

Free at Last

The Muslim holy days of Ramadan just ended earlier this week. Once again, my Muslim friends invited me and members of my church to attend an iftar meal, the breaking of the fast at sunset, during their 30 days of Ramadan. On June 17, I arrived early at the mosque in order to be interviewed with my friend, Imam Senad Agic, by a religious professor from southern California, who asked permission to document our friendship. I was anxious to see Senad, because I wanted to congratulate him for the lawsuit he and his congregation just won in Des Plaines, Ill. Our federal government, along with Senad's congregation, had sued the city council of Des Plaines for discrimination. The mayor and the city council had blocked Senad's congregation from purchasing a building to establish a mosque in their city. Apparently, they did not want Muslims in their community. In early June, the verdict finally came down. The judge awarded Senad and his people \$650,000 for the suffering they had endured and the religious freedom they were denied.

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood before the masses at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. over 50 years ago, he told the throng he had a dream - that all people, black or white, Gentile or Jew, Protestant or Catholic would be free and equal; he called for all people to "let freedom ring." Dr. King was representing the teachings of Jesus. No one who has ever walked the earth has valued freedom more than Jesus Christ. He came to



set us free from sin, free from oppression, free from discrimination, free from condemnation. As he once told his disciples, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free...if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:31b,32,36)

It is upon those principles that our United States Constitution was written. Whenever anyone in our country abuses another person's freedom, he or she will be punished by our laws. There are no exceptions. This next week, we will be celebrating our freedom as a country. One of the most important laws our founding fathers established was freedom



of religion. All Americans are free to form their own houses of worship according to their own unique understanding of God. We are not a Christian, Jewish, or Muslim nation. We are free people who hold tightly to a separation of church and state. Each religion is free to "compete" against another in its effort to convince people of the validity of their truth claims; but no one religion in our country is given special favor to dominate over another. That would be an abuse of freedom. And, for that reason, Dr. King ended his famous speech by saying, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

An increasing number of people in our country today are becoming less certain there is an objective truth in our world. They are tempted to believe that truth is relative, subjective, or even malleable for public relation purposes and political correctness. Instead of believing there is an ultimate truth or moral order in our universe to which we are all accountable, they espouse instead the idea that we are all free to make up our own moral order and truth to suit our own individualist needs and purposes. Nothing could be more dangerous for our society, in my opinion. If we lose our grip on ultimate truth, our freedoms will evaporate more quickly than we can imagine. In such an environment, each person would fend for themselves and their own particular version of truth. Our society would no longer be held together by an agreed upon understanding of ultimate truth or moral order.

Whenever I engage in interfaith dialogue with my Muslim friends, we discipline ourselves to hear truth we have never heard before from our own histories, traditions and backgrounds. We ask God's Spirit to reveal something new in our understanding of his character and creation. My Muslim friends, for instance, are endlessly curious about the Holy Spirit and Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves, even our enemies. Whenever I visit a mosque during Ramadan, I feel convicted that I am not fasting enough, as Jesus encouraged us to do. I see my Muslim friends enduring and suffering while abstaining from eating and drinking during the long hours of Ramadan, especially this year during the very hot month of June. They hardly slept because many of them rose from bed at 3:30 a.m. to eat their last meal before sunrise. I may not agree with all aspects of Ramadan by any means, but I do ask myself whether I should be fasting more often, denying my earthly desires for the sake of seeking God's kingdom.

During the interview with the professor from southern California, moments before our iftar meal began, Imam Senad turned to me and said, "You have been my friend for nine years. But the most significant juncture in our relationship took place when you stood before the mayor and city council of Des Plaines four years ago and advocated for our religious freedom and right to build a mosque in their city. You put your reputation on the line in front of your own countrymen. We knew at that moment that you loved us at a very deep level. In fact, we found ourselves

convicted that you loved Jesus more than we loved Muhammad. We saw a self-sacrificing love in you that was extremely attractive. We knew God had sent you to our community."

If during this Fourth of July week you feel less than free in any area of your life, ask Jesus for help. No one wants to liberate you more from the shackles of worry, insecurity, guilt, sin or injustice than Jesus. He is our redeemer, liberator, Savior, Good Shepherd, counsel and friend. Don't let the world or circumstances rob you of hope and freedom. Stay close to his throne of grace; Jesus has an endless supply of love, wisdom and forgiveness for those who ask.



Jesus forgives the adulterous woman

My family and I hope you have a most blessed week of rest and renewal as we give thanks for our country and the precious freedom it provides. As you walk out your door to watch the local parade or fireworks, join hands with your family, friends and neighbors to say together; "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"