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EMBARGOED AGAINST DELIVERY

Equipped Disciples: Embracing the Cross for the Sake of our Neighbors

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Today we participate in God's mission and evangelism in an increasingly multi-religious world. In our neighborhoods and globally, there are examples of peaceful co-existence but also of inter-religious intolerance, bigotry, violence, and persecution. Amidst this, God has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18). Freed in Christ to love and serve our neighbor, what is our faithful response when our neighbor of another religion is the target of hatred? How are we called, as disciples of Christ, to embrace the cross for their sake?

In the fall of 2010, anti-Muslim bigotry in the United States reached a fever pitch as Terry Jones, a pastor of a small non-denominational church in Florida, threatened to burn copies of the Qur'an on the ninth anniversary of September 11, 2001 and the 24-hour news cycle was spinning controversy around the so-called "Ground Zero Mosque" proposal which would, among other things, create a forum for inter-religious understanding and cooperation. In short, anti-Muslim bigotry was going unchecked in our public discourse.

In response, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders – including 14 from the Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical and Catholic churches – gathered at the National Press Club in Washington, DC for an emergency interfaith summit. They released a joint statement standing in solidarity with their Muslim neighbors. As a longer-term strategy, they formed a coalition, the Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign, with a mission dedicated to ending anti-Muslim bigotry through the mobilization of non-Muslim faith communities.¹

While hate crimes against Jewish and black Americans remain the highest, crimes against Muslims have risen at alarming rates – and of course we must name the intersections. In 2016 alone, hate crimes against Muslims rose almost 20%, fueled by the anti-Muslim sentiment expressed during the presidential campaign. Another uptick is expected for 2017, stoked by the policies of the administration in its first year.

Eight years in, the coalition has expanded to include 35 members and the campaign strategy has diversified. Local capacity building and advocacy have been added to ongoing work nationally and in partnership with global initiatives such as the 2016 Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Communities and the follow-up Alliance of Virtue conference held last month in Washington DC.

There is a unique role, I would assert, for the churches to play. We are just beginning to understand that equipping disciples for mission and evangelism today must include not only religious literacy and inter-religious competencies but also the courage and humility to embrace the cross for the sake of our neighbors of other religions and worldviews, and to defend them against discrimination, bigotry, racism, and violence, regardless of its source.

¹ <http://www.shouldertoshouldercampaign.org/>

The dominant Christian voices in American public discourse are no longer those of the churches in the ecumenical family, but those of certain Christian leaders who teach and preach bias and bigotry – and whose credos are often championed by a president who is not held to *any* religious, moral, or ethical standard. The American public does not differentiate one set of Christian voices from another, and so the Christian witness in the US is deeply diminished, sometimes distorted to the point of betraying the Gospel. We need you, our sisters and brothers in Christ, as we seek to be faithful witnesses amid these scandalous realities.

Martin Luther clung to the theology of the cross. “A theology of the cross excludes triumphalism; we who know God’s promise of gracious, trustworthy love need not have all the answers as we acknowledge the deep mysteries of God. We can live humbly within these limits and still stand in courageous solidarity and loving compassion with all who suffer.”² Today, in the United States, that includes the American Muslim community. Thus, as the ELCA we are working in partnership to educate our church about Islam; to encourage dialogue and cooperation with Muslims; to advocate for religious freedom and civil liberties; and to participate in moral, public resistance when necessary.

In his *Letters and Papers from Prison* Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “Against folly we have no defense. Neither protests nor force can touch it; reasoning is no use; facts that contradict personal prejudices can simply be disbelieved – indeed, the fool can counter by criticizing them, and if they are undeniable, they can just be pushed aside as trivial exceptions. So the fool, as distinct from the scoundrel, is completely self-satisfied; in fact, he can easily become dangerous, as it does not take much to make him aggressive.”³

Just over a year ago, on the night of January 28, I put my four children to bed, hugged my husband, and headed for the airport for the first of several nights in a row. Protests had spread from JFK airport in New York to major airports across the country in response to the executive order, “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States.” The order, which would ban nationals from several Muslim-majority countries, was interpreted as the president delivering on his campaign promise of a “Muslim ban,” but it also put a halt to refugee resettlement from those countries, with the exception of Syrian Christian refugees.

On the train, a woman handed me a black marker and a poster board. I hastily wrote in large letters: “Lutheran Christians love their Muslim neighbors” and on the other side “Lutherans welcome refugees.” The woman sitting next to me glanced at my sign and said: “I didn’t know there were Christians who would come.” She shared that she had been raised Christian but had left the church as an adult to escape what she described as “hatred, especially against Muslims.” As the train arrived at the airport terminal, we decided to stick together, joining a remarkably diverse coalition.

Bonhoeffer was right: protests cannot defend against folly. But as called and sent disciples of Christ, we must protest whenever and wherever the Gospel is diminished, distorted, or betrayed, or when our neighbors are under threat or experiencing bigotry and violence. Freed in Christ, we are called to embrace the cross to protest the suffering of any and all people, and the fullness of Creation. It is costly discipleship, but not when compared to the cost borne by the One who embraced the cross once and for all.

I want to close by acknowledging that there are other witnesses here, with different stories, including painful stories of Christians embracing the cross of violence perpetrated by Muslims. I give thanks to God for this opportunity to learn from and with each other as we seek to equip disciples for mission and evangelism in today’s multi-religious world.

² “Luther and Contemporary Inter-Religious Relations,” From the ELCA Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations, 2016, http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Why_Follow_Luther_Past_2017.pdf

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, “After Ten Years,” In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, edited by Eberhard Bethge, 1-17. New York: Touchstone, 1997, p. 8.