

No Lie

When I usually get together with my Muslim friends once a month, there will be five to ten of them and about the same number of people from my church. But, last week was different. Concerned Christians from throughout the Chicago area attended our meeting. The room was packed with Lutherans, Methodists, Mennonites, and Presbyterians. Everyone came to sit peacefully and listen reverently to what life is like for our Muslim neighbors and friends in America today. You could hear a pin drop when they began to speak.

The first Muslim to speak was Enis, a Bosnian American who has lived and worked in the United States for the past 20 years. He told us about the harrowing feeling of being in Bosnia in the early 1990s when the Serbian president, Slobodan Milosevic, began his campaign blaming Muslims for many of the social ills of the wider Balkan region. He said it was a nightmare. Milosevic gave speech after speech, often twisting the facts of history or current events to suit his political purposes. Enis said he remembered thinking at the time that there was no way Milosevic would get away with grossly violating truth, selling his propaganda of a "Greater Serbia" expansion. After all, Sarajevo had just successfully hosted the Olympics; it was being recognized as an up-and-coming cosmopolitan, world-class city. The Balkan states had become too modern for such an embarrassment.



But, Enis' worst nightmare came true. Milosevic increased his hostile rhetoric and Bosnians became more silent rather than resistant. Enis told us that it was the worse feeling in the world. Previously joyous and friendly neighborhoods became dark and fearful. The lies and harsh rhetoric confused and paralyzed people. Neighbors who had been friends for years in their local communities suddenly began looking at each other with suspicion and increasing hostility. Evil slowly established a strong foothold in Bosnian society. Neighbor eventually attacked neighbor, resulting either in death, injury or encampment. Enis said he still harbors great pain in his life and has deep emotional scars from former friends who suddenly flipped and became his enemies.

Enis continued to tell us about his current experiences in America. He told us how challenging it has been during the last few years, listening to politicians espouse various views about Muslims. When elected officials fudge on the truth, use stereotypes, and whip up irrational sentiments about Muslims in general, it has conjured up old feelings of life in Bosnia for Enis when elected officials did the same thing. Yet, Enis ended his sharing by saying that he has been greatly encouraged recently seeing people take to the streets and otherwise express their feelings publically against what they perceive is an inaccurate or over-generalized portrayal of Muslims in America. He said that being able to speak up and be heard in America

was one of our greatest attributes; he hopes that Bosnians someday will be able to experience the same kind of freedom.

It takes courage to speak the truth and be accurate, especially when we have made mistakes and need to admit that we have failed or hurt someone. Bending the truth and employing propaganda is always easier; it's also self-serving, fear-based and disrespectful of God's rule in the world. Stereotyping and generalizing are quicker exercises that require less thinking. People or leaders who bend the truth are hoping their audiences are as under-motivated as they are -- unwilling to do the harder work of investigating what is really true. It takes work, for instance, to understand the differences between a radical Muslim and a moderate Muslim. It often involves time and intentionality to befriend a Muslim -- spending the necessary time getting to know them, talking honestly about such important topics as worldviews, life and faith. It becomes important to read a little history, appreciate differences in cultures, and remember what was taught in our old world religions classes -- in order to understand how Muslims might be feeling in the world today. It would be great if we could understand complex issues by simply reading a single tweet or by viewing a posted image; but it just doesn't work that way. Discovering truth requires time, a caring heart, prayerful soul, an honest mind and a willing spirit. Fudging truth usually means someone is in a hurry, flirting with darkness, and hoping that no one wants an extended dialogue with them. Let us remember what Jesus taught us about embracing and telling the truth; "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees - their hypocrisy. The time is coming when everything that is covered up will be revealed, and all that is secret will be known to all. Whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be shouted from the housetops for all to hear!" (Luke 12:1b-3)

On March 1, in just a few days, we will begin the Lenten season. For many, this is a time to give up a practice or possession dear to us, or perhaps something not good for us, during the 40 days leading up to Easter. What if we all gave up telling lies, even little white lies or fudging truth for Lent? We could challenge ourselves to speak only what we know is true, and to remain silent if we are uncertain if something is true or not. We would certainly become better people because telling the truth requires better listening skills, discipline, and humility. On the other hand, bending the truth invites more anxiety, pride, and less discipline. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) Jesus always stood his ground, calmly and confidently resting in the truth. He was running from nothing and afraid of no one because he was always speaking and living the truth; and, he asks us to do the same.



Towards the end of the evening during our gathering, another Bosnian American Muslim, Mesud, also spoke. He shared with us the painful experience of being put into a Serbian concentration camp during the years of the Balkan conflict. He

recalled watching a third of the occupants in the camp dying of malnutrition and other illnesses. He barely survived himself. He shared how grateful he was to the United States for accepting him as a refugee. In the United States, he has been able to rebuild his life and health, start a family, and enjoy gainful employment. According to Mesud, his brief refugee status cost American tax payers approximately \$600. He thanked all of us in the room. He said he has spent the last 20 years trying to repay his debt to our country through his hard work and faith.

As we prepare for Easter, let us remember the crowd that yelled for Jesus to be crucified was also heavily influenced by lies and propaganda. Jesus was an innocent man who had committed no crime. But, the influential Roman and Jewish authorities of the day twisted the truth for their own political purposes, whipped the masses into a blood-thirsty hysteria, and nailed Jesus to the cross. For three short days, those power-hungry authorities deceived themselves into thinking they were the ones to determine what was true, not God. But, the truth of Jesus' claims, teachings and innocence triumphed in the end with his resurrection from the dead, and ascension into heaven. What was whispered behind closed doors was shouted from the housetops for all to hear!



Jesus condemned by Caiaphas

When we see or hear something that is unjust, we need to speak up. Darkness and lies prevail only to the extent people remain silent and afraid. Lord, during this Lenten season, we ask for the strength, patience, and courage to follow your ways. As you taught us, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31b, 32)