



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Lillian Daniel: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re so happy to have you with us today for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lillian Daniel.

Lydia Talbot: And I’m Lydia Talbot. Our guest today is the Rev. Patricia Farris, Senior Minister of First United Methodist Church of Santa Monica, California. She’ll be talking about God’s gift of diversity, and how the future of the world depends on us understanding that we are all created in the image of God.

Lillian Daniel: We also welcome back Jason Byassee, Associate Editor of “The Christian Century” magazine. He’ll reflect on an experience that taught him how God’s presence is wider than any one faith tradition.

Lydia Talbot: And we begin with the unusual story of a young man who uses comedy to show Americans a more human side of Islam. Azhar Usman grew up in Skokie, Illinois, and became a lawyer. But the tragedy of 9/11 strangely pushed him to pursue a longtime dream of becoming a stand up comic. As we look at the subject of religious diversity, his story helps us find common ground in our humanity.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Azhar Usman: I do a joke that says, I walk down the street and I get a lot of dirty looks. People look at me like I was responsible for 9/11! Can you believe that? Me, 9/11? 7-Eleven maybe! I feel like comedy chose me. I didn’t really choose to become a comic.

[To audience: Thank you for that kind introduction...that I wrote!]

There is definitely an intent to show Americans a face of Islam, a face of Muslims, that they’ve just never seen.

[To audience: Me walking into the airport. Heads turn simultaneously. Security goes, “Shhh! We’ve got a Mohammed at 4 o’clock!”]

There is a fair amount of political material and then there is a lot of silly stuff. I mean I’m a silly guy.

[To audience: Of course, everybody is real nice to me once the plane safely lands. You know, they just lean over and smile at me like, “Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!” I’m just waiting for a really honest passenger at the end of the flight like, “Excuse me, sir. Ha, ha, ha, ha! I thought you were going to kill us!”]

Developing my own cultural expression as a Muslim, as an Indian, as an American, has always been something that I’ve taken great pride in. Prayer is very important. It’s about being a morally upright human being who lives with a conscience, lives with a reality that we are living in the midst of the Divine. At the same time, I recognize and I understand and I appreciate that we are living in an unprecedented reality, which is Islam in the modern world. Islam in America must be American and that is a very important challenge and project that American Muslims have undertaken now. The psychology of American Muslims at the moment is very much one that’s sort of burdened and very much almost a psychosis, which is feeling the burden of the sins of another.

[To audience: What is wrong with us we can never be on time? And especially because we speed all the time! We’re the fastest drivers out there. How can you speed everywhere and be late to everything?]

There is definitely an undertone to what I’m trying to do. And one of the things socially conscious artists and comedians have been doing for a long time is to remind ourselves and remind America that there are real issues that we need to confront.

[To audience: Right after 9/11 they kept talking on the news about how Muslims around the world supposedly hate America. Isn’t this right: “They hate us for our freedom! They hate America!” I bet Muslims around the world would stop hating America if American troops just stopped killing them!]

I think the joke is about human imperfection and stupidity and human arrogance. And the fact, you know, that we’re living in a world in which people think they can create peace by killing people! That’s funny. That’s inherently ridiculous. So I think peeling away a layer of misinformation, disinformation, and ignorance, and exposing people to something they’ve never heard before, sharing with them information they’ve never had, can go a long way to dispelling that fear and to emptying that bucket of anxiety people are living in.

[To audience: I don’t know where you find these people, especially the callers on the talk shows! “Yeah. Hi. My name is Billy Bob. I’m calling from Arkansas. I just want to say that all them Muslims, all the Israelims, all them Pakastanians, and Afghanistanians, and all them Iraqistanians, they can all just go back to Africa!”]

This is a time in which we need people of conscience to wage peace and I have chosen my vehicle as humor.

INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: Azhar Usman is a sort of goodwill ambassador for Islam. You can find out more about him on our web site at 30goodminutes.org. Our thanks to Azhar for sharing his story.

Now, let me tell you about today's speaker. The Rev. Patricia Farris is Senior Minister of the 1,300-member First United Methodist Church of Santa Monica, California. First Church, as it is called, was one of just nine churches profiled a few years ago in the book, "Excellent Protestant Congregations." Under Patricia's leadership, the congregation has experienced a spiritual awakening and a revival of its commitment to the community it serves. The Rev. Farris is a frequent speaker on church leadership and has written articles for many publications, including "The Christian Century." We're delighted to have Patricia Farris back on "30 Good Minutes." Welcome, Patricia.

MESSAGE

Patricia Farris: Thank you, Lillian.

In the beginning, God created diversity. The Bible doesn't quite put it that way, but it's there to see. The opening chapter of the Book of Genesis is brimming over with it. God creates the world. And in it all kinds of things, everything in the plural. God creates waters and seasons. God creates one light to rule the day and another kind of light to rule the night. God creates fruit trees and trees bearing seed of every kind. God creates swarms of living creatures, every kind that lives in the sea and every kind that flies through the sky. God creates the wild animals and the things that creep on the ground and every kind of cattle. And then God creates humankind in God's image and God blesses the whole creation.

