

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Over these past several days, I have received several phone calls from parishioners and friends deeply concerned about the incident which took place in Minneapolis and the response to the death of George Floyd. I have had people question the direction of our culture and society. There has been a steady decline over several decades in civil and respectful discourse. This is true in society, in the Church, and sadly sometimes even in our own families. Our nation was founded on the highest ideals of freedom and liberty; the inalienable right to worship, free assembly, ownership of private property. Alas, we have shamefully not always lived up to those ideals and therefore intolerance, racism, and bigotry of so many forms have taken root in our land. Even a cursory review of our nation's history reminds us that those who founded this country were motivated by that deep desire for human freedom.

I am currently reading *Plymouth Colony: Its History and People (1620-1691)* and it chronicles the persecution and profound hardship experienced by the Separatists, a group of people in Europe who did not follow the established religion. They faced prejudice, violence and even death. That is what motivated them to come to this new land. America has always been a beacon of hope; that high ideal, despite its tragic faults, still inspires people in our own generation to risk death to flee abject poverty and political and social unrest even in our own hemisphere. We know that there still remains in our country today deep scars of racial and economic injustice. The perpetual question is how we face and eradicate the intolerance and bigotry which affects virtually every sector of our society. Generations of heroic women and men have dedicated their lives to improving the lot of others; they have inspired future generations to do the same.

I remember reading a book about Abraham Lincoln in the seventh grade and it inspired me to examine my own potential prejudices and it began a conscious desire to work with underserved communities. When I was a student at USF, I coached and tutored at Sacred Heart School in San Francisco's Western Addition neighborhood. The students came from impoverished and often fragile homes. I took a year off before I went to work at City Hall to teach middle school and coach at Saint Dominic's School, with a student population similar to Sacred Heart. These were life-changing experiences for me. I have always been for the underdog; perhaps that is due to being a child in a family of nine siblings. I was taught to be constructive in making a positive change where there is injustice and indifference.

I am deeply troubled and saddened by the violence and social discord which marks our country and which has been the case for a very long time. Yes, we must work very hard to change systems which oppress and demean people. Yet, forces have been working to divide and separate us, inciting violence and destruction which hurts everybody, most especially those who need jobs to lift them out of poverty and give them a sense of purpose, meaning, and dignity in life. I cannot tell you how many times lately I have had people utter the phrase, "Father, what is the world coming to?" and "What is happening to us?"

Clearly, we have lost our balance and equilibrium and we have an obligation to right the course. Indeed, it begins first in our hearts, our homes, our churches, our communities. We need to come together now more than ever, especially as we seek to rebuild our lives in the face of Covid-19. On June 6, 1966, the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy gave a speech at the University of Cape Town, South Africa to the young people of that country on their Day of Affirmation. I believe it is the best speech ever delivered. In it, Kennedy said, "We must recognize the full humanity of all our people - before God, before the law, and in the council of governments. We must do this, not because it is economically advantageous - although it is; not because the laws of God command it - although they do; not because people in other lands wish it so. We must do it for the single and fundamental reason that it is the right thing to do. We recognize there are problems and obstacles before the fulfillment of these ideals in the United States as we recognize that other nations, in Latin America and in Asia and in Africa have their own political, economic, and social problems, their unique barriers to the elimination of injustices.

Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change the world which yields most painfully to change. Aristotle tells us "At the Olympic games it is not the finest or the strongest men who are crowned, but those who enter the lists...so too in the life of the honorable and the good it they who act rightly who win the prize." I believe that in this generation those with the courage to enter the conflict will find companions is every corner of the world.

For the fortunate among us, there is the danger of comfort, the temptation to follow the easy and familiar path of personal ambition and financial success so grandly spread before those who have the privilege of an education. But that is not the road history has marked out for us. There is a Chinese curse which says, "May he live in interesting times." Like it or not, we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also more creative of any in the history of mankind. And everyone here will ultimately be judged - will ultimately judge himself - on the effort he has contributed to building a new world society and the extent to which his ideals and goals have shaped that effort."

Let us pray for end of injustice of every kind in our land. Let us remember that we are bound together because we are God's creation. Remember that there are people suffering in Detroit, Boyle Heights in Los Angeles; rural New England, the bayous of Louisiana, Appalachia, Nogales, Arizona, that is in every sector of our society, every racial group. In his song "My Country Tis of Thee, Samuel Francis Smith wrote..." Our fathers' God to thee, Author of liberty, to Thee we sing; Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light. Protect us by Thy might, Great God our King."

--Fr. Tom