

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast

February 5, 2009

Good morning. I want to thank the cochairs of this breakfast, Representatives Heath Shuler and Vernon Ehlers. And I also want to thank my good friend Tony Blair for coming today, somebody who did it first, and perhaps, did it better than I will do. He has been an example for so many people around the world of what dedicated leadership can accomplish, and we are very grateful to him.

I want to thank my outstanding Vice President, Joe Biden, my wonderful members of the Cabinet, Members of Congress, clergy, friends, and dignitaries from across the world.

Michelle and I are honored to join you in this prayer breakfast. I know this breakfast has a long history in Washington, and faith has always been a guiding force in our family's life, so we feel very much at home and look forward to keeping this tradition alive during our time here.

It's a tradition that I'm told actually began many years ago in the city of Seattle. It was at the height of the Great Depression, and most people found themselves out of work. Many fell into poverty. Some lost everything.

The leaders of the community did all that they could for those who were suffering in their midst. And then they decided to do something more: They prayed. It didn't matter what party or religious affiliation to which they belonged, they simply gathered one morning as brothers and sisters to share a meal and talk with God.

And these breakfasts soon sprouted up throughout Seattle and quickly spread to cities and towns across America, eventually making their way to Washington. A short time after President Eisenhower asked a group of Senators if he could join their prayer breakfast, it became a national event. And today, as I see Presidents and dignitaries here from every corner of the globe, it strikes me that this is one of the rare occasions that still bring much of the world together in a moment of peace and good will.

I raise this history because far too often, we've seen faith wielded as a tool to divide us from one another, as an excuse for prejudice and intolerance. It's a theme that we heard from Tony. Wars have been waged; innocents have been slaughtered. For centuries, entire religions have been persecuted, all in the name of perceived righteousness.

There's no doubt that the very nature of faith means that some of our beliefs will never be the same. We read from different texts. We follow different edicts. We subscribe to different accounts of how we came to be here and where we are going next, and some subscribe to no faith at all. But no matter what we choose to believe, let us remember that there is no religion whose central tenet is hate. There's no God who condones taking the life of an innocent human being. This much we know. We know—[*applause*].

We know as well that whatever our differences, there is one law that binds all great religions together. And Tony and I did not coordinate here—there's a little serendipity—Jesus told us to "love thy neighbor as thyself." The Torah commands, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow." In Islam, there is the hadith that reads, "None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself." The same is true for Buddhists and Hindus, for followers of Confucius and for humanists. It is, of course, the Golden Rule: the call

to love one another; to understand one another; to treat with dignity and respect those with whom we share a brief moment on this Earth.

It is an ancient rule, a simple rule, but also perhaps the most challenging. For it asks each of us to take some measure of responsibility for the well-being of people we may not know, or worship with, or agree with on every issue or any issue. Sometimes it asks us to reconcile with bitter enemies or resolve ancient hatreds. And that requires a living, breathing, active faith. It requires us not only to believe, but to do, to give something of ourselves for the benefit of others and the betterment of our world.

In this way, the particular faith that motivates each of us can promote a greater good for all of us. Instead of driving us apart, our varied beliefs can bring us together to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the afflicted; to make peace where there is strife and rebuild what has broken; to lift up those who have fallen on hard times. This is not only our call as people of faith, but our duty as citizens of America and our duty as citizens of the world. And it will be the purpose of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships that I'm announcing later today.

The goal of this office will not be to favor one religious group over another, or even religious groups over secular groups. It will simply be to work on behalf of those organizations that want to work on behalf of our communities and to do so without blurring the line that our Founders wisely drew between church and state. This work is important, because whether it's a secular group advising families facing foreclosure, or faith-based groups providing job training to those who need work, few are closer to what's happening on our streets and in our neighborhoods than these organizations. People trust them. Communities rely on them. And we will help them.

We will also reach out to leaders and scholars around the world to foster a more productive and peaceful dialog on faith. I'm not naive; I don't expect divisions to disappear overnight, nor do I believe that long-held views and conflicts will suddenly vanish. The work of Prime Minister Blair and the work of so many here underscores how difficult it can be to overcome our differences. But I do believe that if we can talk to one another openly and honestly, and if perhaps we allow God's grace to enter into that space that lies between us, then the old rifts will start to mend, new partnerships will begin to emerge. In a world that grows smaller by the day, perhaps we can begin to crowd out the destructive forces of excessive zealotry and make room for the healing power of understanding.

This is my hope; this is my prayer.

I believe this good is possible because my faith teaches me that all is possible, but I also believe because of what I have seen and what I have lived.

Prime Minister Blair shared a story of his awakening to his faith. Perhaps like him, I was not raised in a particularly religious household. I had a father who was born a Muslim but became an atheist, and grandparents who were non-practicing Methodists and Baptists, and a mother who was skeptical of organized religion, even though she was the kindest, most spiritual person I've ever known. She was the one who taught me as a child to love and to understand, and to do unto others as I would want done.

I didn't become a Christian until many years later, when I moved to the south side of Chicago after college. And it happened not because of indoctrination or a sudden revelation, but because I spent month after month working with church folks who simply wanted to help neighbors who were down on their luck, no matter what they looked like, or where they came

from, or who they prayed to. It was on those streets, in those neighborhoods, that I first heard God's spirit beckon me. It was there that I felt called to a higher purpose, His purpose.

In different ways and in different forms, it is that spirit and sense of purpose that drew friends and neighbors to that first prayer breakfast in Seattle all those years ago, during another trying time for our Nation. It is what led friends and neighbors from so many faiths and nations here today. We come to break bread and to give thanks, but most of all to seek guidance and to rededicate ourselves to the mission of love and service that lies at the heart of all humanity. St. Augustine once said: "Pray as though everything depend on God, then work as though everything depended on you."

So let us pray together on this February morning, but let us also work together in all the days and months ahead. For it is only through common struggle and common effort, as brothers and sisters, that we fulfill our highest purpose as beloved children of God. I ask you to join me in that effort, and I also ask that you pray for myself, for Michelle, for my family, and for the continued perfection of our Nation.

Thank you so much. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:59 a.m. at the Washington Hilton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to former Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom, Quartet Representative in the Middle East.

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