

### Chosen to Act

On this first weekend in African American/Black History Month and following upon our celebration of the birthday anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, I am here to both break open the Word and share the results of the survey conducted back in November by our Stewards of Justice + Peace, which was designed to get us in touch with issues surrounding racism in our parish, church and society.

Our Gospel – which continues directly from last week – is Luke’s version of how Jesus revealed himself as the herald, the prophet of God’s kindom of justice and peace on earth. Jesus – appearing in the synagogue of his home town – fired-up by God’s grace which came upon him in his Baptism and strengthened by having faced down the temptations of Satan during his 40 days in the desert – boldly announces his agenda of action for social justice in the name of fulfilling God’s ancient Promise to the People.

First I’d like to share a little story. Many of you know that my spouse, Richard, and I are the very proud parents of two sons: Samuel and Jacob George. Sam and Jake are currently both 28 yrs. old – though not twins. Without going into all the details, it’s pertinent to share that these boys are 7 months apart in age [7months and 5 days to be exact, as they would stress] ....After facing fertility issues and three miscarriages, ... we decided to adopt... and then ... you guessed it, we achieved another pregnancy.

The doctor’s caution even when confirming the pregnancy was: “Go ahead with the adoption!” SO: Our Samuel was born in February – his birth mom laid him in my arms when he was just 21 hours old! And, after a rather complicated pregnancy, a healthy Jacob George was born in September of that same year.

What’s relevant here is that Sammy – our child by adoption – is bi-racial: his birthmother is European Caucasian and his birthfather, African American. From the time he was able to express himself, Sam called himself a “tan” person. And those of you who know him know that that’s pretty accurate. Jacob George, our biological child, who I know a good number of you know – is “white” – in fact, white as only red-heads can be!

When they were in kindergarten, as part of the school’s celebration of MLK, Jr.’s birthday, every student was given a Scholastic Book (you know: glossy pages, big print, lots of bright color pictures... designed for beginning readers)... The book was titled something like: “Young Dr. Martin Luther King.”

In our family – as I suspect in many of yours – our bed-time ritual included getting all snuggled together for a snack and reading. Of course, that night, we read “Young Dr. MLK’s” story. The story starts telling about Martin’s childhood with his preacher Dad, and gets eventually to the part about Rosa Parks and the incident that precipitated the Bus Boycott and the birth of the Civil Rights Movement.

At this point, Jacob – sweet, sensitive, caring, white Jacob – says: “I don’t understand... why wouldn’t they let her sit down?” Now the picture in the book shows a very frail, tired-looking Rosa... laden with shopping bags and bundles.... So: Sammy – older by 7 months & 5 days – and OH! SO MUCH wiser... says, quite matter-of-factly: “They wouldn’t let her sit down because she’s a black person!”

I could see the struggle going on in Jake... and could literally witness him doing what beginning readers are taught to do: searching the picture for clues to what the words were telling... finally, he said to his brother: “But she’s not black... she looks kind of like you.” Well, Sammy – now with rolling of his eyes and all the affect and impatience of a jaded adult, tells his “naïve, little” brother: “I’m what people call a black person!”

5 yr. old Sammy, quite aware that his skin was “tan” – growing up under my very wing – already knew something about which his white brother didn’t have a clue! And from which his parents, including his hovering, professional sociologist, church-lady white mother, had intended to shelter him; he already knew deeply about race and the consequences of race... No matter the actual color of his skin, he knew he was “what people call a black person” and that meant he could expect that he wouldn’t be allowed to sit where he chose... among so many other things. And his 5 yr. old white brother... didn’t know any of it. NO racism in our family... home...neighborhood... school system... parish.... Yet he knew. Talk about being confronted by unconscious racism! I remain humbled in the face of this lesson on the ubiquitous presence and power of our cultural ideologies ... on unconscious racism ... Despite our very best inclinations, intentions and efforts... there is something bigger – something deeper – here; and there is oh, so much more work to be done ... in my own consciousness, home ... and in the society, church, parish, and community we share.

Now I know many of you can match this story with ones of your own – my point in sharing it here is to underscore that the agenda Jesus set out in the Synagogue still exists. As Fr. Fred said last week... while we worship Jesus... we’ve by and large done a pretty poor job of imitating Him.

I think something like what happened during story time at our house that evening, happened when Jesus read in the synagogue on that Sabbath and challenged his home town friends and neighbors by stating that his mission was the same mission of the ancient Prophet Isaiah: God’s mission – to bring glad tidings to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, restore sight to the blind, free the oppressed... They, like Jake and I, because of their privileged position, were unconscious of / clueless about what was really going on in the world around them and what remained to be done to build the reign of God. While they were at first impressed by Jesus’ speaking with authority and with his miracles, in their privileged identity as God’s “chosen people” and, indeed, of being Jesus’ “homies,” they lacked insight into the unconditional nature of God’s love... and the fact that they themselves remained in some ways ‘poor, blind, oppressed, captives’ of a culture and system of privilege and power ... and they were indignant when their home town boy, who had become somewhat of a celebrity, pointed out to them – even before they had actually said anything – that their position of presumed privilege didn’t rate them any them special favors, revealing, that, in fact: God’s favor actually works in quite the opposite way.

