

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER:

MAY 7, 2023

There have been more episodes of gun violence this past week, this time in Atlanta and Dallas. There is reasonable concern about the easy availability of guns but I wonder what else is going on. Why the fear and anger and even hatred that drives people to take the lives of other human beings? Is it something in our genes, or in our culture? No other country has such problems with gun violence.

The Bible would indicate that there is something amiss in our human psyche that is threatened by others. The death of Cain by his brother Abel started the murder road early. The road goes on throughout salvation history. We can be afraid of and threatened by the other, someone who is different. Look at today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The disciples in the early church seemed rather idealistic in their sharing their concern for each other. There was concern to care for widows who often lacked any way to support themselves. But today we read of two groups among the early Christians. There were the Jewish converts who are called here the Hebrews. And there are the pagans converts, Greek speaking people, who are called the Hellenists. There are differences between the two groups over priorities. It takes a synod, a gathering of the community and openness to the Holy Spirit to bring forth a solution. And thus came about the first aides to the Apostles who are later called deacons.

In our own time, in our own country, there seems to be a lot of fear and insecurity. It is, of course, natural that we struggle to find a place for ourselves in this world, to establish a position of security, recognition. We often find our individual space threatened. I wonder whether this isn't what original sin really means. Since Cain and Abel, we are insecure and threatened by someone possibly taking away our privileged space. And so we need to assert our superiority. We have seen this in various immigrant groups to our country. Once they are settled, they are adverse to new groups who could take their place.

Whites are threatened by Blacks and take to asserting white supremacy. Men are threatened by women who are taking their positions. We seem to need an inferior group to feel good about ourselves. Latinos, Asian Americans, gay people. In our head we may know this is wrong. But prejudice is in our gut reactions. We feel fear, we feel threatened. Someone must be blamed.

Have we become insecure because we no longer depend on a higher power

beyond us? Because we have to depend on ourselves to find meaning and security? On a practical everyday level, God has been edged out of our lives. We would rather do it alone. That's what Adam and Eve decided and that's probably what we continue to do.

As Christians we have pledged to be disciples of Christ, to follow his path. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus gives us the inner security of being cared for by a loving Father, accompanied by a fellow human who is also God, and given the interior gift of the Holy Spirit. If we truly know who we are, we are not threatened by someone who appears different. We have an interior self, grounded in God.

To accept Christ as our way, truth and life, opens up and frees us in our thoughts and words. We give up dualistic thinking which demands I am better than another. I am in and he is out; I am above and she is below. Rather, we find the oneness that Jesus preached in our being one with all people, with our world, with our God.

The other day I read about an aid worker who was in the Ukraine at the beginning of the war. The main square in Kiev has just been decimated. One young Russian soldier found himself alone in the center of the square facing a crush of grief-stricken Ukrainians. The soldier was barely twenty. The large group of Ukrainians continued to press forward until they formed a circle around him. Then a Ukrainian woman stepped forward, handed him a bowl of soup, and urged him to eat because he must be hungry. The youngster received her offering, gratefully tipped the bowl to his lips and drank. When the bowl was emptied, a second woman stepped forward, held out her cell phone, and urged the soldier to call his mother because she must be worried sick, wondering if he was alive.

We are not told what happened before this encounter, what the two women had experienced. We don't know what happened after this encounter, whether he was taken as a prisoner of war or what. But it is an example of treating someone, even an enemy, as a fellow human being. It implies a lot of self-security and no need to strike back in vengeance.

If we live with a sense of the sacred and know we are loved by God, then we know who we really are and are secure in ourselves. There is no need for fear or competition.

Saint Peter, in the second reading today, reminds us “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the One who called you out of darkness into his own marvelous light.”

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