

GENUINELY *INCLUSIVE*

AUGUST 23 | REV. T. J. FITZGERALD

As I was leaving church last Sunday, actually having already chosen the readings for this Sunday, I was behind a member of this church, behind her car, who I'd just been chatting with on the playground. And as we were waiting to turn left out of this church, something that's a bit of a spiritual practice for us, spiritual discipline, sometimes we wait quite a while. The other day I left at 4:00 on a weekday. Oh, good Lord. I had to... Anyway. But I was waiting, so I had plenty of time to read the bumper stickers on her car. And there were only two.

One of them said, "Honk if you let the soft animal of your body love what it loves." For those of you wondering what that means, I'm sorry you are not paying attention to the readings. It's a famous line from one of the most famous poems in this country, *Wild Geese* by Saint Mary Oliver of Cleveland, Ohio.

And next to it was one of these stickers. I realize you can't really see what this is, but this is a church decal. You could unstick it and put it on your car. They were right next to each other.

People fix these onto their cars, these decals and bumper stickers, so that they can tell who it is who let them merge. Right? Or who it was who cut them off. I'm going on a road trip soon, so I'm practicing good, good behavior. We can't all be saints after all.

And part of me though as I was looking at this bumper sticker and realizing the readings I had already chosen, how this is all coming together, that this person who I've spoken to maybe a dozen times in the years I've been here, she gets me on some level that people who've known me for years, who maybe raised me, don't even get me. You know what I mean? We were in on the joke together. And the most important part of being in on the joke isn't the joke. It's being in on it.

So we begin our three-part series today. It's a series on the three phrases that are on the front of the order of service: genuinely inclusive, rationally, spiritual, joyfully deep. And I have drawn

genuinely inclusive. And since it's me, the Latin for genuinely inclusive... No. Genuine comes from the combination of gen and ine. Genuine just means to be yourself. It really means how you were made or born like Genesis, gentle, generous. And ine is a suffix that means of or pertaining to, or a chemical compound of two different elements, or if you happen to be a halogen on the periodic table, your last name will be ine. Okay. Apparently, the 9:30 are the nerds. So sorry. That killed at 9:30, I swear.

Although some people came out and started telling me other elements on the periodic table that also end in I-N-E and I was like, oh y'all, honk if you want the warm body of whatever to go, yeah, love what it loves.

So more accurately than simply being yourself, genuine really means being what you were created to be. That's really the meaning.

Inclusive, genuinely inclusive, inclusive is the tougher one. Its root actually comes from includere, which actually means to shut something out or to create a boundary. That's what includere has meant for a long time. Like to imprison something or to bring the flock in and put them in a pen or city walls that are closed up, includere. That's what inclusive meant for a long time. Almost the way we think of exclusive today. It wasn't until the 20th century and part of the work for justice and equity in this country that it started to mean, inclusive started to mean much more expansive things, bringing people into parts of society or to places where they were not included before. That's where it came to be used. But in some ways we know it still cuts both ways because if some people are in, if they're on the list, if they're in, then someone else is out. At least that's the way some people want us to think about it.

To that end, in North Texas recently, there is a fast-growing public discourse about who should be in and who should be out. And some of our laundry here in North Texas is getting aired pretty loudly in public. North Texas is not unaccustomed to being in The New York Times. No. But more rare is being on the front page of The Gray Lady and that story being about religious bigotry on page A1 above the fold. I still get a paper newspaper because I'm much older than I look. I recycle them, I swear.

One of the greatest preachers in this country's history, the Reverend Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick said that any preacher worth their salt better preach with the Bible in one hand and The New York Times and the other. Now, I know, I know. Pastorally, I hear some of you saying right now, "I can read the paper all by myself. I do not need my minister to make me feel bad about it all over again." I know. I know you don't need it. It's just fun. It's what I do. It's what I live for. But trust me, I hear you. And those of you who know I just quoted Little Mermaid, I love you. And I hear you all, no matter where you are on the stripes here. Nothing would please me more than to not have to talk about this rise of bigotry in North Texas. Can I get an amen on that? Right?

Congregation:
Amen.

Speaker 2:

Okay. So I'm preparing my sermon to the choir, but here we go. The pitch and the rhetoric, the rise of municipal and state actions being taken against our Muslim neighbors has grown so high that

we have to talk about it, not here only, but in other places in our lives. That is why we are talking about it here today and why we're not going to stop talking about it.

Because when a woman in Conroe, Texas, told Muslim people that they were not welcome in the grocery store where she was, or in this state, or in this country, she lost her job. And then she went online and she posted her comments and at last count had raised a quarter million dollars. She's not being sued or anything. She's just making money off her hate.

And in McKinney, when a former mayor spoke up at a simple zoning town board meeting in favor of letting a religious institution expand because they have more members that they need to welcome, a woman stuffed a pamphlet of hateful words about Muslims down the front of his shirt. And now the city council and the sitting mayor who approved the ordinance are facing recall elections for their jobs. I think some of those jobs pay like a few thousand dollars a year. I mean, it's tough enough to get public servants without calling them out.

