

To Love Yourself Is to Love God
Sunday, September 12, 2021, 11:15 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
Ani Zonneveld

Good morning, assalamualaikum, peace greetings to everyone.

I am speaking to you today in a church rich with history, the type of history that we can be proud of and that I am grateful to have learned. This is an Episcopalian church known for its vast social justice positions, most famously known for supporting the disinvestment of South Africa against its then apartheid government, during a time when the United States government itself was in support of the apartheid system. This is an example of a faith institution that has upheld its moral responsibility to spread peace, love and compassion, through its conviction for courageous justice.

But courageous justice is so very difficult! We conveniently disregard it because it is just too much work to speak up, and who has time or the bandwidth to speak for it when you barely have enough in you to put food on the table. But you don't have to be rich to speak up against injustice or to disassociate from moral corruption. At a minimum, and on an individual level, you can start by seizing to share misinformation and hate content. As Californians, our vote, BTW, we need to show up for this Tuesday, is a form of speech that speaks for courageous justice.

There is a passage in the Quran chapter 4 verse 135, and one of my favorites that nudges me in my moment of weakness and laziness. It urges us to speak up and especially when we're feeling defeated, and overwhelmed by what's around us.

It reads: Believers, uphold justice and bear witness to God, even if that witness is against yourself, your parents or your close relatives. Whether a person is rich or poor, God can best take care of both. Refrain from following your own desires, so that you do not act unjustly. If you distort the truth, God is fully aware of what you do.

As we reflect on the anniversary of 9-11, and the 20 years we have been in its aftermath in America and throughout the world, there is a common thread that runs through it all. It is moral corruption.

It is morally corrupt to fly a civilian plane into a public building with the intent of killing innocent people. It is equally morally corrupt to deny that 9-11 took place, stripping the victims who died of their dignity.

Our revengeful retaliation on Afghanistan, whose people had nothing to do with 9-11, and then Iraq and our "war on terror" are moral corruption too. After all, war itself is terrorising for all involved on the ground.

We thought we could catch the murderers with huge bounties, bribing our way to our version of justice. But that didn't work, what did work were the billions of our tax dollars for the military to use for a political system that was designed to bomb, rebuild. Bomb, rebuild, and repeat.

One US Air Force Ordnance Air Blast bomb, the largest non-nuclear bomb, costs around \$170,000. With that money, I could work with partners in East Africa to convene human rights affirming religious leaders impacting 153 million people positively. But I digress!

Over the years American Muslims have endured unjust discrimination, assaults, murders and imprisonment; Sikhs mistaken for Muslims were killed; Jews continue to be attacked, and that list has grown to include Asians, LatinX, and now even anyone who chooses to wear a mask simply to protect ourselves, families and children. All these acts are a form of moral corruption stealing our respective dignities.

But for me nothing rings hollow, rife with moral corruption than a declaration by the Taliban, quote 'we will uphold women's rights as long as it complies with sharia law' end of quote. Which sharia law? Sharia law is different in different countries because...IT...IS...MAN...MADE.

How can the Taliban or any radical and oppressive group claim to practice Islam when it violates the essence of the loving and compassionate God? There is a phrase Muslims utter every day and often many times a day "Bismillah hirahman niyahim", which means in the name of God the most gracious the most merciful. The root word of 'merciful' in Arabic, is "rahim" which means "the womb". The womb!! The womb, an environment which is the most nurturing for the fetus and eventually the child, an environment that is most protective, and nourishing.

How can it be that a God that is rooted in such nurturing and loving character be so deformed, bastardized and justified into such violent acts? How is it that so many Muslim religious authorities from all over the world including the Global Union of Muftis continue to congratulate the Taliban of their, quote “victory against the infidels” end of quote? How could they celebrate violence?

Simply put. It is moral corruption.

The outcome of our occupation of Afghanistan was also a result of moral corruption. We didn't exactly partner with Afghans who had high standards of morality, but instead with warlords whose hands are covered with blood and are solely motivated by money and power, and certainly not that of human rights for all.

When the last American administration negotiated their exit, it was with a morally corrupt bunch, and they had no problems with that because they were equally corrupt. It takes two to tango. We left out women and religious minorities, as well as the elected government of Afghanistan. Hang on, weren't we there to establish democracy and to 'save' the Afghan women?

