

“I Can’t Breathe!”

Sisters and brothers, if we were to ask ourselves what has been a core spiritual theme of our All Saints Parish since our opening on the feast of All Saints, November 1, 2008, it would simply be the core teaching of Christianity and the Catholic faith: that every person and all people are created in the image and likeness of God, each person – without exception – is a beloved child of God. Today we celebrate the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity. *If we are created in God’s image and likeness, we are Trinitarian: our essence is relationship. If we are children of the one God, we are therefore in relationship to one another, we are all sisters and brothers.*

It is then *through this spiritual lens* that our Parish addresses the social issues of our day – whether it be the plight of the undocumented; the evils of sexism and homophobia, ... any issue that images a person or a people as less than human. As we gather here this weekend, we join our nation in mourning and grieving. We mourn and grieve the murder – by Minneapolis police – of George Floyd – created in God’s image and likeness, a child of God and a brother to us all. Once again as we have often done through these last 12 years, as disciples of Jesus we are called to reflect on the evil of racism in our nation through the lens of faith.

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James Baldwin, in a speech at the University of California at Berkeley in 1979, stated:

“Every white person in this country – I do not care what he says or what she says – knows one thing... They know that they would not like to be black here. If they know that, they know everything they need to know. And whatever else they may say is a lie.”

Father Bryan Massingale, 63-year-old African-American priest of the Diocese of Milwaukee, who is a Professor of Theology at Fordham University and author of the book, Racial Justice and the Catholic Church – which we used here for small group study – in a powerful article in the NCR published Monday, shared that quote to set the context for going on to share that, although it has never been easy to be black in America, the last few months have:

“...pushed me to the depths of outrage, pain and despondency that are unmatched in my 63 years of life.... All this weighs on my spirit I tried to pray, but inner quiet eludes me. I simply sit in silence on Pentecost weekend before a lit candle praying: ‘Come Holy Spirit,’ as tears fall.”

Brothers and sisters, why wouldn't he cry? Just look at the last three months in America:

1. The Covid-19 Pandemic shows that while all of us might be vulnerable – Blacks, Latinos and Native People are the vast majority of those infected and killed by the virus. Why wouldn't they...? The vulnerability of these groups has been documented for decades: inflated rates of poverty and all the related consequences: lack of insurance, less access to health-care, overcrowded housing, unsafe and often unsanitary working conditions, etc.
2. On February 23rd: Ahmaud Arbery – an unarmed 25-year-old black man – was executed by three white men who stalked him while he was jogging in Brunswick, Georgia. Only after public protests and the passing of 74 days were any charges filed.
3. On March 13th: Breanna Taylor – a 26-year-old African-American woman – was killed by Louisville police officers after they kicked in the door of her apartment unannounced and without identifying themselves, in the middle of the night. Fearful for their lives, her boyfriend fired his lawfully possessed gun. Breanna was killed by eight bullets fired by three officers, under circumstances that have yet to be satisfactorily explained.
4. On May 25th: George Floyd – a 46-year-old African-American man – was brutally killed in Minneapolis by a white police officer who knelt on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, ... despite Floyd already being restrained, ...despite urgent requests of on-lookers, ...despite Floyd's repeated pleas: “I can't breathe!”

5. On May 29th: Omar Jimenez – a black, Latino reporter was arrested while reporting events in Minneapolis, while a white reporter – doing the same thing - at the same time - couple of blocks away – was not only not arrested, but treated with “consummate politeness.”

Why wouldn't Fr. Massingale cry? Why wouldn't all people of color cry? Why wouldn't *we all* cry?

In his article, Fr. Massingale invites white Americans to reflect on another incident, which took place in Central Park on May 25th in the midst of all of this. Although not as tragic as the other incidents – because a black person didn't die – Fr. Massingale suggests that this event is key to understanding the core of the racism that is alive and well in 2020... as it was in 1968 or at the height of slavery... and that lies at the heart of the tragic consequences of the Covid-19 Pandemic for communities of color and all the incidents noted above.

Christian Cooper – a young black man – a bird-watcher, was reported to police by Amy Cooper (no relation) – a young white woman – who called 911 to say that “An African-American man” was “threatening her” in Central Park, *merely because he had the gall to ask her to comply with the Park's posted regulation to leash her dog.*

Amy Cooper told 911: “There is a man – an African-American – he has a bicycle helmet. He is recording me and threatening me...; please send cops immediately!” This despite the fact that Christian Cooper's camera records the events and shows he made no threatening moves toward her, spoke to her calm and without insult and kept his distance from her the whole time.

Sisters and brothers, as Massingale points out: *Amy Cooper knew what she was doing and so do we!* She was operating on assumptions that are ingrained in the soul of white America:

- She assumed that her lies would be more credible than his truth.
- She assumed that she would have the presumption of innocence.
- She assumed that he, the black man, would have a presumption of guilt.
- She assumed that the police would back her up.
- She assumed that her race would be an advantage, that she would be believed because she is white. (By the way, this is what we mean by white privilege).
- She assumed that his race would be a burden, even an insurmountable one.
- She assumed that the world should work for her and against him.

