

Pentecost 2017

Today is the Feast of Pentecost – traditionally called the Birthday of the Church. Today also is the 138th/139th day of the presidency of Donald Trump. To bring together these seemingly unrelated moments, I'd like to reflect a bit this morning on fear.

Fear has a legitimate and even vital role to play human society. Without this elemental alarm system our ancestors would not have survived and we would not be warned of potential dangers or sufficiently motivated to address them. Fear can move us to marshal our resources in the face of crisis and, as we know, there is real crisis – genuine threats – in our obviously troubled nation and world today (just reflect on the events in London over the last days and weeks...).

But fear – when it becomes excessive or misdirected or used to manipulate – is itself dangerous. Fear can lead us to misperceive the world around us and can undermine our willingness to interact constructively with others.

At the National Prayer Breakfast on February 4, 2016, President Obama stated:

Fear can lead us to lash out against those who are 'different,' or lead us to try to get some sinister 'other' under control. Alternately, fear can lead us to succumb to despair or paralysis or cynicism. Fear can feed our more selfish impulses and erode the bonds of community... Fear can be contagious, spreading through societies and through nations. And, if we let it consume us; the consequences of that fear can be worse than any outward threat.

Martin Luther King Jr. – who lived daily with threats to his very life – put it powerfully:

Normal fear protects us; abnormal fear paralyzes us. Normal fear motivates us to improve individual and collective welfare; abnormal fear constantly poisons and distorts our inner lives.

Sisters and brothers, we don't have to look too far to conclude that we as a nation are living in a culture of *abnormal fear* — we know that politicians on both sides of the aisle sometimes instill and manipulate fear to reach their own ends. There is ample evidence to conclude that the Trump election campaign and the Trump administration in their earliest days have been sowing the seeds of fear in an attempt to accomplish its agenda and in the process is throwing gasoline on our already polarized, divided and fearful nation.

Some might say we shouldn't be talking about this "political stuff" in church. I must say that I cannot not talk about this political stuff in church — because it strikes head on with the Gospel, head-on with the Mission of Jesus and head on the lives as disciples of Jesus.

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Brothers and sisters, the Feast of Pentecost invites us to reflect on fear through the lens of faith, through the lens of the Gospel. The death of Jesus, his execution on the Cross, produced terror in those who had followed him. All the Gospels speak of the fear these events caused. In today's Gospel, the disciples are gathered behind locked doors – paralyzed by fear. The confrontation with the religious authorities in collusion with the Roman authorities has terrified them.

The risen Jesus appears in their midst and offers them peace – *Shalom!* and charges them to continue his mission of love and justice and peace for each person and all people. Jesus charges them to continue his mission that had led him to a torturous death on the Cross. *'Sure – fear is a normal human feeling..., but: be not afraid... I am giving you the Holy Spirit... I am giving you the breath, the fire, the wind, the spark, the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that fear will not paralyze you, consume you, block you from becoming the persons, the community, the church and, ultimately, the world God desires!* Sisters and brothers, “Be not afraid” – proclaimed 22 times in the Scriptures – is the grace of the Spirit.

Those disciples, consumed with the Spirit, opened the windows, opened the doors of that stale upper-room, breathed deeply and went down the stairs and proclaimed the Good News of the Reign of God, the Kingdom of God; the Good News of love and justice and peace – to the ends of the earth! And: brothers and sisters, here we are 2000 years later, called to breathe deeply, to embrace the Spirit of love and proclaim the Good News – joining with other people of goodwill – and little-by-little create the world that God intended.... Knowing in our heart of hearts that *love casts out all fear!*

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Sisters and brothers, what are the roots of this deep fear? There are many complex and complicated reasons why fear is so prevalent in the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world: fear of terrorism, fear that we are a nation in decline, etc., etc., etc. But for a few moments I'd like to focus on one fear that was at the heart of this past election cycle.

I'm no expert on the economy, but those who are, tell us that there is a significant number of Americans (particularly in the rust belts of Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin, but throughout the country) who feel that they are left behind, and experts would say that their fears are warranted.

