

**St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA**

**The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge**

**Church Year C**

**Date: 1/31/16**

**Season: Epiphany 4**

**Luke 4:21-30**

**1 Corinthians 13:1-13**

Last Wednesday evening, close to 150 people, including 20 or so of our Muslim neighbors from the IMAN Center in Kirkland, gathered in the Great Hall to share a meal and conversation. Our program was led by Mr. Mohamed Jawad Khaki, a former senior Microsoft executive who is now a successful entrepreneur and a generous philanthropist. Jawad is passionate about interreligious conversation as a means to bring together people of good will of different faith traditions to work together to build strong communities based on our shared values of justice and peace.

Jawad spent about 30 minutes leading us through the basics of Islam and pointing out the many values that Christians, Muslims, and Jews share. He reminded us that we also esteem many of the same prophets; Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jesus, to name just a few. In fact, Jesus is the second most highly esteemed prophet in the Quran after Mohammed. Mary is also highly regarded in the Quran. And of course, Muslims, Christians, and Jews are all children of Abraham. Muslims understand themselves to be descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's first son, while Jews and Christians trace our lineage from Isaac, Abraham's second son. Are there differences? Of course there are; significant ones that can't be overlooked. But the important core values of love of God and love and respect for neighbor and the want for justice and peace for all is at the heart of all these traditions.

Jawad then opened the floor for questions, and for well over an hour, we had a lively conversation. Some difficult and pointed questions were asked, and I'm glad they were. Jawad's response to these and every question was clear, direct, respectful and hopeful.

Lots of things emerged by the end of the evening. Underlying it all, was an understanding that we mostly want the same things. A just and peaceful society founded on our shared core values of love of God, love and respect for neighbor, helping the less fortunate, and working together for peace. I was also so delighted, and not at all surprised, by the warm hospitality our community extended to our Muslim neighbors that night. I've heard from several of them, both that night and subsequently how much our hospitality was appreciated. And I know I speak for many of us, because I've heard from

you, how real the presence of the Holy Spirit was that night among us all. It was truly a blessed time.

This vision of unity in the midst of diversity was very powerful and connects us to the biblical text appointed for last Sunday and this Sunday. We really need to put together both Luke's story of Jesus; first sermon in the synagogue and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians from these two Sundays.

Our reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians this morning brings us some of Paul's most familiar lines. It's about *agape* love – love that's unconditional and has no strings attached. Love that is freely offered and expects nothing in return. We hear it at weddings all the time. Maybe it was read at your wedding. And it's good that it is. Because anyone who's been married for more than about six weeks can tell you that love can be very hard work. And if you're not willing to put in the work, the chances of your marriage enduring are pretty slim.

But to get the richness and the depth of what Paul is saying about *agape* love in chapter 13 you have to read it together with chapter 12 which we heard last week. It's Paul's image of the Body of Christ. The image of a whole organization containing many parts. And each part is important. In fact, the organization can't thrive without all of its parts, even the parts which seem to be the lesser or inferior parts. Paul says "God has so arranged the body, giving greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together within it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." This is Paul's way of talking about the gifts of unity in the midst of diversity. Then he says to the little group in Corinth, who by the way, are having a big fight with each other; that's why Paul is writing to them, because some members of the community think they are better or more important than others – that they are each members of an organization called the Body of Christ, and they each have different gifts and that each gift is indispensable to the health of the Body.

And then he says, "strive for the greater gifts, and I will show you the still more excellent way." And that "still more excellent way" is the way of *agape* love in Chapter 13 that we read today.

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

That's the "still more excellent way" to overcome division in the community. And we know something about division in communities, don't we? Racial divisions, theological divisions like our Anglican Communion kerfuffle following the Primates Gathering a couple of weeks ago, political division – just look at the sad state of our political life in our nation as we head towards the next election: Class divisions. Religious divisions. And you know, we don't do a very good job navigating these divisions. Instead of finding and celebrating our commonalities and then holding our differences in creative tension, we choose sides and then demonize the other side. But here's a great truth that comes straight from the Apostle Paul. It's better to love than it is to be right. Let me say that again. It's better to love than it is to be right. If by being "right" we also mean tearing down or demonizing our opponents.

I ran across an interesting man the other day named Elias Chacour. Father Chacour is the Archbishop Emeritus of the Melkite Catholic Church for Akko, Haifa, Nazareth and all Galilee, an advocate for non-violence, working toward reconciliation between Arabs and Jews he says, "The one who is wrong is the one who says 'I am right.'"

It is better to love than to be right.

Luke is speeding into another divisive situation. When Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth for his inaugural sermon, which we read last week, everything is going just fine until he gets specific about exactly who are the poor and the captive and the oppressed to whom God's good news is being delivered. He reminds his home town listeners of two incidents from their history where God's favor was bestowed upon non-Israelites at a time when God seemed to be withholding favor from Israel because of Israel's unfaithfulness. I think it's important to know that both the widow of Zaraphath and Naaman the Syrian were what we would call today Arabs, residents of Lebanon and Syria. And in both these stories Israel was reminded that God's favor extends beyond the local tribe. God's favor extends to all people everywhere. In our own fractious and divisive time, where Muslims and refugees and immigrants are being demonized by some, we would do well to remember the stories of the Widow of Zaraphath and Naaman the Syrian. And we would do well to remember the reaction of Jesus' home town audience when he reminded them that God's favor had been given to ones they thought of as their enemies. They drove Jesus out of town!

In this divided and divisive time, when immigrants and refugees from the Middle East are the objects of fear and distrust, can it be imagined that they might actually be the beneficiaries of God's favor, just like the Widow of Zarapheth and Naaman the Syrian? Would Jesus be run out of town today for pointing that out? Sometimes I wonder.

The gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of Jesus Christ, is a gospel of peace and of peace-making. And peace-making always begins with listening; listening across boundaries of tribe and tradition and ideology. And listening in love as the Apostle Paul describes it. Listening with patience, with kindness, with humility, listening to discover shared truths and not to point out wrong doing; listening when it is hard and difficult and frustrating; listening in hope and compassion for weakness and brokenness.

It's the way that God listens to us. And it's the listening that will lead us to the place where we can say, "I would rather love than be right."

There was listening in love to and with our Muslim neighbors last Wednesday night. Will we agree on all things? Of course not. But as we listen to one another and see how we share so many core values in common, and recognize that we are all seeking to do God's will and seeking to move ever more deeply into God's presence, then those things which divide us won't be so sharp. And so scary.

Listening in love brings the heart closer to God. Listening in love loosens us from the bondage of self-righteousness. Listening in love makes us all of one heart. This lovely piece in your worship sheet that's set to the tune of Ubi Caritas calls us to that place of love. So let's sing it together in love and let it draw our own hearts closer to God. Amen.