And these are just some of the examples from this week. And another was in the news yesterday. You start writing these sermons, and in Texas, you never know what's going to come at you the next day. But the governor is now appointing people to investigate ritual washing stations and interfaith chapels and airports in this state. This follows systemic banning of any ritual washing facilities for Muslims in vast parts of the state. In other parts of the state, it's just forbidden. And withholding of funds for places, state funds, that include such places. One example we saw of this was in Grand Prairie where the state ordered canceling a paid rental at a public pool for Muslims or others who wanted to practice modest bathing.

I held my 12th birthday at Jack Carter Pool in Plano. We just rented the place and we did whatever we wanted. And I forgot to invite one of my friends. So Kelly, reach if you're watching, I apologize.

And Daniel spoke at the city hall about that in Grand Prairie and was confronted for his stance and the proclamation of this faith to protect and defend the religious freedoms, not only enshrined in the law of this land, but in the hearts of the believers of good conscience of faith everywhere. If the camera had panned a few degrees to the right, you'd see Daniel standing there enduring from that gentleman you see with camera, a constant onslaught of hate and vitriol while these families watched. Daniel was so close to being on the front page of The New York Times, I just got to say.

Two of our recent podcasts, our Tiny Pulpit Talks, are about this rise of Islamophobia in North Texas. My friend and colleague, Zainab, is in them with me. So I wrote to her recently to see if she had any recommendations for us to address what so many people are seemingly using now to single out Muslims. This idea of Sharia law. I said, "Do you have any resources?" And in my own question, thank God for good friends, was disclosed some of my own ignorance because she said, "I'm pretty sure you can find some resources out there. I don't think you need an expert on the subject." As it turns out, laws that have been around for seven centuries have a lot written about them. And I went and found them.

Sharia describes how a person of the Muslim faith lives their life in accordance with God's will. It's not a set code in the Quran somewhere, meting out punishments for offenses against God and man. The guides through these practices have grown since the seventh century in Medina into roughly seven different schools of teaching and principles and philosophies. Mostly, Sharia

provides guidance about how communities have found to treat each other fairly and justly in accordance with their religious beliefs, their community building ideas.

An interesting teaching of Sharia prevents the charging of interest on accounts like mortgages. Let that sink in. Don't all run away. [inaudible 00:12:45]. Recently a friend called me and he was shocked. He said, "They're coming and they're just getting houses without mortgages." What he didn't know is that Sharia requires the backer of a purchase that someone can't afford by themselves to enter a legal joint venture for the purchase. And through financial instruments, the two parties, the two entities share in the profit and the risk of the investment. No interest is charged. So we're getting into some of the fine points I know here. Sometimes I wonder if it's really the mortgage industry that's behind some of these issues.

But the fear being stoked against Muslims is that Sharia will replace American constitutional and local law. And that Sharia includes Draconian tortures for offenses that would shock the conscience of those familiar with the US legal system.

I did have a whole section about the five largest countries who practice the death penalty still. And when you're in that kind of company with Saudi Arabia, Iran, and some others, let's be a little ginger with touting that legal system. And I'm a member of it. I'm just saying.

The accusations though go like this, that under Muslim law, thieves will lose their hands, adulterers will be stoned, and things like this. And in nations and areas where authorities rule with no meaningful civic oversight as kings on earth, it is no wonder that the tools of fear and violence are used over and over and then justified with some kind of religious veneer or backing. But that says immeasurably more about what unchecked power in the hands of people who are uneducated and who are ruthless does than it will ever say about religion.

Harvard Law Professor Intisar Rabb, she is dual appointed at the law school at Harvard, you may have heard of it, and also the College of Arts and Sciences in the history of religion. Not an easy feat being dual appointed like this. And she says this. The reality of it is that Islamic principles or Islamic laws can accommodate many things. So there's actually very little that Islamic law requires or dictates. A lot of the rules that are called Islamic are often local, culturally inflected preferences that come to have an Islamic veneer. This is the authority in Islamic law speaking now.

She points to the change to Islamic law in 2018 in Saudi Arabia that all of a sudden let people let women drive. It just happened. They didn't have a lot of cars in seventh century Medina. I'm just saying. That's another issue. But if that can change, her point is that so can a lot of other things that are purported to be religious law.

Many scholars of Islam say that what they see before them in Sharia says that men and women should be equal in all ways. So there's many ways to think about this. The Islamic extremists, however, who have taken control of parts of some countries or even whole countries are practicing a form of violence and fear that includes punishments as severe as stoning and crucifixion. But the Quran does not include stoning as a punishment at all. Deuteronomy and Leviticus do from the Hebrew scriptures. And Islamic law expressly forbids crucifixion.

So Rabb says, "This is about these militant regimes." She says, "With these organizations, you have all the trappings and benefits of claiming religious commands, but none of the substance or the procedure that came along with a complex system of Islamic law through informed and changing interpretations over time."

