

THE FEAR OF ISLAM<sup>1</sup>  
I John 4: 16b-21  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
September 11, 2011

These are frightening times, and I am sure we all are united in the hope that this day passes without one tragic event taking place. “Things that go bump in the night” is not a wise crack. Sometimes it is our fears that go bump in the night. Our fears bump into our thinking, bump into our dreams, bump into our logic.

On this 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11, I want to begin with the fear of Islam, then next week we will think about the fear of God. Later in the series we will think together about the fear of failure and the fear of rejection. And finally, perhaps one of the most challenging topics, the fear of fear.

I

The first thing to say in the context of Christian worship is that fear is not a motivator of sound Christian faith, and any religious leader who peddles fear, even when using Christian language, should be regarded with some skepticism.

One would imagine that the early church had much to fear, but over and over again we hear words that call on them not to fear. Here is the biblical advice an older pastor gives to a newly ordained Christian minister: *I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-*

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<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, September 11, 2011.

*discipline.*<sup>2</sup> And then there is the text we read here today: *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*<sup>3</sup>

Christian faith does not move forward on fear; it moves forward on faith and hope and love.

## II

We Americans were not unfamiliar with fear of terrorism long before 9/11. The Ku Klux Klan was and still is a terrorist organization. They liked to intimidate with the central symbol of the Christian faith: the cross. They would hide behind their white robes and masks, and burn a cross in someone's yard. Why the cross? Because they considered themselves a Christian organization! They used Christian symbols and claimed to be true Christians.

Now suppose people unfamiliar with Christianity heard a member of the KKK claiming that his terrorist organization was the true form of Christianity, and that all those churches were heretical that tried to embrace differences in love and service? And suppose those people unfamiliar with Christianity mounted a campaign to convince the world that true Christians are all like the KKK? And suppose some wealthy foundations began to fund sophisticated publicity claiming that all Christians were determined to take over society and force the beliefs of the KKK onto the legal system and the political process?

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<sup>2</sup> II Timothy 1:6-7.

<sup>3</sup> I John 4: 18.

And suppose that in order to bolster their argument, they said, "Don't those Christians have scripture that promotes violence?" To prove it, suppose they cherry-picked texts that both Christians and Jews hold as sacred. They turned, for example, to the book of Numbers, chapter 31, in which Moses claims to be speaking for God when he instructs his soldiers to kill all the Midianites. Then we are told that his soldiers slaughtered all the Midianite men, but they captured all the Midianite women and children. When Moses heard that, he was furious. He stood before his army and said, *You let all the women and children live?...separate the children by gender and kill all the male children, and execute every woman who is not a virgin. But all the young girls and women who are still virgins, keep alive for yourselves.*<sup>4</sup>

Yes, that is in our Bible! To most Christians, this text and others like it are abhorrent, and they do not represent Christianity at all. But no, this imagined crowd is determined to paint Christianity as a violent and blood-thirsty religion. They are sure that true Christianity is what the KKK says it is.

### III

This is the kind of dilemma that the vast majority of Muslims face. The horrible events of 9/11 are seared into our brains and will always be there. It was an unspeakable crime by any standard, and no one here is interested in excusing it in any way. There is no excusing the horror 2,819 innocent people

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<sup>4</sup> Numbers 31: 7-18.

killed in the attacks. There is no excuse for 343 firefighters and paramedics killed; no excuse for 60 police officers killed; no excuse for the 19,858 body parts found; no excuse for the 1,717 families who recovered no remains at all; no excuse for the 1,609 people who lost a spouse or partner in the attacks; and no excuse for the 3,051 children who have to grow up without a mother or a father.<sup>5</sup>

Nearly the whole world condemned it. Mainstream Muslims especially were horrified by it. Within days leaders of every mainstream Muslim organization condemned the attacks of 9/11 as “criminal, misguided, and counter to the true teachings of Islam.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet in spite of the nearly universal condemnation, there have been well-funded efforts to spread the rumor that all Muslims are terrorists, and it has churned up exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Muslim neighbors in many a community.<sup>7</sup> When a group of our own members visited the Muslim center here in Worcester, we heard genuine fear from their members just to do things like going to the airport and taking a flight. All of them had experienced hostility that is the very definition of Islamophobia.

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<sup>5</sup> See “9/11 By the Numbers,” *New York Magazine*, September 5, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> [http://web.archive.org/web/20020916085653/http://www.islam-democracy.org/terrorism\\_statement.asp](http://web.archive.org/web/20020916085653/http://www.islam-democracy.org/terrorism_statement.asp)

<sup>7</sup> See the extensive report released by The Center for American Progress, entitled *Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America*, detailing the “fundamentalists, organizations, and individuals who have contributed to the discourse on Islamophobia in this country.”

This very morning, there is a former Navy Chaplain, now pastor of a Baptist church in North Carolina, who is leading worship and, like us, he is remembering the events of 9/11. His name is Charles McGathy, and he tells this true story. Ten years ago he was serving as Command Chaplain at Naval Base Coronado, California. As Command Chaplain, he supervised chaplains of all faiths who reported to him. One of his chaplains was a Muslim imam named Hussein.

Because of Hussein's linguistic and cultural knowledge, Chaplain Hussein was called again and again into service in Iraq. It seemed that every Marine unit wanted him. Chaplain Hussein did not remain in the protection of a compound when in Iraq; he went out daily on patrols into villages and encountered people who could not easily be defined as friend or foe. His sincere manner and genuine care for people dispelled hostility and fear almost everywhere he went. His field commanders reported that Chaplain Hussein was invaluable not only for providing religious care for his troops, but also for his unique ability to de-escalate hostility and thus avoid needless bloodshed. He was fearless in going on patrol.

But back home in California was another story. Chaplain Hussein had a wife and five children, and they found themselves in great stress. For his wife, English was a second language, and she became the object of ridicule and rumor in the off-base community where she lived. She feared not only for her own safety, but

also for the safety of their children in a neighborhood that was becoming increasingly threatening. She was very frightened, and she longed for her husband to return from Iraq. But that day was delayed again and again.

When it came time for the evaluation of all the chaplains, his commanding officer wrote that Chaplain Hussein provided or facilitated ministry not only for Muslims, but also for Baptists, Catholics, Jews, Buddhists and those with no religion at all, and Chaplain Hussein received the highest possible rating.<sup>8</sup>

#### IV

This story is not so much about Chaplain Hussein; it is about us. National security does not require that we listen to the fear-mongers and decide to hate all Muslims. National security does not require that we turn our backs on the cherished value of religious freedom. National security does not require that we fear our neighbors. National security does not mean that we believe outright lies about Islam. Of course, national security does require vigilance and common sense, but it does not require demonizing over four million American citizens who happen to be Muslim.

Such irrational fear leads to the tearing of the fabric of a diverse community and sometimes to violence toward innocent people. The well-funded machinery

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<sup>8</sup> Charles McGathy was commissioned as a naval officer in the Chaplain Corps in 1984 and spent 22 years serving the men and women of the sea services on three continents and at sea. He retired at the rank of Commander in 1996 and answered a call to serve as the pastor of First Baptist Church of Madison, NC. You can read his account of Chaplain Hussein at <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/the-hidden-truth-about-howard-the-naval-chaplain-cms-18489>.

of Islamophobia would have us believe that all Muslims are bent on destroying western civilization. But the truth is that the vast majority of Muslims who have chosen to live in the US have done so to better their own lives and those of their children.

## V

As we remember the events of 9/11 today, there is sadness over the terrible losses, and there is pride over the amazing heroism. But let there be no fear, for *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*