

Abide in Christ

Lord, That I May See....



Archbishop John C. Wester

It hardly seems possible that hate-filled bigotry has raised its ugly head once again at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and in a shopping center in Jeffersontown, Kentucky. Sadly, these horrific murders of Jewish and Black people are even more insidious since they happened in a place of worship or, as in the latter case of Maurice Stallard and Vickie Jones, the victims were gunned down because the perpetrator was not able to gain access to a predominantly Black church. As we read the brief biographies of the victims, we see people very much like ourselves, fellow citizens, brothers and sisters with God as our Father, whose lives were tragically cut short by persons consumed with irrational hatred and inexplicable animosity for people different from themselves. We must wonder who these butchers saw at the other end of their guns. How did their vision become so blurred?

When did they begin their path of vitriol and distortion?

We may never get answers to those questions but we certainly do well to ask ourselves who we see when we encounter people different from ourselves. I am not suggesting that we are in the same boat as these murderers, but we are kidding ourselves if we believe we are free of prejudice or that we are not inclined to be suspicious of certain people in our lives? It is precisely these prejudices that can make it difficult for us to follow Christ's command to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is the whole point of our Lord's parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite, two good and religious men, ignored the victim of robbers, even going so far as to cross over to the other side of the street. It was the Samaritan, a person who would have been despised by Christ's audience, who showed compassion and genuine love of neighbor. The two passers-by saw someone who was a threat either by compromising their ritual purity by putting them in touch with unclean wounds or by getting involved with or even blamed for a crime or by forcing them to go out of their way or by being a member of a despised group of people. The Samaritan, however, saw a fellow human being in need of help. He saw a child of God and was filled with compassion. The Greek word used by Luke for "compassion" is *splagchnizomai*. It means to be moved as to one's gut, one's bowels, where the ancients believed that love and pity resided. This is what Jesus has in mind when he calls us to love our neighbor, to see others as he sees them. We are called to cut through all our filters and prejudices in order to see people as they are, unique,

unrepeatable children of God who God loves beyond telling and to have compassion for them deep within ourselves.

This is how St. Oscar Romero saw people: as God sees them. I am told he defined Catholic social justice as that body of Church teaching that "looks at God looking at the poor." In other words, he believed we are to see others through the eyes of God, with the eyes of God and in the eyes of God. This takes faith, a faith that enables me to transform my vision from a prejudiced perspective to one that embraces all persons as recipients of God's love and as my fellow sojourners on the road to union with God the Father. This describes a vision formed by faith, enlivened by faith and guided by faith. I am reminded of a famous *National Geographic* photographer who was once asked how he took such gorgeous pictures. He responded, "Most people say, 'I'll believe it when I see it.' I say, 'I see it because I believe it.'" It is when we have faith that we can begin to see with the eyes of Christ and we can see things we never thought possible in our fellow human beings.

I am not sure why we are sometimes incapable of seeing others as God sees them, as they are meant to be seen. Maybe it is due to ignorance that we judge an entire race of people based on one experience or one myopic perception. Or, perhaps it is due to low self-esteem that makes us put others down so they we feel better about ourselves. Or, it could be just sheer meanness as that which is found in bullies, dictators and the arrogant. I suppose it could also be mental illness or a combination of any of these or other possibilities. But

whatever the cause, our faith in Jesus has the power to transform our limited, fearful and clannish perspective into a broader, kinder and more generous one that enfolds others into a loving embrace that moves beyond petty jealousies or deep-seated hatred.

The events at the end of October have now joined the ever growing list of other such tragedies in which innocent lives have been lost, leaving us to deal with the grim aftermath of systemic and personal bigotry that gives way to violence. While we may feel powerless in the face of such heartbreaks, there is much we can do to stem the tide of violence in our country. We can advocate for more comprehensive mental health interventions, for effective gun safety laws and for better education of our young people in the area of social justice. We can certainly pray for solutions to these intractable problems. And we can make sure that our own vision is not clouded by the stain of prejudice. We can see the homeless person on the street corner not as a nuisance but as a fellow human being in need of compassion; we can look upon immigrants not as "illegals" but as human beings struggling to find a safe haven; we can envision the elderly not as burdens but as wise mentors who reflect the wisdom of their years; and we can encounter the stranger not as a threat but as a gift from God.

There is an ancient Jewish story about several rabbis arguing over the time of the Sabbath's beginning. One rabbi was convinced that midnight is the correct answer. Another was certain that it begins at sunset. Still another believed that the Sabbath begins at dawn. Finally, one elderly and very wise rabbi spoke up and said that the Sabbath begins when there is enough light to see into your neighbor's eyes. May Christ, who is the Light of the World, enlighten our vision that we may see each other as God sees us: as unique, lovable human beings, created to be one with God forever in heaven. Let's try to see each other that way. So many tragedies could be avoided if we all did.

Sincerely yours in the Lord,

+ John C. Wester

Most Rev. John C. Wester,
Archbishop of Santa Fe



His Mercy
Endures Forever