**Hope in the Midst of Racism, Injustice and Anger**

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What is happening to our country? On Wednesday, the United States reached a tragic milestone: *100,000 people dead* from COVID-19. And that is just the deaths that have been confirmed as *directly* attributable to the virus and its complications. The true death toll is undoubtedly much higher. Next came the latest accounting of the economic damage, with a loss of jobs and business activity reminiscent of the Great Depression of the 1930’s. However, by the weekend, an even more distressing turn of events pushed the pandemic off the front pages. Riots were breaking out in major cities around the country, spawned by the killing of yet *another* unarmed black person by a group of white police officers.

As I read reports of nightly riots in Minneapolis and National Guard troops being called up to quell the unrest, I had flashbacks to December 1991 and the “Rodney King riots” in Los Angeles. For those too young to remember, that was another nationally publicized case of police brutality by white officers against a black suspect. When the officers were acquitted on all charges by an all-white jury in an affluent suburb of Los Angeles, all hell broke loose in the streets. I was a graduate student at USC at the time. It was the middle of finals week, but I had to flee the city as the vandalism, looting and arson quickly closed in on my neighborhood, a few blocks from campus. When I came back a few days later to take my last exam, the National Guard was stationed in the parking lot of our local supermarket, right across the street from the USC Catholic Center.

That experience terrified me, not just because of the shocking level of violence, but because I could not understand the intense and widespread rage that I was witnessing in my city. I did not understand, because I had never had cause to fear the police or to doubt the fairness of the judicial system. I certainly had seen racism, *directed at other people*. But I had never suffered its effects personally, nor did I have any reason to fear that I would. I knew that a police officer would never point a gun at me or throw me to the ground and handcuff me just because I fit the vague description (like “young black man, medium build, wearing jeans and a t-shirt”) of someone who had committed a crime in my neighborhood. Likewise, I would never be pulled over in my car simply for driving lawfully through a wealthy part of town (an occurrence so common for African-Americans that they refer to it as the crime of DWB – “driving while black”).

While one should never condone vandalism, looting or any such indiscriminate violence, it is a mistake to focus only on these “senseless” acts of violence, perpetrated by *the few*, while ignoring the persistent violence, discrimination and injustice that *virtually all people of color* have suffered all their lives. The anger and frustration that we see on the streets today has been building for a very long time. It’s not just what happened to George Floyd in Minneapolis on Memorial Day or what happened to Rodney King in Los Angeles 30 years ago. It’s the fact that these incidents *keep happening*, month after month, year after year, decade after decade, *with no end in sight*. Even more exasperating than the inaction by public officials is the fact that so many *good people, with no hatred in their hearts*, refuse to open their eyes and acknowledge the systemic racism and injustice that each of these incidents represents and glaringly reveals. The *overwhelmingly peaceful* protesters of the Black Lives Matter movement really are not asking for very much. They *do not want* a violent revolution. They are not even demanding the respect that they deserve. They are simply pleading for the rest of us to *recognize their human dignity* and *honor their basic human rights*. They are fed up with living in fear of police brutality and a judicial system stacked against them. They want someone to listen and to care that their loved ones are being killed, and that the perpetrators are rarely held accountable. Human nature being what it is, there is a limit to how long such desperate pleas can fall on deaf ears before people lose hope and turn to either despair or violence. In the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “A riot is the language of the unheard.”

The response from police departments and governments has been mixed over the years. Great progress has been made in some places. Many police departments have totally overhauled their training and procedures, shifting their emphasis from *confrontation* to *collaboration* with the communities they serve. The fruits of those “community policing” efforts could be seen in recent days, as police officers in several cities have actually marched and knelt with protesters, showing solidarity with their cause and understanding of their pain and frustration. However, other police departments have taken a more aggressive stance. Peaceful protests, including one right across the street from the White House, have been met with tear gas and rubber bullets. To make matters worse, our President has now demanded that Governors “dominate” the protesters, rather than listen to them.

A closed mind and a clenched fist are *not* the answer to this crisis. In fact, they are the principal *cause* of the crisis. The sad reality is that changes in policing strategies and public policy are not enough. The root of the problem lies in our culture of racism and discrimination, and our inability to deal with it honestly. We have grown too accustomed to injustice and inequality. We have become too tolerant of public figures who scapegoat minorities, employ demeaning or violent rhetoric, and encourage hate groups. Too many of us fail to empathize with people marching through the streets, crying out for justice, because we are just too privileged and insulated from that type of suffering to appreciate their sorrow and frustration.

In the midst of all of this pain, acrimony and division, the Church celebrated the feast of Pentecost on Sunday. We heard how the Holy Spirit can bring peoples together, even in circumstances where the barriers to community seem insurmountable. We heard how the entire gamut of spiritual gifts is all directed to the same end – to serve the common good and build up the Body of Christ. We might be tempted to dismiss these ideas as out-of-step with our present reality, mere wishful thinking for a calmer time. But, the Apostles did not live in a calmer time. Their present reality was one of discrimination, injustice and persecution. They had every reason to doubt that any amount of spiritual help could change hearts and reconcile enemies. However, they had seen a man rise from the dead, and they had felt his Spirit enter into them, as he promised. They believed that *anything* was possible for God.

As long as the Holy Spirit remains active in the world and in the hearts of all believers, peace and justice still have a chance. As long as Christians heed Jesus’ commandment to love one another as he has loved us, community is still possible, even while angry voices continue to stoke hatred and division. We cannot allow fear, prejudice and hatred to drive us apart, while we have a much more powerful force moving us toward reconciliation, harmony and trust. May the Holy Spirit and its sevenfold gifts prevail!