In the decades between World War II and 1970s, the actual wages and standard of living for most U.S. workers grew steadily. During those years, an unprecedented number of mostly, but not exclusively, white and male workers could gain access to the American Dream and the middle-class standard of living that is associated with it. As prosperity grew for most workers during this time, it was simply expected that their children would enjoy even more material abundance than did their own generation. Increasing affluence for hard work began to seem like a birthright. But in the 1970s – for a lot of complex reasons – greater income for greater output came to an end. One prominent reason for this halt is the shifting balance of power between *capital* and *labor* (look at where the 1% is...). Since the 1970s, real wages for most U.S. workers have stagnated, with the minimum wage far under what a living wage would be. Thus, the American Dream – considered a birthright for decades – has been denied.

And so it is within this atmosphere, that in marches the dark side of politics: the reemergence of the divisive politics of white nationalism – that instills abnormal fear big time into the heart of our society.... We must name it what it is: *Contemporary White Nationalism*.

Mark Rupert, a Professor of Political Science at Syracuse University, in an excellent article in the current issue of The Syracuse Peace Council Newsletter, describes three core beliefs of Contemporary White Nationalism:

- 1) People's political identity is based most fundamentally on their ascribed racial identity;
- 2) America as defined by white nationalists has been and should continue to be a nation based on white supremacy and European cultural traditions;
- 3) White Americans are increasingly being dispossessed of this birthright because of the political power of the liberal establishment, the Washington elite, and their allies among traditional racial minorities - along with their ideological, cosmopolitan openness to the world, multiculturalism and political correctness.

Contemporary White Nationalism depicts white Americans as both entitled to a clear position of superiority in this country and "victims" of forces conspiring to deprive them of that birthright.

Sisters and brothers, survey evidence clearly indicates that persons with these kinds of beliefs were drawn to, stimulated and enraged by the Trump campaign from the outset with its

- anti-immigrant...,
 - anti-refugee...,
 - anti-climate change...,
 - anti-Muslim...,
 - anti-poor...,
 - racist... worldview.

Surveys indicate that 81% of white Trump supporters had higher levels of racial resentment and we saw it acted out day-by-day during the campaign.

Brothers and sisters, we know that white supremacy and racism has been part of American life since Columbus first set foot on the Continent. But the election of America's first African-American President sharpened these fears of white racial dispossession and intensified the political backlash paving the way for Donald Trump's overtly White Nationalist politics.

Sisters and brothers, this divisive politics, that intentionally stokes the fears of hurting people, and draws them into this darkness is against everything for which our Nation – at its best – stands; and is against everything that the Good News of Jesus was all about. As disciples of Jesus, we must breathe deeply the grace of the Holy Spirit and – despite our fears – we must reject this ideology and challenge the Administration's divisive politics, and join with other people of good will in articulating a more inclusive and democratic vision of what this country could be and should be.

And this vision of inclusivity is at the heart of the Gospel, the heart of Catholic Social Teaching of the last 100 years, is at the heart of what Pope Francis is all about and: at the heart of what our Parish Mission is all about!

A powerful sign of our Parish's *resistance* to this divisive, evil White Nationalism and of our *commitment* to our Catholic Social Teaching at this moment in our Nation, is the consideration of our Parish becoming a Sanctuary Parish. In order for our parishioners to have more opportunity to explore, investigate and reflect on this proposal, we will hold dialogue sessions after each Mass the weekend of June 17th & 18th with a vote on our Resolution at the weekend Masses, the last week of June (the 24th & 25th). I ask you to reflect on the resolution you will once again find in your Bulletin.

I will conclude with the words of Cardinal Joseph Tobin, given at an interfaith prayer service on May 4th in Newark, New Jersey, that convened imams, pastors, priests and rabbis, together urging action amid swift changes to immigration enforcement and threats to health care.

His remarks included sharing a powerful scene of a novel about Italian fascism:

What keeps despots and dictators awake at night, what topples evil empires is the little person who goes into the square in the middle of town in the dark of the night and scrawls on the wall, 'No.' and I want to say to you, we are the 'No' that God scrawls on the wall." We are the 'No' to a nation who would deport people, separating them from their families and their loved ones simply because they are victims of a broken system.

Be not afraid! Perfect love casts out all fear!

"Come, Holy Spirit, and renew the face of the earth!"

Amen!