

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Today our first Sacred Writer tells us, “Before man are life and death, good and evil, whichever he chooses shall be given him.” One would think that only crazy people would choose death over life, but the truth is that millions of us choose death over life every day. There are people who choose to drink themselves to death or drug themselves to death. There are others who text and drive. They too are choosing death—either their own or someone else’s. Then, there are people who choose to be angry and full of hate. They too are choosing death over life.

Back in 1988 I went on a study pilgrimage of the Holy Land. We had as our guide a Christian Palestinian named Joseph. Joseph was able to trace his lineage all the way back to the time of the Apostles. Every time Joseph uttered the word, “Jew”, he would spit. Such was the visceral hatred of Joseph toward the Jews.

He told us that when Moses went up on the mountain and pointed to the land of Caanan, he could have just as easily turned in the other direction and pointed to what is present day Jordan and proclaimed that as the Promised Land. But he pointed to the land of the Canaanites, the ancestors of today’s Palestinians. So today’s Palestinians see Israel as their birth right, and they are right. And the Jews of Israel see the land as theirs by divine right, and they’re right too.

I believe it was the wisdom of God that led the Jews to settle in Canaan so that they might come to know each other as the children of the same loving Father. Instead since 1400 years before Christ until the present day, Jews and Palestinians have been filled with such anger and bitterness toward each other that they have been more or less at constant war.

Then, we have God enter into the fray in the person of Jesus of Nazareth 2,000 years ago when both Jew and Palestinian are under the hated occupation of the armies of the Roman Emperor with this new commandment: “You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; and whoever says to his brother, ‘Raqa’ (which is to say he is worthless), will be answerable to the Sanhedrin; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ will be liable to fiery Gehenna.”

Now, if that was the way it was back in Jesus’ time when there was so much hostility, anger, and hatred, what do you think he would make of the state of affairs in our country today? Perhaps there was more rancor and name-calling and hostility and hatred at the time of our Civil War, but none of us, not even me, are old enough to remember that.

The coarseness of today's public and private discourse bespeaks an anger that is so vile that it is tearing apart the very fabric of our society. It is really far worse than what's going on in Israel because none of us have a birthright or a divine right to this land. We are all children of immigrants. Our ancestors either came here seeking a better life for themselves and their families or were taken from their home lands in chains and enslaved to build up this land. Even those we refer to as Native Americans came from another place.

But just as surely as I believe it was the wisdom of God that set the Israelites in the land of the Canaanites so that they could learn to love Him as their common Father in loving one another, I also believe that He called together our ancestors to this land for the same purpose. And I believe he continues to call others to emigrate to this land of immigrants so that we can be enriched by each other's cultures and languages and various expressions of belief in Him who is Father of us all.

Racism is the original sin of America. It has divided us among ourselves from the day that one of us looked upon another and referred to the other as "Raqa" that is worthless. It is an anger built on fear of the Other simply because he or she is unlike me. Racism is in the air we breathe in America.

Today it is Mexicans and Muslims that we perceive as "the threatening other". Of course, it was only about 150 years ago that we Catholics were seen as "the threatening other". Just as today there are fear-mongers who claim the Muslims want to establish a Caliphate and establish "sharia law" in this country, 150 years ago it was feared that the Papist armies were going to overthrow the government and establish the Pope as President.

As a result our catholic churches were burnt to the ground, including our own original church that was built down on the corner where our cemetery is. That's why our church in town is built on a little side street so it wouldn't draw as much attention. But that too was set afire right after its dedication in 1907.

Even as we were victims of hateful prejudice, we practiced it among ourselves. That's how four catholic churches came about in Coatesville. The Irish and German immigrants of St. Cecilia's didn't want to worship with the Italians so Our Lady of the Holy Rosary was established for the Italian immigrant families. None of them wanted the Polish in their parishes so St. Stanislaus was founded to care for the Polish immigrants, who would have nothing to do with the Slovaks coming down from the coalmines up-state, so St. Joseph's was set up for the Slovaks who had been long established Americans in the coal region of Pennsylvania.

However, as the generations past all of those prejudices of nationality melted into the great melting pot which is America. But not so for African-Americans whose ancestors were brought here in chains long before any of our ancestors ever set foot in America. Because of their obvious difference in color, African-Americans continue to be perceived as the “threatening other”. They are “Raga”, that is worthless, to many in this land stained by racism.

Please allow me to share my own personal testimony. I grew up in lily-white America. My first encounter with a person of color as a child was the man who delivered coal to our home. I thought he was black because he was covered in coal dust. I had no idea that people could be other than white.

When I was four or five our Mother took us downtown on the Frankford El. A Black woman sat down next to me, said something to me, and then touched me. I started screaming crying. Nothing she said or my Mother said could shut me up. They kept asking me what was wrong, but I didn’t know how to tell them that I was afraid. What I was afraid of was that her Blackness would rub off on me and I would become Black too.

