

Bishop Smith's reflections—September 29, 2015

“What are you and the North Carolina Synod going to do about the Muslim threat?” That was one of the very first questions asked of me in a large public (church) gathering my very first week in office. I hadn't anticipated this question that night, but since then it has come at me from numerous places in our synod, including in some form from people, leaders in this church, whom I admire and respect.

I have received perhaps dozens of attached email videos and Facebook posts that intentionally stir up the second-most powerful and motivating emotion in the cosmos—fear—supposing some sort of worldwide Muslim takeover plot. Several even suggest that the “supposed” Syrian refugee crisis is actually part of a scheme to infiltrate the world with more Muslims who will eventually brutally rule the western world with Sharia law. The world, Christendom, America, and our families are at extreme and imminent risk, they suggest. Islam, they imply, is evil, ruthless, and insidiously scheming to undo us.

ISIS, from whom so many are fleeing in Syria and elsewhere, is evil in the same way that absolute fundamentalism in any flavor of religion will eventually move toward the extremes: “In order for me to be right, you, therefore, must be wrong; for me to be blessed, you, therefore, must be cursed; for me to be saved, you, therefore, must be damned; and finally, for me to live, you, therefore, must die.”

Christian crusades (and doesn't Matthew 28's Great Commission command us to “make disciples of all nations?”), Jewish Zionism, Muslim jihadists all live at the extremes. They capitalize on our second-strongest motivator, fear. Do any of us, of any religious flavor, want to be a part of any religion that ultimately has to kill those who disagree with us? Including appeasing our consciences by turning away millions of Syrian refugees, two-thirds of whom are women and children, by demonizing them?

I will leave it to the politicians and military authorities to discern how best to resist jihadism, but I want you to imagine your own five-year-old son, grandson, nephew, or neighbor, face-down on the beach, drowned in a desperate attempt to flee religious extremism. Imagine that boy is Christian, American, and having to flee his own state here in this very country. In your best self, would you not hope that boy and his family had somewhere safe to go, somewhere to build a new life? And if you could help that boy, his mother, his family, with that would you not, in your best self, welcome them?

Fear is so very paralyzing and powerful. But it is not ultimate as a motivator. Love is. Scripturally speaking, hate isn't the opposite of love, though it is close because hate is what fear evokes. The opposite of love is **fear**. 1 John 4:18 tells us that “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” God is love. The freedom of the Gospel is freedom from fear of the ultimate power of sin and death, free to give ourselves, and thus change the world, in love. Long before even Jesus, our forebears in the faith of Israel valued hospitality to and welcoming of strangers as a core value and necessity.

So back to the original question: What am I and the NC Synod going to do about all this? We're going to advocate for and participate in hands-on, dollars-in ways for the resettlement of Syrian refugees and others displaced by power-hungry jihadists blaspheming their own religion by their acts. I have been in contact with Ted Goins of Lutheran Services Carolinas (LSC), who is working closely with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) to help us arrange congregation by congregation, conference by conference, the resettlement of refugee families.

There is much bureaucratic and political red tape to sift through, but we will respond by helping the least of these—the displaced, the homeless, the hungry. I will be encouraging and facilitating you and your congregations during subsequent months and years to work specifically through LSC and LIRS to help with this immense resettlement program. Please refer to [these LIRS "talking points"](#) as you address this issue in your congregations.

As Jesus keeps saying during this month's lectionary readings from Mark, we'll find ourselves—our rhythm, our purpose, our hope, our life as this church—in losing ourselves for the sake of others. They won't know we are Christians by our swords, bullets, and bombs. Not by our panic-driven emails and fear-mongering Facebook posts. They'll know we are Christians by our love. If that's not who we are, let me out.

Your partner in serving,

Bishop Tim Smith