- She assumed that she had the upper hand in this situation.
- She assumed that she could exploit deeply ingrained white fears of black men.
- She assumed that she could use these deeply ingrained white fears to keep a black man in his place.
- She assumed that if he protested his innocence against her, he would be seen as "playing the race card."
- She assumed that no one would accuse her of "playing the race card," because no one accuses white people of playing the race card when using race to their advantage.
- She assumed that he knew that any confrontation with the police would not go well for him.
- She assumed that the frame of "black rapist" versus "white damsel in distress" would be clearly understood by everyone: the police, the press and the public.
- She assumed that her knowledge of how white people view the world, and especially black men, would help her.
- She assumed that a black man had no right to tell her what to do.
- She assumed that the police officers would agree.
- She assumed that even if the police made no arrest, that a lot of white people would take her side and believe her anyway.
- She assumed that Christian Cooper could and would understand all of the above.

And... she was right. He clearly knew what was at stake, which is why he had the presence of mind to record what happened!

Sisters and brothers, without these assumptions, Amy Cooper's lies would make no sense, but in truth her assumptions are 'reasonable' and – we have to admit well-founded. They match what we know to be true about how America works and how too many white people think. *We know how our culture brings whiteness and folks of color. We know how race works in America.*

The fundamental assumption behind all others is that white people matter and should matter more than people of color. That black lives don't matter... or at least not as much as white lives, is the basic assumption behind Amy Cooper's decisions, actions and words. That's the basic assumption that links Christian Cooper – the bird-watcher – with Covid-19 as well as with all the black men and women murdered in the last three months.

If we question the assumptions in white America that black lives don't matter... just look at the facial expression on that officer with his knee on George Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds... there was no expression, ... it was as if his knee was on a log

Sisters and brothers, Amy Cooper in Central Park made the truth plain and obvious: she knew deep in her soul that she lived in a country where things should work in favor of white people; she knew the 'real deal,' and if we are honest we all do.

This is the reason for the grief, outrage, lament, anger and fury that has been pouring into our Nation's streets: *folks are tired of living under our fundamental American assumption that black lives don't matter and should not matter as much as white lives.*

Sisters and brothers, this is what is meant by 'systemic racism' – 'white privilege' – white supremacy.' It's hard for white people to admit that present in Central Park that morning was the scaffolding of centuries long accumulations of the benefits of whiteness; benefits that burden people of color; *benefits that kill black and brown people*.

Fr. Massingale concludes the article by describing what white people must do if racism is to be eliminated in America:

1. White people need to face the truth and become uncomfortable with it. white people have the capacity and obligation to end racism in America. The truth is if it was up to Blacks, racism would have been resolved centuries ago. White people must become uncomfortable with the reality.

The only reason for racism's persistence in America is that white people continue to benefit from it. Let me repeat that: the only reason for racism's persistence in America is that white people continue to benefit from it.

Until this country accepts that – we will never move beyond superficial words and ineffective half-measures. Sugar-coating the truth is killing people of color. Silence for the sake of making white people comfortable is a luxury we can no longer afford.

2. Next, Massingale counsels that white people do nothing but let this reality sink in ... and live in our uncomfortability until it brings us to tears, anger, shame and embarrassment. Why? because it is only when a critical mass of white folks is outraged and grieved and pained over the *status quo* – only when white people become upset enough to declare: "This cannot and will not be!" – only then can real change become a possibility.

3. White Americans need to admit our ignorance and understand that there is a lot about our history and life that we're going to have to unlearn. To create a different world, we must learn how this one came to be... .
4. White Americans must have the courage to confront family, friends and the world around us – even our Church – on racist attitudes and actions. We have to move beyond excuses such as ... “Deep down he’s really a good person” or “Aunt May is from a different generation.” As Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “There comes a time when silence is betrayal.”
5. As Catholics we need to become truly “unconditionally Pro-Life.” Those words are from Pope John Paul II, from his final visit to the United States when he summoned Catholics to “eradicate every form of racism” as part of their commitment to life.

And this has a very serious consequence: how can one support a president who is blatantly racist, who mocks and denigrates people of color, separates Latino families and consigns Brown children to concentration camps and still call oneself “pro-life”? In this, we need to confront our one issue “pro-life” sisters and brothers.

It was refreshing to read Washington, DC Catholic Archbishop Wilton Gregory’s statement on President Trump’s visit Tuesday to The St. John Paul II National Shrine which – as a private institution is not under his jurisdiction. He said: “*I find it baffling and reprehensible than any Catholic facility would allow itself to be misused and manipulated in a fashion which violates our religious principles.*” This in the face of a ploy by which the President sought to garner Catholic votes, just as it was a ploy by him to visit St. John’s, Episcopal Church and hold up the Bible – after having called in riot troops and tear-gassed peaceful protesters in Lafayette Park, in order to clear his way for the photo-op.

6. Finally Fr. Massingale recommends that we pray: he says

“Yes, racism is a political issue and a social divide. But at its deepest level, racism is a soul sickness. It is a profound warping of the human spirit that enables human beings to create communities of callous indifference toward their darker sisters and brothers.

This soul sickness can only be healed by deep prayer. Yes, we need social reforms. We need equal educational opportunities, changed police practices, equitable access to healthcare’ an end to employment and housing discrimination. But only an invasion of divine love will shatter the small images of God that enable us to live undisturbed by the racism that benefits some and terrorizes so many.”

Amen!