

July 21<sup>th</sup> & July 22<sup>nd</sup> 2012

All Saints Parish

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### Leadership

There's a story that first appeared in the *Des Moines Register* in April, about a synagogue in Iowa that - during one night - was spray-painted with neo-Nazi graffiti, covering the outside walls of their Temple. Two weeks later, the police arrested an 18 year-old male and his 17 year-old girl-friend for the crime. The entire religious community of Des Moines was outraged by the crime - and rightly so; and the entire community demanded that the two perpetrators be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

But the Synagogue's Rabbi took a surprising step: he contacted the police and asked that the two offenders be brought to the synagogue. When they arrived, they sat in a circle with the Rabbi, two Holocaust survivors, a former member of the Israeli Army and three temple elders.

Tears, fear and anger flowed as the Rabbi and the members of the Jewish Community told their stories of the horror of the Holocaust, of going into hiding and fleeing the Nazi atrocities, of struggling to survive and to make a new life far from their homelands - despite their scars and nightmares.

The teenagers told their stories as well: As a child, the young man had been routinely beaten by his father - so severely that as a result he had suffered significant hearing loss and a speech defect. He ran away from home at 15 and was taken in by a white-supremacist group that completely indoctrinated him in bigotry and hate. He had come to Iowa to start his own neo-Nazi group; his first - and only - recruit was the young girl and the vandalizing of the Synagogue was their first "action for the cause."

In their three-hour long meeting a dramatic change took place: The Synagogue Community came to see the teens as broken and frightened children, ... lost sheep; and the ugly stereotype of the Jewish community that the young teens had been brainwashed into

believing, disintegrated and they recognized the courage and wisdom of the Synagogue Community that they had offended. The two asked for the Temple's forgiveness.

In the Jewish Tradition, forgiveness must be earned; so it was agreed that the two young people would perform 100 hours of service to the Temple under the supervision of the Custodian and 100 hours of studying Jewish history and the history of the Holocaust with the Rabbi. The Temple offered to get medical help for the young man's disabilities and to have the Nazi tattoos removed from his arm. The Temple also arranged to help the two teens get job-seeking skills, some therapy and their GEDs. They would meet again in 6 months and if the two had atoned for what they had done, forgiveness would be given and the criminal charges would be dismissed.

The two teens exceeded all expectation: the process transformed their lives with new possibilities, new understandings and new relationships.

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My sisters and brothers, I share this story because the Rabbi of the Temple is a powerful example of a Good Shepherd that today's readings challenge people in leadership to become. The Rabbi took a very difficult situation - his community filled with pain, hurt and anger - and was able to channel that negative energy into a win-win situation, bringing about restorative justice and reconciling peace that ultimately made the Synagogue Community stronger and more human and more respected; *and* rescued the two broken teenagers from a life that would have ultimately destroyed them and hurt many others along the way.

The Rabbi showed himself to be a true 'good shepherd' ... a pastor who *not only* had deep love and compassion for his flock, his congregation; *but also* saw those two lost sheep as children of God, who were in need of healing; children of God, who despite the venom and hatred and darkness within them, had the potential to become the persons God created them to be; ... a shepherd who had the wisdom and courage to sit down with the enemy, to dialogue with the enemy, to get to know the enemy, to hear the stories of the enemy - to realize that, despite major differences in understandings, they shared a common humanity.

A shepherd that stands in stark contrast to the “shepherds,” the leadership of Jeremiah’s community in our first reading, who mislead the flock, scattered the flock and used the flock to further their own prestige, turning their backs on the very people they were sent to serve; in stark contrast to the “shepherds” - the leaders - of Jesus’ time who, as we see in Mark’s Gospel, excluded the poor of Palestine - the “poor of the land” as they were called - considered ignorant and hopeless and worthless by the Scribes and Pharisees...; “sheep without a shepherd,” as Jesus compassionately reflected.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus calls the leadership “hypocrites” who put burdens on the shoulders of others while not lifting a finger...; their words, bold but their deeds, few; all their works performed for show; fond of places of honor at banquets, and in the front section in the Synagogue. “Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees: you frauds! Blind fools! Blind guides! You are like white-washed tombs: beautiful on the outside, but full of filth, like dead-man’s bones.” (It’s no wonder he ended up on the cross...!)

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As we see in our readings today, both Jeremiah in the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus in the Gospels understood clearly that the systems and institutions of their times were broken and instead of serving the people, the leadership often served themselves...; the shepherds becoming like false God’s that were to be worshipped.

