Jan. 13 & 14, 2018 All Saints Parish, Syracuse 2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time Fr. Fred Daley

Confronting Racism

Just shy of the first anniversary of his being in Office, I had come to a point that nothing that President Trump says or does really shocked me any more – until the meeting he had last Thursday with a number of Congressional Representatives that was hoped to broker a deal to allow the “Dreamers” (hundreds of thousands of young people brought to the U.S. illegally as children) to have a path to citizenship; a deal which just two days earlier, the President had indicated he would support. Instead, the Thursday meeting turned into a vulgar, racist scandalous harangue – denigrating refugees and immigrants of color from Haiti and Africa; remarks that have been condemned by leaders across the country and across the world. Upon further reflection, I concluded that I really shouldn’t have been shocked because the President’s remarks on Thursday were very consistent with the racist remarks he has made since the day he announced he was running for president:

* Calling Mexican immigrants rapists;
* holding campaign rally filled with chants of build the wall;
* implementing a Muslim travel ban;
* advocating to reinstate the unconstitutional law enforcement practice of ‘stop and frisk;’
* denigrating a Mexican judge who is actually a US citizen;
* calling white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and KKK members in Charlottesville “nice people;”
* complaining about admitting Haitians into this country because “they all had AIDS;”
* saying that Nigerians would never “go back to their huts;”

and the list goes on… .

Brothers and sisters, it is very frightening time to me and, I’m sure to all of us, that we have a racist president and even more frightening that, according to the polls, a significant number of Americans agree with him!

We gather here on this Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday weekend, as disciples of Jesus and, our Bible readings today ask us: What is God calling us to do as individuals, as a Church and as a Country?

In our First Reading, Samuel went to sleep and God came and revealed God’s presence: “Samuel, Samuel!” Samuel answered: “Speak, God for your servant is listening!” If we listen to God with ears of our hearts what might God be calling us to do?

In our Gospel Reading from John, we are beginning to see the plan of God: God became human to show us the way a way to birth the world that God intended; a world where every person and all people are recognized as precious children of God, whose bodies are Temples of the Spirit, as Paul points out in our Second Reading from Corinthians; and – as precious children of God – we are all sisters and brothers, to be treated with dignity. When I denigrate and abuse and dismiss another person, I’m denigrating a sister or brother, child of God! In our Gospel Reading today we see Jesus beginning to gather around him a core group of people who will continue his work after he is departed. Jesus will preach for only a short time – about three years – in a small area, and yet his message is for the whole world for all ages to come.

What is important for Jesus, is to form the hearts of a Community of disciples who will – as poor religious – travel throughout the world proclaiming and striving to live the Good News of love and forgiveness, breaking down the barriers that separate people and cultures from one another by proclaiming justice and peace. It must be working because here we are 2000 years later, baptized, committed disciples being challenged – being called – to proclaim and struggle to live that dream of Jesus, which clearly condemn racism as a sin and evil; a sickness of the soul.

And so, sisters and brothers, if we’re called to grow where we’re planted, it seems to me that the first step that Jesus is calling us to do in and for our All Saints Community is to have a conversation about race and about racism in our Nation, racism in our Church and racism in our hearts.

Father Bryan Massingale, an African-American Professor of Theology and Sacred Ethics at Fordham University, who recently gave a lecture, at Le Moyne that a number of us attended, in a Keynote Address at the National Catholic Network 20th Ignatian Family Teach-in for Justice on November 4, discussed three obstacles to an honest adult conversation about race:

“First, we do not know what we are talking about. Many think we are living in a “post-racial” society, so then what exactly is racism? Second, we don’t know how to talk about it, especially in an interracial context. I know black folks talk about race among themselves, and I have it on pretty good authority that white people, Latinos and Asians talk about race among themselves. But when we come together, we have this code of silence, where we do not say anything, or become polite, or do not raise the issues – out of fear of sounding ignorant or giving offense. We do not know how to talk about it. Third, we do not really want to talk about it. Talking about the core reasons for racism takes us to places that we do not want to go because we have to face some very unsettling and deeply uncomfortable truths.”

Here is an invitation to overcome these three obstacles our Parish. Our Stewards of Justice and Peace Taskforce has been discussing the issue of racism and, with the support of our Adult Faith Enrichment Team, will be offering a six-week Lenten Book Study using the book: America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America by Jim Wallace an author and political activist. A white man, who in the book, describes his journey from unconscious racism and white privilege to deeper awareness of how racism is almost in our DNA as white America, and yet, how with faith and listening hearts we can overcome it. We are blessed to be in diverse parish and will have the advantage of having a truly interracial dialogue in our small groups. Details of the times of the small groups, sign-ups and book orders will be available soon. This book was recently used by 13 congregations throughout Syracuse during the fall and comes highly recommended.

This is simply one action step of how, we as a Parish, and how each of us as disciples, can respond in a fruitful way to the evil of racism.

How appropriate to do this during Lent, a time for us to come to our senses, to our true selves, and see through the lie that some people are more important simply because they have less color in their skin. We have built a whole society on this illusion – a delusion, a lie – and it is time to come to our senses! When we are so sick, so delusional, we need to be re-created; we need to become new being; we need a new way of thinking, … a new way of living, … a new way of loving, … we need to become new creations.

On this weekend, we honor a disciple of Jesus, a prophet who like Jesus, shed his blood to birth the world anew – according to the dream of God! In conclusion I liked to share a few words of Dr. King from the Sermon he delivered on November 6, 1956 in Montgomery Alabama. These words have helped me to try to keep things in perspective during these polarized and divisive days; they may be helpful to you too.

At the beginning of the sermon Dr. King counsels:

“Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons. Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter as you press on for justice. Be sure to move with dignity and discipline; using only the weapons of love. Let no one pull you so low as to hate.

And at the end he states:

“I think I have discovered the highest God – which is love. This principle stands at the center of the cosmos; as John says: God is love; the one who loves is a participant in the being of God, the one who hates does not know God.”

Amen!