There's a common denominator that enjoins the Taliban and a particular political cult in America, it is in their desire to make life miserable for women. Depriving them of their basic right to self-determination and to their bodily autonomy. They are also similar in the vigilantism they are promoting, the lawlessness of spying, and killing the spirit of 'life, liberty, and happiness.'

In both instances, we need to do away with a violent and misogynistic interpretation of religion, constructed by men, and sold as “God's law”. The only way to overcome this tyrannical power of religion is to identify these religious authorities as irrelevant, while amplifying the liberating, loving, compassionate and inclusive interpretation of religion as its counter narrative.

As an example. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country and last night, our partner organization the Asian Muslim Action Network messaged me, asking me to contribute to a collection of video messages they are compiling to be sent to their president Djoko, urging him to speak up against radicalism and for human rights in Afghanistan.

As I reflect and relearn my Islam, I read the writings of a famous Tunisian scholar of Islam, Sheikh Tahar Ibn Achour. In his book "The Objectives of Islamic Law" he describes the guidelines, not laws, as prescribed in the Quran as "*The rules of Islamic sharia (not sharia law) are based on inner reasons and causes which seek to achieve universal goodness and welfare to society and individuals*".

No. Taliban's Islam is not Islam. The real Islam does not prohibit music; the rights of women and girls to schooling, to self determination, and the right to a life of joy and fulfillment.

This reminds me of a phrase my mother used to say in my mother tongue, Malay: *Nama nabi, tetapi peragai macam babi*. I wish you could see me smile underneath this mask! In English it means: he may have the name of a prophet, but he behaves like a pig.

I apologize to all the pig lovers for this.

My point is, you may claim to have Islam in your name, or your flag, but it is just a facade.

So what is it about our society today that feels compelled to promote hate, and the dehumanization of others? Is it our own insecurities, and out of it, fear? Is it because in many religious institutions we are taught to fear God rather than to love God?

SOLUTION TO STRENGTH, PEACE AND COURAGEOUS JUSTICE

So as I continue to reflect, meditate and contemplate about Islam, and our world, there is a solution that hints at the possibilities.

One is a passage in the Quran chapter 50 Verse 16 and it reads: "God is closer to you than your jugular vein". Yes, "God is closer to you than your jugular vein". And to reinforce this passage, Prophet Muhammad was known to have said "to know yourself is to know God".

Is the reason for the hate we are seeing in this world due to the disconnect we have with the God in us? Is it this disconnect that empowers the ego, and unleashes hate? Is it this disconnect with the God

within us that has led to discontentment, and emptiness that allows people to string us along down the path of moral corruption? And even more vile when it is perpetuated in the name of religion?

You can't love God if you don't love yourself. And if you don't love yourself, it is impossible to love others and all of God's creations. And is that then the path to transformation? To turn inward, rather than to the preacher, Jerusalem or Mecca?

Young people of all faiths everywhere are leaving organized religion. More Muslims are declaring themselves atheists especially those in Muslim majority countries. Well, who could blame them? If all they see is moral corruption in the form of a theology of oppression, violence and hate from religious leaders. Who wants to be a part of that! Who would want to belong to any religion that uses fake piety cloaked in religious garb while remaining blatantly corrupt.

As a way to turn inward, to seek and to connect with the God in me, I sing a song titled Prayer of Light, which in my own way is a form of prayer. The words are said to be Prophet Muhammad's favorite prayer, which brings peace in my heart, and I hope it does the same for you.

Here before you is a Muslim women, doing what is deemed blasphemous for some, I will be singing.

May you find the light of love of God in yourself.

Prayer of Light

Lyrics: Prophet Muhammad's favorite prayer

Music: Ani Zonneveld & George Landress

Performer & Producer: Ani Zonneveld

O Allah! Grant me Light in my heart
Light in my grave
Light in front of me, Light behind me

Light to my right and Light to my left
Light above me, Light below me
Light in my bones
O Allah! Increase my Light everywhere
O Allah! Grant me Light in my heart

Ameen, Ameen

Light on my skin and Light in my hair
Light in my flesh, Light in my blood
Light within myself

Light on my tongue, Light in my eyes my ears
Light in front of me, Light behind me
Increase my Light

O Allah! Increase my light everywhere
O Allah! Grant me Light in my heart

Ameen, Ameen, Ameen, Ameen

You can purchase the music at any of your favorite music stores. Album and song title: "Prayer of Light".
You can also watch the video on [Ani's YouTube](#) channel.