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Now I want to thank everyone who participated in the survey – you individually and collectively gave voice to the people, the community ... speaking for the Body of Christ which is All Saints Parish, and so today I am able to come to share glad tidings!

For the purpose of today’s sharing, let me simply note that some 23% of the 321 respondents identified themselves as some variation of ‘non-white,’ while 77% identified as some variation of ‘white.’ Remember this is respondents NOT ALL Parishioners. [It may be of interest that, 11% of our respondents identified as “black” ... as compared with just 3% of Catholics in the US!] In addition, there is a fascinatingly long list of “ethnicities” (including – interestingly – a number of Jewish sisters and brothers!) Also of some note is that 62% of the respondents were under 65 yrs. of age [18-64]! Pretty good for any Catholic Church these days!

The big picture that emerged from the Survey is a kind of “good news” / “bad news” one: as a community and as individuals, we here at All Saints, are well aware of and sensitive to the reality of racism. In fact, it is to a large degree, this awareness and sensitivity that has drawn us together as a faith community, committed to inclusion and diversity. Among All Saints Parishioners, there is a strong sense that these realities – racism, white privilege, white supremacy and unconscious racism remain problematic in our society and in our church. In this data (especially in comments shared), All Saints emerges as a sanctuary for folks seeking to mitigate – even to eliminate – the presence and consequences of racism experienced more generally in our society and wider church. Survey respondents’ further indicated that, we as a community are MORE-rather-than-less willing to be challenged around issues of racism, white privilege and white supremacy. This, I think, is very good news: we share a willingness to face up to the reality of racism in ourselves, our own homes, and our parish, and wider community: to be challenged on our own unconscious racism, to confront the systems of white privilege and to engage in constructive action.

Which is right in line with our First Reading today, which tells us, that the appropriate stance as God’s chosen is to be “**braced for action!**” We hear God instruct Jeremiah – and us – to: “**STAND UP and TELL THEM all I command you. ... Look: I MAKE YOU A FORTIFIED CITY, a PILLAR OF IRON and a WALL OF BRONZE, SO YOU may confront this whole land, the royalty and the officials, the priests and the people.**” To identify with God’s “favor” is to embrace God’s charge to confront injustice from the solid foundation of faith.

We are graced by our Baptism to act as Christ in the world... and we are privileged to be here at All Saints, AND we must not ever let the grace and privilege that brought us here, nor the comfort we derive from that, turn to complacency... complacency rooted in presumed favor that becomes indignant when the comfortable (and righteous) image we hold of ourselves is challenged by evidence that there’s always more to be done; the complacency of “insiders”... who run Jesus out of town when his message suggests that we might still need some enlightening ourselves! We need the humility and faith to *hear and embrace* God’s on-going, inclusive agenda for justice, which is Isaiah’s agenda, Jesus’ agenda, Martin Luther King’s agenda... dare I say, my Sammy’s agenda... and we must be braced for action!

Our Stewards Group, now with input from the survey, is engaged in formulating action steps... including: continuing attention to diversity in the leadership of our Parish and in our worship; continuing our work as a Sanctuary Parish with our migrant and immigrant brothers and sisters; as well as continuing to strengthen our Refugee Welcoming efforts (even challenging our city to greater accountability for housing conditions, services, and so forth);

In the wider church: to challenge our Diocese to accountability for ACTING on the recommendations of the recent Bishops’ Pastoral on Racism... challenging them to walk the talk; exploring the fate of our Diocesan Office of Black Catholic Ministry (which is listed as funded by the Hope Appeal... but doesn’t seem to actually exist), to energize the Hispanic Apostolate, etc.

Within our community our Stewards are connecting us with training for court-watching, monitoring police-community relations; and very centrally: through supporting the street-level grid option for rebuilding I-81, connecting us with the efforts to rebuild the vulnerable, poorest core of Syracuse and create some restitution for the damage inflicted by the urban renewal of the last century.

Stay tuned for more on these and other opportunities for action!

Finally, it is imperative – as our beautiful Second Reading from Corinthians reminds us – to remember that **all** this awareness and action means nothing, will come to nothing... if it is mere self-righteousness or political correctness; and not a sincere expression of our deeply rooted faith, hope and – especially – love for all our sisters and brothers! As the Holy Quran says: *“Until you want for the other, that which you want for yourself – you not a believer.”* As Cornell West, philosopher, political activist and social critic puts it: *“Justice is what love looks like in public.”*

Our work must be rooted in our commitment to God’s Dream of a Beloved Community. We are the Body of Christ – and what harms any one of us harms all of us!

Amen