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 ***A Reflection on Recent Events in Our Country***

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On May 25, a convenience store clerk called police and reported that 46-year-old George Floyd had attempted to make a purchase with a counterfeit $20 bill. Police said he resisted arrest. After Floyd was handcuffed, a white officer kept his knee on the black man’s neck for several minutes until he died while witnesses videoed the encounter.

This sparked unrest in just about every major city across the United States. To me, this was a reminder of the 1960’s when images of Vietnam protests and civil rights demonstrations dominated the evening news. Who would have thought that on the heels of COVID-19 our Nation would be brought to its knees by the images of a man dying from a knee placed on his neck as he screamed, “I can’t breathe?” I view this as a modern-day form of lynching. What has emerged is a debate over whether black lives really matter and a debate over police brutality and the need to reform the way we do policing in the United States.

As an African American man living in America, racism is something that is difficult to make plain to others unless they have experienced it. Both of my parents were raised in rural Alabama and they experienced much more racism than me. I was raised in Washington, DC and for the most part raised in a socially inclusive environment. My mom, rest her soul, would often share stories about a relative wrongfully accused of a crime hiding out in her home and how he was able to barely escape the wrath of an angry mob as he successfully made his way to Chicago. She even experienced an incident in college where a car, full of angry white men, attempted to run a car off the road that she and her female classmates were travelling in. My mom was raised in Monroeville, Alabama, home of Harper Lee, author of “To Kill A Mockingbird.” My dad and his family lived on a farm that his family eventually owned thru a process called “sharecropping.” My dad’s father was a Baptist pastor who walked on the Edmund-Pettus Bridge with John Lewis and Rev. Martin Luther King.

I was gratified by the phone calls, cards, emails and text messages from many white persons who sent words of encouragement after the George Floyd incident. Several I spoke with wanted me to honestly evaluate their past interactions with me to understand if I had ever perceived any racial bias in them. They were sincere in asking about language and communication and certain terms that an African-American might find sensitive. I believe in this season of hyper-sensitivity, it is good to have dialogue on race, racism, classism and sexism. God is honored when we can humbly admit our prejudices and work to get along with one another. Dealing with these issues that are part of the very fabric of America is no easy task. It is hard work.

I am equally disturbed by black-on-black crime, something that seems to get scant attention as a problem during the current season we find ourselves in. I support the idea that “Black Lives Matter” and I support the young people who are genuinely concerned and want to fix relationships by addressing systemic racism in our country. However, there are many elements in the Black Lives Matter, Inc. platform I find difficult to embrace so I do not support the Black Lives Matter organization. I do not have the time to go into detail on some of the potential dangers of the organization, but I encourage all reading this reflection to carefully review what Black Lives Matter, Inc. stands for. Another observation… if black lives really matter, then what about the rights of the unborn? Abortion impacts African Americans at a higher rate than any other population group. In 2011, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released an Abortion surveillance report. According to that report, black women make up 14 percent of the childbearing population. Yet, 36 percent of all abortions were obtained by black women. At a ratio of 474 abortions per 1,000 live births, black women have the highest ratio of any group in the country.

Abortion of African American babies is another example of black-on-black crime, the effects of which are hard to fathom on the black community.

Again, the current dialogue of prejudice and racism and police brutality is long overdue and necessary; however, it is important that the conversation include confession of how we as African Americans can sometimes contribute to our own problems by being our own worst enemy.

A week before the George Floyd incident, there was a shooting involving two “rival” gangs in the neighborhood where I pastor a church in Northeast DC. A neighbor sent me a home video of the shooting that occurred, and I could not believe what I saw…AK47 assault rifles and 9 mm guns being used in broad daylight as assailants hid behind vehicles and bushes as if they were kids playing with toy guns. Two persons were killed, and twelve persons were arrested.

In the midst of all this, to show you how good God is, representatives from the rival gangs called a truce and each side turned two weapons into a person known as a “Violence Interrupter.” Under the auspices of the DC Office of the Attorney General, Violence Interrupters are DC’s version of New York City’s Guardian Angels. Many of them are former prisoners, now reformed, who cruise the streets of the toughest neighborhoods to identify and intervene in gang-related conflicts before they intensify. If a shooting occurs, they seek out the victim’s friends and relatives and try to prevent a retaliatory shooting.

After the surrender of guns and proclaimed truce, I was contacted by the area Violence Interrupter in DC, who asked me to personally sit down with the gang members in an effort to get them to surrender more weapons. While waiting for this meeting to occur, I was contacted by the local police commander for the 5th District who asked if I would commandeer an effort to improve police and community relations. Police tactics have come under scrutiny all across this country, and as a profession, they must connect on a personal level with those they are charged with policing. I am honored in some small way to be a part of the effort to seek solutions. Starting August 1, we will be holding month long listening sessions via “zoom” where the community has an opportunity to hear from the police and vice versa. We will be examining issues like racial profiling, stop and frisk practices, the “blue code,” training of officers, the need for police to get out of their cruisers to talk to the community, and the use of cell phone cameras by the community, etc.

The expected outcome of this initiative is to:

• Expose officers to the lives and stories of the community members.

• Expose community members to the lives and stories of the police who patrol their neighbor.

• Recognize those who are leaders in the community.

• Encourage officers to recognize that in addition to working in the community, they must be a part of it.

• Emphasize the importance of useful intelligence by the community to the police in order to deter crime.

We must realize that not all police are bad. There are also good “cops.” All people are not bad. There are also good people in this world. The more we seek to understand each other the better this world will be.

In closing, 2020 has been a year that has caused all of us to reflect. I want to especially thank the Daughters of Charity and the many Affiliates who sent cards and letters of condolences in the passing of my mother who died of COVID-19 on April 25th. May God continue to bless you all.