God creates all this wondrous diversity and calls it "good." In all its abundance and potential, in all its glory and splendor, God blesses it all and calls it "good." In fact, these opening verses of Genesis give the feeling that God had a ball creating these different kinds of living things. The diversity of creation is God's delight. It is God's joy. It is God's gift.

Each and every one of us has a precious and beautiful place in God's magnificent creation. Oh, sure — but much of the Bible is about how it's all gone sour. Seems like God's humans don't take as much delight in diversity as does God. You know: Cain and Abel, the Tower of Babel, Joseph and his brothers, the Israelites and the Egyptians, Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar. It's all there. And it's a pretty sorry picture of humankind — all created in God's image — but turning away from God's gift and turning toward enmity and violence.

Not long ago, near where I live in Los Angeles, I drove past a protest demonstration. I'm used to seeing them, in support of the President, or protesting the war, or urging a Living Wage and so forth. But this one was different. It took me some moments to realize what I was seeing. Clean-cut young kids, all dressed in white shirts and black trousers. Holding signs saying something I couldn't make out about the U.S. government. Then I got to the one with a man's name and photo, describing him as a "hero of the white race." And as my blood ran cold, I passed the next group of these young people each lifting an arm in the Nazi salute. I was appalled, not just because they were affirming a history of violent hatred and genocide, but because they were protesting the very diversity of God's people and their faith.

As I drove on, shaking, tears coming, and although many might say that I was alone in that car, I believe that God was with me. I felt that surely God's heart was breaking as well and God was

sharing my tears.

I firmly believe that as people of faith, we have a special vocation and calling to lead the world in embracing diversity. I believe that we have a witness to make to the fact that we are all created in the image of God, that we are, in fact, sisters and brothers. And I believe that the future of the world depends on our leadership and our faithfulness.

We live in a world whose diversity is pluralistic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious, a world of "interconnected differences." Our diversity has become more global and more local every year. You know, right now, in just one county in Georgia, twenty-six languages are spoken by school-age children.

Maybe you're not surprised. Most of us now live in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural communities. Many of us live in multi-faith families. Many of our kids have best friends of a different race or faith. For many of us, our closest personal relationships have become something of a laboratory in which we learn to feel enlarged, not threatened, by difference.

This is something of a life-long faith quest for me. After I graduated high school and before starting college, I was privileged to spend a year as an exchange student in a program sponsored by my local Methodist church. I will be forever grateful to that church for their vision and their commitment to that program for youth. From a fairly homogenous, white Protestant world, I went to Marseille in the south of France. I lived with a Roman Catholic family who embraced me as their daughter.

We could hardly have been more different, on the surface. I was a tall, skinny redhead trying to learn the language and the customs. They were of Greek and Italian descent, short, stocky and exuberantly Mediterranean. They believed in saints and feast days and ate fish on Fridays. It was all new to me. And nothing could have been more exotic than walking through that great port city and seeing all kinds of people — Armenians, Moroccans, Tunisians, Ethiopians, Greeks, Congolese, Turks, Lebanese, gypsies. That experience blew my mind in the best possible way and opened my heart to the wonder of humankind and to the incredible diversity of God's world. Humankind. All created in the image of God.

There's a beautiful verse in the Qur'an that expresses this same truth. It begins: "O humanity! Truly We [God] created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might know each other..." (49:13). God created our diversity that we might know one another.

What a powerful, foundational message this is for our post 9/11 world. In this world of fear and suspicion and violence, God calls us to be signs of peace, sacraments, people who have the vocation of unity as Thomas Merton, that great Catholic mystic and teacher, put it. For this, we will need a pluralistic heart, a heart which recognizes the spark of God in others and is eager to reach out in understanding and respect.

It doesn't mean that we cannot be different. It does not mean that we must abandon our deeply-held beliefs. Understanding and respect begin when we reach to see beyond our differences —

when we are, at last, and through the grace of God, able to see ourselves in "the other" and "the other" in ourselves.

Let me close with a familiar Jewish "midrash," a teaching story, in which the teacher asks: "How can we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?"

A student answers: "You know the night has ended when you can distinguish a goat from a sheep." A second suggests: "You know the night has ended when you can distinguish between an olive tree and a fig tree."

Still, the Teacher shook his head. Immediately the disciples began to argue with one another. "Answer your own question, Teacher, for we cannot think of another response." Then the Teacher spoke. "When you look into the eyes of another human being and see a brother or a sister, then you will know that the night has ended and the day has begun."

In the beginning, God created diversity. And in the beginning of each new day, may the bright and morning star, Christ Jesus, bless us with a heart big enough to embrace that diversity with thanksgiving. And bless us as well with the vocation of unity, that we may be sacraments and signs of peace to share in God's joy and bring wholeness and healing to our world.

CONVERSATION

Lydia Talbot: If you'd like a free printed copy or audio CD of the message you just heard, we'll tell you how to order it at the end of the program. Or you can go to our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or download the text anytime.

Now let's talk with Patricia Farris. What a compelling message on a sensibility for diversity in this world in which we live.

Patricia Farris: Thank you.

