

We are going to now turn to the 5th chapter of the gospel according to Matthew. The gospel of Matthew is included in the Bible as the first book of the New Testament. The book begins with a genealogy of Jesus by tracing Jesus back to Abraham through his adopted father Joseph. Matthew then describes for us the birth of Jesus and John the Baptist announcing to the world who this Jesus is.

Jesus is then led out into the desert wilderness where he endures 40 days of temptation by the devil. A period where Matthew shows the trust that Jesus has in God to care for him. Jesus then begins to invite people to follow him including some fishermen named Peter and Andrew, James and John.

So news about Jesus begins to spread and great crowds begin to follow him. People begin to bring sick people to him and Jesus is able to bring healing to lots of people with physical and mental health illnesses. So Jesus ascends a mountain and he begins to teach the crowd. And the words which we are about to read are the first instructions that Jesus gives to the crowds.

We normally call the first part of our reading the “Beatitudes.” They are called beatitudes because Jesus begins with a list of blessings. Beatitudes means “blessing.”

I love the beatitudes. I think there is a reason that the gospel of Matthew records these words as the first teachings of Jesus. Matthew apparently wants to highlight these words and let these words give a summary of all of Jesus’ teaching.

Read Matthew 5:1-16

As most of you are aware, I helped to initiate a letter that was sent to several news organizations last week. Two weeks ago I can assure you that the contents of that letter were nowhere in my brain. But then events over the last 2 weeks led me to believe that it was my calling as a Christian pastor to do what I did.

About two weeks ago I read a story about Robert Doggart. Robert Doggart is from Tennessee and he pleaded guilty this month to plotting an attack against a Muslim community in New York. It was discovered by the FBI that Doggart was trying to recruit people in South Carolina to join him in his attack. I could only assume by his outreach into South Carolina that he was planning an attack against the residents of Holy Islamville here in York County since it is a sister community to the one in New York.

So I wrote a letter and sent it to every pastor whom I have an email address for in York County. That is about 70 pastors and it includes several denominations. Some of these pastors would call themselves theologically liberal and some theologically conservative. I sent it to everyone whom I had an email address for.

25 of the 70 responded and said that they would sign the letter with me. I intentionally made the letter very basic. My main point of emphasis was to speak out against any violence against residents of Islamville. I wanted us to offer support for Sheriff Bryant and the York County deputies who work hard to keep all of us safe.

I wanted to take a stand that as Christians we do not promote violence. Conducting a holy war against people of another religion is not American and it is certainly not Christian. The rhetoric of some national Christian leaders has made me uncomfortable and I knew that there were people who believed differently than this fear based language which we hear so often. So the letter was written.

The letter was submitted to several news organizations last Friday and a reporter from the Rock Hill Herald contacted me on Saturday. The story that she wrote has now appeared in newspapers in Rock Hill and Charlotte, it will be in the Lake Wylie Pilot this week, and it has gone somewhat viral as some national blogs have reposted it.

I expected some backlash to the story but I have been pleasantly surprised as I have received quite the opposite reaction in the people who have contacted me. Several folks in the community have reached out to me to say that the letter expresses what they believe.

The most interesting phone call I received was from someone on Monday who told me that the letter was a very Christian thing to do. The person who told me that what we did was so Christian is a resident of Holy Islamville.

I know this letter is not accepted by lots of people. Two of the pastors responded that they could not sign a letter that referred to Muslims as our brothers and sisters. But as I said to them, God made us all so therefore that makes us brothers and sisters.

Just because a brother or sister has different beliefs than me does not make them less of a brother or sister. We are all created by one God whether we acknowledge or accept that. The language of calling us all brothers and sisters has become important to me because it affirms that we are all linked together. It is much easier to carry out violence against a neighbor than it is against a brother or sister.

I was misquoted in one place in the article. The reporter said to me, "so this is not about conversion or persuasion right?" I said this in response to that statement. I said, "I hope that the light of Christ shines through me. If others see that light and are attracted to that light then that is wonderful. If the light of Christ shines through me then I am being faithful to Christ and being a good witness to others."

I think misquoting me was simply an oversight on her part. I enjoyed my conversation with her and appreciated the editors of the Rock Hill Herald for putting this story on the front page and then writing a very nice editorial later in the week.

Newspapers still have a place in our culture even though it has been online that this story has taken on a life of its own. Posting this article on our church's Facebook page has resulted in more people viewing our church's Facebook page than at any other time. I know because I have access to how many people view information on our church Facebook page.

Why was it important for me to write that letter? As you are, hopefully, becoming aware by now we at Allison Creek are focusing our attention on "making connections." When the Session discerned this path I had no idea that this would lead me to making connections to folks in Islamville. Next Thursday the residents of Islamville are inviting the pastors who signed that letter to come and enjoy a meal with them that they are preparing. So I really wrote the letter to get a free meal out of it.

I am accepting their hospitality and am looking forward to lunch a week from Thursday with about 15 Christian pastors in the middle of Islamville. Islamville is that community of people that some very fearful people describe as a terrorist training camp. I know Islamville instead as a place where I am always welcomed and where I am treated with a great deal of respect. Too much respect actually.

I am not naïve. In fact, the last time I attended an event with folks from Islamville I got into a somewhat heated discussion with the out of town speaker where I disagreed with what I felt like was his stereotyping of Jewish people. I also disagree with how traditional Muslims limit the roles of women.

But I accept this invitation to Islamville because I believe that as Christians we are called to be peacemakers. As Jesus says, when we are peacemakers we are called children of God. I accept this invitation to eat in Islamville because I believe that as Christians we are called to be a light to the world. I accept their invitation because their radical hospitality and active prayer life has something to teach me and something we can all learn something from.

So I felt called to write that letter which is leading me to making some connections I did not see a couple of weeks ago. The tendency is to either put me on a pedestal for this act and celebrate me or to put me on the doormat for this act in order to stomp on me. I would ask that you neither elevate me for what I did nor disparage me for what I did. I simply tried to respond to what I felt was the faithful act to do in the midst of threats of violence.

What I hope is that you are also willing to seek to make your own connections to people outside of the church. To take a chance and risk making a connection outside of your immediate comfort zone. It may not be a person in the Muslim community but it may be the person that you work with, are in school with, enjoy a hobby with, are friends with, and are neighbors to.

What I encourage you to do is to find ways to listen to what is important to them and find ways to partner with them as a Christian. God is speaking to people outside of churches and inviting those of us inside the church to partner and help to give witness to what God is doing.

I don't know where my journey will continue to go after the letter. I am trying to be open and go wherever God is guiding me and not put limits on what that may mean. I invite you to trust God as well, take some risks, and seek to make connections with people that God is calling you to make connections to.

You are invited to be one who brings about peace in your own way and Jesus invites you to be a light to the world. AMEN.

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-Given: May 31, 2015 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)