God, I just can't imagine what it would be like to live in a place governed by people with glancing understandings of law and religion, setting up laws and religions for our children and ourselves. Imagine a place. Imagine a place where some of its leaders want to take over public schools and teach only one religion in them. What could be such a place? Or a place that wants to strike fear in people for using the restroom that they need to use? Or all the righteous veneer of a faith purported to allow a person to follow a person, all this is done in the name of someone who said to love one another as yourself? Just imagine. I know I'm being a little cynical, but ridicule is a powerful tool.

The rise in fear and intimidation, whether we like it or not though, it's not really just happening to other people. It includes all of us. Because you better believe this is going in front of the legislature in Texas this fall.

One legislator in The Times article from San Antonio said this, direct quote to the reporter, "One of the first things we're going to try to do is define what a religion is." What could possibly go wrong with that? And another said he will not stop until all Muslims are out of the country. These are lawmakers in our state, like they're starting one of their own modern crusades.

When I hold our order of service and see these words in this opening of our time together, I think about a faith that only wants us each to be holy themselves and to love the warm animals we meet, to hold them against us like it's all that matters because in some ways it's all that is. And then makes hilarious bumper stickers about it.

Imagine all the things in our faith I had to see and hear and feel, try to fathom the years of culture I was steeped in to see a sticker on a car on a church campus and for it to be enough to make me laugh out loud and talk to you about it for a half hour of your lives. That did not happen overnight. I did not walk into All Souls on the Upper East Side some decades ago and immediately get goose jokes on bumper stickers. I was brand new, kind of scared, and trying to find my way in a new place. We have all been in different places.

Naomi Shihab Nye writes about this, writes about a people making their way in a new land in a new place, and she says, "What they left to be here..." I grew up in the '80s here. I remember the people who fled some parts of this world to be here, who were welcomed, who were not safe where they were in parts of this world. I know I'm interrupting a master writer here to say that, but it just strikes me. I knew their parents, and those children were my friends. "What they left to be here in the cold country, where winter lasts forever, haunts them in the dark. Golden hue of souk in sunlight, gentle calling through streets that said, brother, sit with me a minute, on the small stool with the steaming glass of tea. Sit with me. We belong together."

What she writes about here is making a home. They said it in our story time. When you've had to leave a home you thought you had to find a new place, it's one of the hardest things any human ever does in life. I know people here have done it, have come from hard places, have had family

spur them for coming here to this place. And I know it's hard, but we have to remember that when we're looking at our Muslim neighbors and friends. So what do we do?

First, I need you to remember these four magic words. Sincerely held religious belief. Say it with me. Sincerely held religious belief.

Those were the words taught to us by one of the best constitutional lawyers I know who also represents this church. In some of our other work, however, still good language. And use it. Use it once a day. Even if you're just talking to yourself. It is my sincerely held religious belief that attacking a person's faith is wrong. It is my sincerely held religious belief that a state should not ban any religion. It is my sincerely held religious belief that I will stand in the way of someone who tries to expel Muslims from this state or this country solely on the basis of their faith. I didn't write that down. My heart is just telling me to say it. I'm on record.

This is how our protected constitutional rights to hold our sincere religious beliefs can protect and defend our neighbor's religious beliefs, a practice our faith has done since the 16th century in Europe when the Transylvanian king issued the Edict of Torda that said, "You can believe what you want to believe." It is truly one of the cores of our faiths.

Second, my friend in our podcast said, "It's not complicated." If you see Muslim people at a store or somewhere just going about their days, she said, "Smile. Say hi. And if you feel like it, tell them how stupid you think all of this is going on and that your church is actively fighting against that kind of hate." My friend also said that she looks back fondly on a woman who said how sophisticated she looked when she was all dressed and that she appreciated that very much. Now, from this pulpit, I cannot tell you to comment on anybody else's appearance at all because I don't really think that's a great idea, but you all do you. We're about autonomy after all.

And third, please get informed. Please get ready. There are centuries of texts that tell of the beautiful Muslim faith shared by two billion people on this globe. Knowing more about it if you don't already is a good way to get ready to address and to fight back against the bigotry, which is only a form of white Christian nationalism rearing its head again.

What we know is coming in the lawmaking body of the state in a few short months will take a concerted, real, and vigorous effort to oppose. So let me put it in terms Unitarians understand. We're going to have to honk, people.

As Saint Mary tells us, if you see hate against your neighbors, honk, speak up. If you hear ignorance in a conversation with someone, honk. Gross generalizations, honk. If you see injustice, attacks on religion, calls for expulsion, honk, honk, honk. I hope you hear this in your brain. The next time you hear something awful on the phone or somewhere, they're like, honk, "What is happening?", speak up.

Be who you were born to be, proudly, in public and in your private heart, by showing someone how human we all really are, that we belong in the family of things. And so may call to all our siblings, "Come, sit with me. We belong together." And in this, like so much in our days, may we help to build this beloved community, to sow peace and not anger, to sow justice in an end to ignorance, and to sow love and abiding grace for us and for all. May it ever be so, honk, honk, and amen.

