

FROM THE MINISTER

To call the friendship between Phyllis Rodriguez and Aicha el-Wafi “unlikely” would hardly begin to describe just how unusual it is. Rodriguez is a native New Yorker who has spent her life in and around New York City. She’s a retired teacher, an artist, the wife of a professor and is Jewish. El-Wafi grew up in Morocco’s Atlas Mountains and later moved to France. She retired as an official with the national telephone company in France and is a Muslim. From these completely disparate places in life, their lives intersected on September 11, 2001.

Phyllis Rodriguez’ son Greg was employed at Cantor Fitzgerald and worked in the World Trade Center. He was among the fatalities of the attacks on those towers. Aicha el-Wafi’s son is Zacarias Moussaoui who is now serving a life sentence as one of the co-conspirators of those attacks.

In November 2002 Phyllis Rodriguez and her husband were in a small group of relatives who had lost family members on 9/11 invited to meet Aicha el-Wafi. From that initial encounter a friendship blossomed and the two women have now appeared together in wide-ranging speaking engagements. They have shared openly from their individual pain and have served as a source of comfort and support for one another.

Aware that by now many of us are fatigued by the recent intense focus on the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy, and having shared a portion of these women’s story in our service on September 11, 2011, it nonetheless seems worth considering this remarkable tale in this setting.

Their story has a precedent in one of Jesus’ curious parables. It’s one he told in response to a particular question. Aware of the injunction to “love my neighbor as myself,” someone asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” So, Jesus told the tale many of us know about the Jewish traveler who was assaulted and left for dead on the side of the road. Certain people saw him but refused to stop and help. At last, along came a Samaritan. The Jews and the Samaritans regarded one another with suspicion, even enmity. But, in Jesus’ tale it was the Samaritan who stopped, tended the wounded man’s needs, and generously provided for his care. Jesus concludes his narrative answer with another question, “Who in the story was a neighbor?”

We don’t know Phyllis Rodriguez or Aicha el-Wafi personally and have no way of knowing the actual depth of their connection. There’s even a recent report to suggest that they may now be estranged. But that they were able to engage in any way, that they were able to find compassion for one another, that they were able both to console and to be

consoled by the other, isn’t that something to consider in our lives?

Who is my neighbor? The one with whom I agree? The one who shares my religious, social and political views? The one whose perspective poses no threat to my own, who talks and thinks and acts like me? Just how similar do I need to be with someone in order to consider her my neighbor?

At the conclusion of a TED talk that Aicha el-Wafi and Phyllis Rodriguez offered together, Aicha El-Wafi declared: “. . . we have to try to know other people, the other. You have to be generous, and your hearts must be generous, your mind must be generous. You must be tolerant. You have to fight against violence. And I hope that someday we’ll all live together in peace and respecting each other.”

In our own statement of aspirations, we here say that each of us is “working with others to overcome the barriers that divide the human family” and that we are cultivating “lives of generosity, sharing our personal abundance.”

Do you have a story, a personal story of an unlikely friendship? Is there some respectful, compassionate relationship in your life that transcends profound difference? I’d love to hear it. Contact me at jay@uuccharlotte.org.

Who is your neighbor? To whom might you choose to respond with generosity and tolerance? You may remember Lao-Tse’s teaching:

If there is to be peace in the world,
there must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations,
there must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities,
there must be peace between neighbors.

Peace, Jay

CONGREGATIONAL CARE ITEMS

Issues of Joy or Concern may be expressed by filling out a yellow card or by contacting Becky Whittington, Congregational Care Coordinator, at becky@uuccharlotte.org or at (704) 996-9228.