

Holding It Together

Once a year during the advent season, my friends and I invite our Muslim friends to a special Christmas dinner at our church. It is a night always filled with deep emotion and God's Spirit. Each year, the crowd has gotten bigger. Our Muslim friends often bring their entire families. I make sure to have Sharon and as many of our children as possible along with me. This year, I sat next to my Muslim friend, Ermin. As the food was being served, Ermin turned to me and said, "We love your church. We have found nothing like it in the entire Chicagoland area, if not the United States. You are the most special people. We feel humbled to be with you. In fact, I have recently determined that you are better Muslims than we are."

Knowing that this was the highest compliment he could possibly be paying me, I responded by saying something like, "You are the most wonderful people in the world, too." But, he kept going. He was determined to tell me a lot of things he had been thinking about since we last met in our small group discussions concerning Islam and Christianity. He continued; "Islam is in a mess in the world today. You just went to Egypt. I would never go to Egypt. It like so many other Muslim countries in the world today is corrupt, chaotic, inefficient, unproductive, dirty, and dangerous. If there were a contest in the world today for kindness, Christianity would be winning by miles over Islam. The ugliest side of Islam is on display for the whole world to see right now. It is awful."

As we concluded our dinner, our pastor rose and gave a wonderful talk on Jesus the Prince of Peace within the kingdom of God, the heart of the Christmas story. He then asked the Muslims if it would be ok for us to sing our favorite Christmas hymns, and for them to sing along with us if they would like. They were delighted with the idea. Fortunately, we had many people from our choir at the dinner; therefore, the songs came bursting forth in a most beautiful sound. For the last song, *Silent Night*, we turned the lights down low, highlighting the candles we had burning at each table. Tears began to flow down the cheeks of our Muslim friends as they sang along with us. They were incredibly moved by the songs and the evening. No one wanted to move when the last word had been sung. The Spirit of Christ filled the air. Hugging and embracing amongst the Christians and Muslims concluded the evening.



The next night, the Imam called me, saying he had just returned from taking people from his mosque to serve food to the homeless along with other Presbyterians in one of the tougher areas in Chicago. For the past couple of years, he has told me he felt convicted that Muslims do not do enough to care for the poor, homeless and impoverished. I had told him about this one Christian soup

kitchen in the city. Completely on his own, he called that kitchen, marched down with his friends and became the first Muslim group to join other Christians serving the hungry. He also told me that he and his group will return in early January to serve the homeless on the prophet Muhammad's birthday. I could only smile, thank God, and marvel at the way our Muslim friends are discovering the beauty and path of Jesus - all on their own.

Without Christ to hold together our own lives, we become amess, too. As hard as we may try to be integrity-filled, honest, and true, without Christ holding us together, we fail ourselves and others - every time. Our Muslim friends are very close to embracing this truth. There is a reason Jesus spent so much time talking about hypocrisy in the Gospels. Hypocrisy happens when we try to be consistent, honest, and integrity-filled on our own - without God's help. There is only one spirit that can fully integrate our souls, help us be consistent, stay in the truth, and be strong. It is the Holy Spirit of God. God has determined that we need help from the inside out.

When I was in the United Arab Emirates last month, I was face-to-face with an Iranian Muslim who had just become a follower of Christ. He told me that in his past he was a member of the special police force that guarded the inner circle of Muslim clerics and government officials of the Ayatollah's regime. He told me story after story of these officials being filled with hypocrisy; appearing so holy and devout on the outside, but pursuing numerous worldly pleasures on the inside. In fact, his job at times was to guard the public from knowing what was happening behind closed doors. He said that this kind of attitude was prevalent throughout Iran, especially in the abusive behavior of many male employers with women employees. He told me that when he accepted Christ into his heart, he discovered a new "power and light" in his life that made his ability to pursue higher morals and character possible. He said that Muslims all around the world are endlessly striving for a moral standard of conduct that is impossible, apart from the inner, healing work of Christ in their hearts.

Let us remember the following words of Jesus; "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (Matthew 23:25-28).



Jesus confronts
the Pharisees

The Christmas season is an intense time of year. Those of us in ministry know all too well how many injuries, deaths and broken relationships happen during these weeks of December. There is a general accounting of our lives and

relationships that occur before the end of each calendar year. We either feel good about ourselves, or awful about ourselves, or some wild combination of the two. We are often quick to identify the ways we are falling short in our lives - not achieving what we want to achieve, not being the person we want to become. As a result, we become hard on ourselves - and others, too.

"To us a Savior is born," is one of the most famous lines of the hymns we traditionally sing at Christmas. Until we truly see our need to be saved from ourselves and our inconsistent ways, we will always keep God at a distance, preferring to achieve integrity and truthfulness on our own. Jesus came to the world to make our lives whole; to pull together all the various strands, treasures and talents God gave us at birth in order for them to shine, bring us peace, and give life to others. If you are tired of being inconsistent, settling for a lack of peace in your life, setting goals and never achieving them, you may want to make special room in your heart this Christmas for the Savior of the world to dwell in you, changing you - from the inside out. Sharon, the children and I want to wish you a most Merry Christmas - may the Prince of Peace fill your hearts and home throughout the New Year!