Such thinking and behavior is an occupational hazard of leadership that - believe it or not - can happen even in the world and in religion today....! Yet with fragile hope, we see the last vestiges of absolute-rule crumbling:

- We’ve observed the transformation of the ‘Arab Spring,’ not without terrible suffering and bloodshed - and with a long way to go with many pitfalls ahead;
- We pray for the suffering people of Syria as a brutal dictator is about to fall;
- Many of us are old enough to have witnessed the miraculous - almost totally nonviolent - collapse of the former Soviet Union; ... the crumbling of apartheid in South Africa, ... the birth of democracy in the Philippines and Chile;
- ... and the list goes on.

We in the United States *live* in the most creative and successful “experiment in democracy” that the world has ever seen, with tremendous liberties and freedom. *But*, we the people must remain vigilant to ensure the health and growth of our democracy and - like Jeremiah and Jesus - find our voices to critique the wrongs, and work together to make them right..

We are all stunned with the violent attack in the movie theater in Aurora, Colorado which took place early Friday morning - just one among many such tragedies in recent years. Gun violence happens daily in every major city in our Nation. The statistics are staggering:

- Since the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy in 1968, over a million Americans have died from gunshot wounds on our streets; many, many times over the number of American soldiers killed in Viet Nam, Iraq, Afghanistan and other conflicts combined;
- In the 24 hours surrounding the shooting in Colorado, there were 70 shootings in New York City alone;
- 12 people were killed in Chicago in the last seven days!

And yet, our President and his opponent for Office have to date said - and are likely to say - next to nothing about gun control; and the vast majority of members of Congress and their opponents for Office will say next to nothing about the need for gun control legislation.

Why? Because their political advisors tell them (with good reason!) that the American Rifle Association Lobby is so powerful that it would be political suicide to take-up this issue at this time...

This absurd reality will change only when we the people stand-up and say: “Enough is enough!” Educating ourselves and others on the *reality* of gun violence and demanding that legislation like the Brady Bill - which in *no way* threatens the Second Amendment - be taken seriously.

One of the most precious gifts of our Democracy is the ‘separation of church and state,’ that gives religion the freedom to critique our Democracy through the perspective of our ethical and moral lenses.

For us as Christians - for us as Roman Catholics - our right, our privilege, our *responsibility* is to become salt and light and yeast for the culture; working together with other people of Good Will in righting the wrongs of our culture from the lens of the Gospel of Jesus. On this issue, our Shepherds - our Bishops - have been in support of gun control laws for years because our Church opposes anything that threatens human life from its beginning to its end, embracing a “seamless garment” ideal that protects human life *inclusively*.

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As I conclude this reflection on leadership, a theme of our Scriptures readings today, I can't help but think of the teaching of Jesus: ‘Before pointing out the speck in our brother's or sister's eye, we better take a look at the plank in our own!’ In other words: “Get your own house in order before you criticize others!”

Brothers and sisters, it goes without saying that the system of leadership in our Catholic Church is in crisis - with some experts pointing out that there are a number of indications that we could be heading toward a new schism or split in the Church as many of our Shepherds desperately hold on to a medieval, feudalistic, patriarchal, monarchical form of government that can *no longer function* adequately in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century - while ignoring the vision of the Second Vatican Council that calls for a new way of being Church....

But in this fragile transition to our becoming a more authentic church (not without a lot of pain and suffering and even persecutions), we have some wonderful contemporary models of Shepherds who model the Good Shepherd: Jesus Christ. I call to mind:

- ❖ Steve Dickout our speaker last weekend: Director of Unity Acres with deep compassion for the homeless men - desiring nothing but creating a safe home where the men can live with dignity and self-respect;
- ❖ Bishop Costello who was with us two weeks ago for the blessing of our Peace Pole: a Shepherd whose leadership has always been guided by the pillars of justice and compassion and reconciliation;

- ❖ And - our amazing religious women: the nuns who took the vision of Vatican II most seriously and for the last 50 years have been walking the walk - accompanying the poorest and most vulnerable and excluded in our world; walking the streets of our inner-cities, walking the hallways of our prisons and hospitals, walking the corridors of death row and nuclear weapons facilities;
- ❖ And the list goes on...

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I conclude with the words of Bishop Harrison, a Church leader who was our Shepherd in the Diocese of Syracuse in the late 1970s and '80s, who embraced the Vision of the Second Vatican Council with great enthusiasm. In a Pastoral letter called "We are the Church" that was issued in the 1970s, he wrote:

*"Thus it is to the Church that people look for leaders - men and women - cleric, religious and lay - shepherds comfortable with their own humanness and sensitive to the incompleteness of others; leaders who call forth the giftedness of others and who recognize the rightful place of all; ministers courageous enough to dare and credible enough to inspire." (p. 12)*

*Amen!*