

Fall River Herald News Clergy Column June 20, 2020

For This I Pray

Mahatma Gandhi said: “the true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.” Times of crisis make clearer who the most vulnerable members of society are. They are always there, but too often people tend to ignore them until something makes them more visible. This is such a time. The weaknesses in our society are on plain display these days and I worry that the cracks and divisions in our society will become more pronounced before solutions begin to be implemented. I very much hope I’m wrong about that.

Before the murder of George Floyd, the coronavirus pandemic was making it increasingly clear that the impact of the pandemic was disproportionately felt among people of color, the poorer members of society, and the elderly – in other words, the most vulnerable members of our society. The impact has been felt, as we all know, not only in disease and death, but also in their by-products such as unemployment. For example, we know that people with lower incomes often live in dwellings with a higher concentration of people which makes social distancing more difficult. People with less financial security feel the impact of unemployment more intensely than others. The side-effects of the coronavirus pandemic are numerous.

Since the murder of George Floyd, the 400 year history of racial inequality in our country has shared the public’s attention with the current pandemic primarily because of the protest demonstrations that have proliferated across the country. Even though change can be painfully slow, people’s voices being heard makes a difference. Demonstrations can bring the public’s and the government’s attention to issues that may have previously been ignored or under-emphasized. Demonstrations can also inspire people to change in their own personal lives and to try to bring about change in society in general. Shouldn’t religion’s role also be to inspire people to live lives that affirm the inherent value of every person’s life? Our faith traditions ask us to examine our hearts and souls while putting the precept of loving our neighbors as ourselves prominently in our consciousness. We can do this in more ways than one. Ultimately action in the world is the most effective means of bringing about change. However, for those who have a prayer-life, prayer can bolster and inspire our actions in the world.

This past Sunday Bishop Edgar da Cunha organized an “Interfaith Prayer Service for Peace and Justice” at St. Mary’s Cathedral in Fall River. In the interests of public safety and

social distancing the number of in-person participants was limited, but it was simultaneously being live-streamed. Different prayers from different traditions combined to express a unified concern and vision of a United States in which peace, justice and racial equality can finally be achieved. This convocation was a good example of prayer meant to inspire change and action. Prayer can articulate our highest aspirations, it can inspire us to strive for our loftiest goals. The key is that it can't stop with prayer itself. This reminds me of the famous quote of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel after the Selma March in 1965 in which he marched with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Heschel said he felt that he was praying with his legs.

Right now in our weekly Torah readings we are in the book of Numbers which in Hebrew is called *Bemidbar* (literally "in the wilderness"). It speaks about the forty year journal of the Children of Israel from slavery in Egypt to return to the Promised Land. For many people, the United States has been seen as a Promised Land. That's particularly true for people who came here seeking a better life than the life they were leaving behind. For African-Americans coming here as slaves, that clearly was not the case.

The foundational documents of our country articulate a vision of freedom and equality greater than what the reality was at the time or what the reality is even today. However, I believe we can continue to move our society closer to realizing those ideals for everyone. Over the decades and centuries our understanding of, and sensitivity to, true equality and forms of discrimination has increased. Progress has been made despite setbacks, reactions and resistance to change. As Martin Luther King Jr. said: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Change may not come quickly enough for people suffering now. Even when society as a whole finally recognizes the vital need for change, it still comes slower than we would wish. However, maintaining a long-term vision and fortifying ourselves spiritually will keep us on the journey forward towards our vision of a Promised Land of true freedom and equality. For this I pray.