

Christmas – 2016

According to Jim Wallace, an evangelical pastor, author and teacher, the most important talk he ever gave on the issue of immigration and refugees was to his son's fifth grade elementary school, current events class.

"I told the students of our current problem of 11 million undocumented people living in uncertainty and fear, for years, even decades, being unable to safely obtain medical care and police protection; being exploited – without protection – by unscrupulous employers; most painfully: being separated from family members ... with fathers and mothers being torn away from their children; hard-working and law-abiding people being deported every day -- at that time: 1,100 per day.

"Looking very surprised the students asked the obvious question: 'Why don't we fix that?' 'Why doesn't Congress change the system?' I answered: 'They say they are afraid.' The students looked even more confused and asked: 'What are they afraid of?'

"I paused to consider their honest question and looked around the room: the classroom of a public school fifth-grade in Washington, DC. I looked at their quizzical and concerned faces – a group of African-American, Latino, Asian-American, Native-American and European-American children. Then it hit me.

"'They are afraid of you.'

"'Why would they be afraid of us?' the shocked children asked; totally perplexed.

"I had to tell them: 'They are afraid you are the future of America. They are afraid their country will someday look like this class -- that you represent what our country is becoming.'

"This multicultural, multiracial and multinational group of 11-year-olds looked more confused than ever. 'They are afraid this won't work. ... Does it work?' The children looked at one another, then responded with many voices, saying: 'Yeah...! Sure... Of course it works... It works great... It's really cool!'"

"Together that morning we decided that our job was to show the rest of the country that this new America coming into being is – in fact: 'really cool!'"

+++++

Sisters and brothers, you might be wondering by now: "Isn't this a Christmas Liturgy? What does that story have to do with Christmas... the Nativity, the manger, the Holy Family, the birth of Jesus: God with us – Emmanuel?"

During Advent, as I was reflecting on what to share at Christmas, one thought kept gnawing at me like an elephant in the living room; and that thought was that if I was going to be faithful to this Jesus, who's birthday we celebrate, that I must say something about the state of our nation on this Christmas 2016.

As a nation, we have just concluded the most negative, demeaning, polarizing, and, I would say, dangerous election cycle in modern history and in its wake, we face a future that seems uncertain at best. Some of the signs are frightening: for example, findings released by the Poverty Law Center a few days ago reported that hate crimes in our nation are increasing at a scary rate, surging past 1000 in the last month. Numbers of elementary school teachers report that many of their young students are afraid that when they go home from school, their immigrant parents made have been arrested and taken away. We've seen in this election cycle, that a large slice of Americans, both rural and urban, feel forgotten, dismissed – with jobs taken away from them and factories leaving their towns ... and nobody seeming to care... ...and the list goes on.

Brothers and sisters, if our celebration of Christmas is going to be real – we must bring the present moment in our country and in our hearts to the manger. Let us look at the Christmas story as recorded by Luke in our Christmas Gospel to give us some answer in the face of our divided nation.

It is roughly 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem – according to Google maps! And, it would take about 34 hours to travel the distance on foot without counting stops to rest. This was the journey that Joseph and Mary made. Their journey is not a choice: Caesar Augustus had spoken and, like it or not – impending birth not-with-standing – they made the 100 mile trek ... to fill out some government forms.

Joseph and Mary are, like poor and defenseless people of every place and time, at the whim of what Caesar – or whoever compassionless government official – dictates. The irony is that while Joseph and Mary (and the about to be born child) are headed to Bethlehem to be counted, the fact is: *they really don't count* – not to Rome anyway. They are faceless nobodies...; they are numbers in the files of an uncaring Empire!

But their hope is not in Caesar Augustus... but in God! They are embraced not in the imposed *Pax Romana*, but in the peace of God's compassion.

To God: they count!

On Christmas Day, little Bethlehem is the center of light for humankind: God has become one of us! God has become human to show us the sacredness of our own humanity!

We who travel from the Nazareths and Bethlehems of our own lives... count! Those who find themselves so beaten down that they don't want to get up again, have reason to hope... because Emmanuel – God is with us...!

+++++

Sisters and brothers, God became human to show us that every person counts; every person matters; every person is holy... whether born in a stable or in a refugee camp or a deserted mill-town in West Virginia or hopeless, drug-infested ghetto..., or the richest city in the world! As Baptized Christians, we are called to bring this vision to the political table of our land.

Brothers and sisters, this is the Good News that the Incarnation brings to a hurting, divided, bleeding world that every person in this nation and every person in our world – our global village – and all creation counts with their dignity and sacredness to be respected; and this is the vision that we are called to proclaim and live that ultimately will bring about the world that God intended.

To do this however, we must look at our personal, national and global situation through the lens of the Gospel, we must stand up and commit ourselves to what is the heart of what truly counts...

On this Christmas, in the midst of the polarization and fear in our Nation, there are some non-negotiables that put the vision of Jesus into the here and now for us as Catholic Christians. And, these are not Democrat values or Republican values, left values or right values, progressive or conservative values, but Gospel values that lead us to put our Creed, our orthodoxy into ortho-praxis.

And so on this Christmas, in the midst of the polarization and fear in our nation, what might we commit ourselves to in order to reflect the vision of Jesus as we move forward? I ask that we consider the following, and if we so choose to respond: "I will."

Number one: To listening. Many Americans seem incapable of listening. In the midst of division and polarization, do we commit ourselves to listen to others as a means of healing..., that our parish and families and community be safe and sacred spaces for listening to each others' stories, pain, fear and hope? Do we commit ourselves to listening?

Number two: There is a saying in East Africa: "When the elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers." Do we commit ourselves to join with other people of goodwill in speaking-up for the poor, the homeless, the unemployed and underemployed, the differently-abled, the sick...? Will we find our voice to speak up for the poor?

Number three: Will we find our voice to speak up against racism? If there is any illusion that racism is a thing of the past, this election cycle thoroughly dispelled such thinking. Will we find our voice to speak up against racism in all its forms?

Number four: Will we find our voice to support refugees and migrants – so demonized in this election cycle, separating people one from another... Will we welcome refugees and immigrants as our brothers and sisters? Will we find our voice to speak up for refugees and migrants?

Number five: Following the lead of our Pope Francis, will we find our voices to protect our environment, joining with others of good-will to care for our common home? Will we find our voice to speak for Mother Earth?

Number six: Will we find our voices to speak up for all the marginalized, who in this election cycle have become fearful of their livelihoods and their lives: LGBT folks, women, Black and Brown Americans and others? Will we speak up for the marginalized?

Number seven: Will we find our voices to defend religious liberty and defy the banning and demonizing of Muslims, to resist racist anti-Semitism as part of a white-nationalism on the rise? Will we speak up and stand up for religious liberty?

Number eight: Will we join the voices of good will calling for *a ban on the creation of and for the elimination of all* nuclear weapons with their potential to destroy our world? Will we stand up and speak up for the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction? Will we stand-up and proclaim the value of non-violence in our lives and in our world?

+++++

I'd like to conclude by reflecting together on a short video that to me represents what being a Christian is all about, what being an American is all about; and which depicts America..., Christianity..., humanity... our world at its best...!

<http://www.godvine.com/A-Father-Meets-His-3-Year-Old-Son-For-The-First-Time-And-Collapses-10112.html>