Lydia Talbot: Patricia, I have a feeling that when you look into the eyes of your parishioners at First United Methodist Church in Santa Monica, or when you look into the eyes of the stranger, that you try to read your own thoughts there, that you see a sister or a brother. How is that critical to ministry these days?

Patricia Farris: You're quite right. I think making that connection, one with another, especially with people who have different ideas from us or different points of view, is something of an ongoing spiritual task. With some people it comes very easily. You connect right away. It's easy to talk and converse and recognize that inner connectedness. Sometimes it's hard with certain kinds of people, or in the ways which certain people act. I think it gets even harder when we look around the world and see photographs of people starving in Darfur, or refugees. We tend to objectify those people and think of them as "those people" rather than lingering with those photos and thinking, "This is my sister. This is my mother. This is my brother." That is a spiritual task which I think we have and which changes our hearts and changes our lives.

Lillian Daniel: Patricia, I'm struck by the difficulty of seeing the image of God in someone with whom you disagree strongly. And I loved your description of driving past the demonstration of

the Nazis and your sense that God was very much with you in the car. And the question that came to me was, “Was God with them, as well?” How are they created in the image of God and yet acting that out. Where is God in their mix?

Patricia Farris: That’s such an important question that I’ve thought about so many times because, frankly, my first reaction was sort of to dismiss them. They were kids, they were youth. And I thought, what’s going on in their lives that they are so angry and hurt? Do they see this as some sort of attempt to distinguish who they are in the world, however misguided? What influences have they not had in their lives that would have shaped them and formed them in different ways? How do we begin to reach out to them and try to have some sort of dialogue? I’m not really sure, but I think that keeping the heart open even to them is an essential part of this work.

Lydia Talbot: Patricia, when you arrived in Santa Monica—what, almost ten years ago?

Patricia Farris: I think that’s right!

Lydia Talbot: A beach outpost of LA. How did you begin to reorient the culture of this otherwise large and very wealthy congregation?

Patricia Farris: I think we worked a lot on small groups, on interpersonal relations, on conversations, on getting to know one another. More and more, new people coming into our community are young adults, families with young children who have new perspectives on church and community and what they’re looking for to support them in their life of faith. New and yet the same. There is something wonderful about a congregation that’s as old and traditional as ours in that it brings the resources of faith and the wisdom of generations to those younger people and younger families. I think it’s about affirming gifts as well as opening to the new.

Lillian Daniel: And your role as a woman in ministry. Aren’t you among that small fraction of women who were able to break through to the pulpit of a mainline Protestant church?

Patricia Farris: Yes, it’s still true. I just heard a statistic that, at least in our United Methodist denomination, only one percent of senior pastors in large membership churches are women.

Lydia Talbot: You know about that, Lillian.

Lillian Daniel: I do also. Speaking of United Methodism, though, in the mix of diversity that is the American religious landscape today, we know that people no longer feel an obligation to attend the church of their parents and they really do venture from church to church looking. I know you’ve just been at Oxford talking about the history of Methodism. What gift does Methodism bring to the whole diversity of contributions in world religion? What makes it unique and special?

Patricia Farris: I was reminded again in that setting of the global reality of our denomination because there were Methodists there from southern Africa, South America, from Korea, from the Philippines, from the British Methodist Church and so on. Just keeping that reality in my mind is

important serving in the church in the United States. Then I learned some things about our founder, John Wesley, that I didn't know. About how he set about to learn German and Spanish and Italian and some French so that he could, when he came to Georgia, minister with the people that he found here. I was so inspired by that because I hadn't known it. Again, it's just another example of how I believe we Methodists are open to the world. We just need to build on those foundations and live it out now in our own settings.

Lydia Talbot: In 30 seconds, Patricia, what did inspire you from Phoenix to Harvard, and now your call to ministry?

Patricia Farris: I love serving God's people. I love being with people. And I love working for a world of harmony and justice and peace, with them and through them, with the grace of God undergirding it all. It is really my passion and my calling.

Lydia Talbot: Thank you for being an inspiration with us today.

Patricia Farris: Thank you.

INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

Lydia Talbot: And now, Jason Byassee, Associate Editor of "The Christian Century" magazine, brings us a final thought on diversity.

REFLECTION

Jason Byassee: While traveling in Europe as a college student, I let my friends convince me to go with them to Morocco for a camel ride overnight in the Sahara desert with guides who spoke no English. Soon after we camped, a scorpion came crawling into our midst. We Americans all screamed. We wanted to go home.

Our guide began to speak in a mess of hurried French. I heard him mentioning the names of cities and pointing in each direction, with the words Allah and "no problem" interspersed. Then I translated, as though speaking in tongues: "He says he's been all around this area and nothing bad has happened because God has protected him." Though in terms of the normal rules of religion and language we could not communicate, the guide and I held a common language of faith. We all slept soundly underneath the dazzling desert stars, and did not fear the terror of the night.

CLOSING REMARKS

Lydia Talbot: Thank you, Jason, and our thanks again to Patricia Farris, Azhar Usman, and you for joining us today on "30 Good Minutes." I'm Lydia Talbot.

Lillian Daniel: And I'm Lillian Daniel. Before we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today's program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at "30 Good Minutes," have a wonderful week and go in peace.