



Fear, Hate, John's First Letter, and the Task of Ministry

In many places that I go, I meet fear and hate. The people who fear and hate are Lutheran Christians. They are not alone, but the fact that they are involved must be of interest to the members of this community who are dedicated to the ministry in mainly Lutheran churches. Where am I when I meet this fear and hate? Am I trying to make my way down some vicious urban block at midnight? Am I before some warlord trying to tell him that he is not being very nice? No, I am in a tidy Lutheran church on Main Street talking about the Christian engagement with Muslims. And, more often than not, I sense fear, and I meet hate. (Muslims have similar problems, but they must deal with those for themselves.)

We should never extrapolate from the few, and that may be my problem. On the other hand, as we preachers of sin and grace know from our own self-awareness, both fear and hate lurk just below the human surface, probing for the weak spot in the spiritual epidermis to emerge in force. Let me take you back to the war that broke out seventeen years ago. I had been speaking in a large forum in a prominent Lutheran church not far from Luther Seminary. The subject was "Discovering Islam and Meeting Muslims," and the reception was unusually warm. I have seldom seen greater excitement than that exhibited by this group. That week, the First Gulf War was declared. The next Sunday, I held my second talk, and the reception now was cold as ice. The interest in reaching out to Muslims had evaporated and had been replaced by a hard shell of animosity.

The fear and hate are, no doubt, worse now as grim events pile up around us. What is the nature of Christian ministry in this context? Perhaps it is time for us to take more seriously the First Letter of John to help us discover who we are and who we might be, in contrast to those plagued by the ethical occasionalism that I have described. As the eternal gospel is grounded in the self-giving love of the Savior, so our ministry is surely directed toward making that love the consistent rather than the intermittent attitude of the people of God. At stake is the Lutheran mission, engagement with that one-fifth of the world that is Muslim. For, arguably, you cannot share the gospel with someone you hate. Fear and hate foreclose God's mission. So it is always the right time for some of St. John's little one-syllable words:

Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. (1 John 2:9)

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. (4:11)

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. (4:18)

The words are simple and pungent. They do not represent a burdensome vision, but rather portray an uplifting one—the Christian vision. Without it, abandon hope all ye who enter here.

Deep in southwest India lives a man who is the spiritual and political leader of eight million Muslims. He is also held in deep respect by millions of non-Muslims in that region, as a reconciler and a man of peace. His name is Muhammadali Shihab Tangal, and he is my friend. Last year, I was able to be with him. Hundreds of people thronged his courtyard. They wanted to be in the saint's presence. They wanted him to bless a snippet of the Qur'an, so they could restrain the Evil One. When I arrived, he stopped his program and took me inside. He said, "Today I want to show you the photos of my forefathers." Then he sat me down for tea together with his two sons. It was a quiet and gentle moment. I said, "You are too generous to a foreigner." He answered kindly, "You are not a foreigner, you are an Indian." Then he told me about his brain tumour. Like King Hussein of Jordan, he had been flown to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. He said, "I telephoned you in Ottawa because I wanted you to come and be with me, but I could not reach you." I told him how sorry I was. How can I fear or hate such a man? He helps me discover who I am in Christ. I am the brother, I am the sister. John says:

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:20–21)

Lord, help us cling to the hem of your perfect love!

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