exist, or fear and love to be friends. Angry and self-righteous Christians have no place in the kingdom of God. Peacemaking, efforts of reconciliation, and love are at the heart of the Christian life. That is why the Apostle Paul once wrote, "If I could speak all the languages of earth and angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal....Three things will last forever - faith, hope and love - and the greatest of these is love." (1Corinthians 13:1, 13)



So if we are tempted to be angry, self righteous or judgmental about someone of another faith or religion, it's all right step back and throw a figurative stone at the one who is causing those emotions or actions, remembering the admonition of Jesus to his follower Peter, "Get away from me Satan."