Then when I was nine or ten, about 1954, we were visiting my Grandparents home in West Philadelphia. My Grandmother kept saying the N-word. On the way home in the car, I asked my Mother what is an N. She said, “Don’t ever use that word. It is a nasty word that people use to refer to Colored People.” I asked, “Why was Mom-Mom using it?” My Mom said, “She was wrong. Don’t ever use it!” My Dad, apparently trying to defend his Mother, said, “Oh, she didn’t mean any harm.” My Mother piped up to my Dad, “Victor, she was wrong. You know she was wrong,” and then to me, “Don’t ever use that word.” I never used the word, nor did I ever hear my parents use the word in our home. I often wonder how they had become so wise and stood so firmly against the political correctness (or should I say incorrectness) of their time.

It never occurred to me all through grade school that I was in an all-white school, and that, in high school, there were only two or three Black students. But it was during those high school years, 1958-62, that civil rights marches started happening, and then, once in the Seminary when I read Dr. King’s Letter from the Birmingham Jail, that I first started thinking about race and how evil racism was. But, I certainly did not consider myself a racist.

Then in 1966, I was assigned by the Seminary to St. Elizabeth’s Parish in North Philadelphia for my field education. When I arrived, I met with the priest who was supposed to be my mentor. He told me, “Do whatever you want. Stay out of trouble and stay out of my way.” What was I to do? I decided to take a walk.

I left the Rectory on 23rd St., dressed in my little black suit, white shirt, and narrow black tie, wearing the required fedora, and went to the corner of Berks St., walking toward 24th St. I looked ahead. It was around 11:00 in the morning and there was a small group of young Black men sitting on the step of a corner bar. All of a sudden I was scared. I felt threatened by the Other. Racial fear overwhelmed me. It stained me. It flowed throughout my very being.

I thought should I turn around and run, but that seemed so cowardly; or should I just nonchalantly cross the street to get a head start when they came after me. But what good would that do if they had a gun. I prayed, “Lord, for you I live, for you I die!” Then I walked right up to them and said, “Good Morning!” Believe it or not, I was a skinny beanstalk of 22 then and one of the group said, “White boy, whatcha doin’ aroun’ here.” I explained I was a seminarian studying to be a Catholic priest and they looked at me like I had come from Mars. Then one of them asked what was the difference between Catholics and Baptists and one question led to another and I sat down and the next thing I knew they passed the brown bag with a bottle in it and I began to acquire a taste for Thunderbird wine. We spent the afternoon laughing and joking and drinking Thunderbird. We became friends.

For the better part of all of those years from 1966 until I was reassigned here in 1993, I lived my life in the African-American communities of North Philadelphia. I found that we all share the same hopes and dreams, suffer the same pains and disappointments. We all want the same love and appreciation; the same peace and serve the same God who is Father to us all.

I have been greatly enriched by the love, the friendship, and the wisdom I have gained in living with and praying with and worshipping with my African-American sisters and brothers.

Just some of the traits that have enriched me is a beautiful spirituality wherein there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular—everything is sacred because it is of God; an abiding trust in God, that no matter how bad things get, God will make it right; a ready acceptance of people that is welcoming and joyful; and a beautiful compassion and willingness to help those who are having a tougher time than they are themselves. Perhaps the most amazing trait that I admire most in the African-American people I have been blessed to know is what I call forbearance, which I define as a readiness to forgive even the rude, ignorant stupidity of a bigot. To not forgive in such a circumstance, one person told me, would be to lower oneself to the same level and offend one’s sense of her own dignity.

Today we welcome the youth of St. Martin de Porres Parish in North Philadelphia who are returning the visit of our Teens to their parish last week. In this brief, shining moment we defy the truth uttered by Dr. King so many years ago that 11:00 o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. These young people are the hope of our nation because they are eager to learn from each other. They are finding there is so much more that unites them than divides them. They are discovering that they are being enriched by their differences and they don't have to be controlled by the racial stereotypes of the past.

It is the youth of America who are taking to the streets proclaiming that Black lives matter; Muslim lives matter; Mexican lives matter, every bit as much as any of our lives matter. None of us can look down on the Other as "Raqa", that is, worthless.

It is in such encounters as these, and thanks to our young people who are showing us the way, that we can bring our gift to the altar, reconciled, if only in this moment, with each other.

Dr. King once proclaimed these words which I have taken as a motto for my life: "I just want to be there; in truth and in justice; in love and in commitment to others; so that together we can make of this old world a new world."

Please, Church, if you are so inclined, please stand with me and let this become our anthem, let it become a part of our creed. Please proclaim together: I JUST WANT TO BE THERE; IN TRUTH AND IN JUSTICE; IN LOVE AND IN COMMITMENT TO OTHERS; SO THAT TOGETHER, WE CAN MAKE OF THIS OLD WORLD, A NEW WORLD!