

May 31

Pentecost, for what ever else it is or represents, seems to me to be the paradigm for the church at its best: a community transformed and finding its way and its work outside itself. Pentecost is the time of the unlikely communicating the unexpected through the improbable. A little huddled mass of ragtag people announcing a new occasion of God doing amazing things to re-energize the human family by word of mouth and ear. Hold that thought for a moment.

At the same time we Christians remind ourselves of the power of the Holy Spirit, the streets of America's great cities and smaller communities are filled with people outraged and grief-stricken at the deaths of George Floyd in Minneapolis and Breonna Taylor in Louisville, KY—and the whole list of black victims of police malfeasance (which is a centuries old, long, and terrible list).

The first published use of the phrase, “police brutality”, may have been in the Chicago Tribune in 1872. The growing labor movement, especially in Chicago, gave ample opportunity for that complaint. Indeed, several historical threads—the labor movement, followed by a great tide of European immigration (especially Jews and Italians), then succeeded by the massive movement of black Americans to the northern USA—ran through Chicago, and these groups were targeted by police here and elsewhere as sources of social disruption which needed to be suppressed. The spiritual ancestry of this kind of social control surely includes the slave patrols which go back to the early 18th century in America. The legacy of suppressing the slave, the immigrant, the poor, (and the female!), is a dark theme and practice in our national narrative.

This is the key to the dark side of policing, the repeatedly hidden truth of discrimination, criminalization, incarceration, and death for those seen to be threats to the “established order” and the “public peace”. Let me say that again: the dark side of policing is social control—what masquerades as “law and order”. Upper middle class and upper class white people who are conventional citizens in thought, word, and deed are the beneficiaries of this system. It makes for “nice neighborhoods, quiet streets, good schools, safe areas”, what our taxes pay for and what our police maintain. But that American paradise is for a shrinking minority of our citizenry now, and has never been the real experience of vast swaths of our fellow Americans. This is what brings people into the streets spontaneously. It is not theatre nor is it agitators—though both things do exist in such events—the motive is the pent up anger at ordinary experience.

I have served as a police chaplain, my family and I have benefitted from both the kindness and the professionalism of police officers. But I have been on the other side, too, and until you have, you don't know what it is to be bone-deep afraid of the people in blue.

Sometimes there is a yearning in some people for “the way things used to be”—the references to the “Father knows best” time of “not so long ago”—but that was a minority experience then, just as it is now. And, it was as much a product of the media then as

anything else. No one actually lived on the same street as Beaver Cleaver because it wasn't real. It was an illusion, a presentation of an idea aimed at forming a cultural aspiration, what we thought we wanted. I'm not saying there was no real feeling, I'm saying it was not reality for most of us; it certainly is not life for many Americans these days—perhaps none of us, really. Most important to notice is that there are no black, brown, or red faces. That's how you know it is not the American reality, so it cannot show us the American dream.

More than any other group in America, black people have been oppressed and victimized in this system, although they are by no means the only people of color so burdened. You cannot be rich enough, famous enough, distinguished enough, educated enough, old, young, pretty, well-spoken, well-dressed enough to escape the reality, the burden, the grief, and the suffering of being black in America. No person of color gets a free pass, but black people pay the highest toll most often. That is the rough reality of racism in "law enforcement". And, yes, people of color do get taken into that system and serve there. But it is not without a price.

Where am I going with this? Maybe nowhere just now. I spent part of my day at a demonstration for justice and a witness that Black Lives Matter (and I will interject here that objecting to that statement on the grounds that "all lives matter" is baloney because, in fact, in America, black lives have never mattered the way white lives matter, and that inequality means all lives do not matter in practice). I went to the demonstration, meeting my son and his wife, and as I looked around and the several generations represented, I felt sad and tired. My white privileged self has been on the demonstration line since 1963 on this stuff, to some—but far to little avail—in the company of brave people who face far greater burdens, take much greater risks, and have soul crushing history in their blood and on their bodies.

I am glad that the streets still fill, traffic gets screwed up, people march and care and work for justice—and, yes, go to jail and even die for justice. But I am mortally heartbroken about it. This is not the world as I and many others would have it—I hope you feel this way also.

Which brings me back to Pentecost.

What gives us the strength, the perspicuity, the will, and the wish to make things better for everybody and not just ourselves or our group? What prompts us to say and believe that we all do better when we all do better? What makes us know in our guts that injustice, prejudice, brutal exercise of power with some pleasure in the doing anywhere is injustice, prejudice, and brutality everywhere?

Without sounding saccharine, I hope, I firmly believe that the idea that common humanity binds us together on the deepest level, not merely on the surface, and I am convinced that this insight is not a simply human notion. Moreover, having the conviction that people are brothers and sisters, children together, is not a concept that is natural or automatic. It is learned and realized; we are taught it by great spirits moved

by insights deeper than I can imagine. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit, passed on by those who live it and believe it and are willing to put their conviction out before the world for all to see and respond to. This, it seems to me, is the outcome of Pentecost for those of us who are followers of Christ. We don't hold the idea of a common humanity as a monopoly, of course, but we do absolutely preach it, bind ourselves to it, and try to bring it forth "not only with our lips, but in our lives", by the power of that Spirit.