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Ingrid Mattson

Remarks before Sunday service

I have two favorite stories about Jesus from the Muslim tradition. Both of them tell of a conversation between Jesus and his disciples as they walked down a road together. In the first story, Jesus and his disciples pass by a pig standing in a garden. Jesus says, "Peace be upon you" to the pig. His disciples (no doubt as observant Jews repulsed by the sight of the pig) ask "Why did you say that?" Jesus says, "I do not want my tongue to become accustomed to harsh words." In the second story, Jesus and his disciples pass by a dead dog lying at the side of the road. Jesus points to the canine carcass (which of course, according to Jewish law is unclean) and says, "What nice white teeth he has."

Some people say that religious people are too idealistic, or that people involved in interfaith activities are Pollyannas. This is wrong; we know that there is much evil in the world, life is a struggle and often very sad. But what Jesus and the righteous throughout the ages have taught us is to see beauty in the midst of the ugliness and that how we respond and speak to and about less-than-pleasant things determines who we are. In this regard the Qur'an says, "Do not let the hatred of others towards you let *you* deviate from justice."

I am, by nature, a very calm person. But in the last decade, as the news rolled in from terrorism to torture, I have found myself so often angry. The only way to describe how I feel even today about the terrorist attacks of 9/11 is white, hot rage.

But over the last ten years, when the heat of my anger would dissipate I would think: now what, what do I do about it? The truth is that when I was moved to act, I would often find that others had already begun responding. Terrorism in the name of Islam? Muslim scholars from all over the world have consistently issued fatwas and statements denouncing this sickness. What to do about U.S. sponsored torture? Christian theologian and Princeton professor George Hunsinger was on the job, founding the National Religious Campaign against Torture with a vigorous and sustained ethical response to the issue. Qur'an burning by a Christian pastor in Florida? Christian and Jewish leaders across the country held press conferences denouncing this action and even holding Qur'an readings in response. Courageous and generous acts of love.

Some people complain that interfaith programs are too much about people being nice to each other. My response is that there is much of substantial work that has been done in the last decade, and besides that, being nice is underrated. In the last decade, vulgar, mean and slanderous attacks – whether politically partisan or religiously informed – have become all too acceptable. A kind word, a smiling face, the benefit of the doubt, a listening ear – these are postures the faith community should retain and continue to model for the rest of society. The Prophet Muhammad said that when one stays in the company of people who are speaking in a bad way, it is like being in a smoky, sooty blacksmith's shop; one walks away feeling kind of dirty and smelly. But when one stays in the company of people who are speaking in a good way, about good things, it is like

being in a room filled with incense, and the pleasant scent lingers on one's person throughout the day.

I'm not very delicate, but sometimes, it really stinks out there. Like the perfumed handkerchief a Victorian lady might hold under her nose as she walked around the open sewers flowing through the streets of London, the pleasant, kind and loving religious congregations who have opened their doors to me in the last decade have made it possible for me to breathe and keep moving forward. This is one of those congregations, and I am here to say, not just for me, but for all those in the Muslim community who have been welcomed here and have experienced this love, thank you and may God bless you.