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Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel-St. Thomas More, NYC
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Solemnity of Pentecost 2020 John 20:19-23

You may have been shocked and saddened, even sickened, watching the tape of a white police officer with his knee on the neck of a black man, causing that man, George Floyd, to suffocate. Even if George Floyd were guilty of passing a bogus \$20 bill, he certainly did not deserve to die in the manner that he did. More serious still is that this was not just the action of some rogue cop. The Police Manual for the city of Minneapolis allows police officers to subdue a suspect in such a way—a procedure abandoned by many other police departments in the country. What we see here is excessive force, institutionalized violence, directed against a person of color. That is why “black lives matter,” because we can be sure that something like this would never happen to anyone of us. Of course, none of this occurs in a vacuum, but in the context of the pandemic we have all been living through. In recent weeks we have become more aware of the injustices in our society—disparities in income, in access to health care and good nutrition, in decent housing—affecting not only, but principally black and brown people. We should heed the words of Joe Burrow, this year’s winner of the Heisman trophy and recently drafted quarterback for the Bengals, “The black community needs our help. They have been unheard for too long. Open your ears, listen and speak. This isn’t politics. This is human rights.”

This moves us into reflecting on what Pentecost is all about. What happens on Pentecost is that, with the descent of the Holy Spirit, the disciples of Jesus finally “get it,” they finally understand what He had been trying to communicate to them all that time He had been with them. But it goes even deeper than that—it’s more than a lesson learned. Now the disciples are gripped by the mind-set, by the consciousness that was Jesus. It’s more than that they possess some new knowledge; rather, they are possessed by that knowledge. When the Spirit of the risen Jesus is given to them, they see everything—the world, life, people, themselves—they see everything the way that Jesus sees it. And because they see the world in the way Jesus sees it, they love the world in the way that Jesus loves it.

We have to be more specific about the way that Jesus sees the world and the way that Jesus loves the world. The claim is often made that all the world’s religions are basically alike: about love, about following the Golden Rule. Up to a point that is true, but that way of thinking misses what is specific and unique to Christianity. What is specific about Christianity, what is uniquely revealed in Jesus Christ, is to see the world through the eyes of the victim—to see how the world works from the underside,

from the point of view of the weak and powerless, from those who have traditionally been left out, and not from the side of those on top, from the viewpoint of those who enjoy prestige and power.

Jesus is presented at the very outset of St. John's Gospel as "the Lamb of God." The lamb, for the Jews, was principally the animal, the victim, that was sacrificed in the Temple. So, there is a certain trajectory, a certain direction that is given to Jesus' life, leading up to His death. Jesus will be executed on the hill of Calvary because He spoke for, because He associated with, because He proclaimed the essential human dignity and worth of all those were written off, even despised, by the religious and political elites of His day. Because Jesus stood in solidarity with all those who were victimized in one way or another, Jesus is crucified on Good Friday as the Quintessential Victim. But He is raised by the Father on Easter Sunday to indicate, to vindicate that God is always on the side of the victim. Pentecost is that moment when all this becomes clear to Jesus' disciples, so that the understanding, the perception, the conviction, the passion, which possessed Jesus now possesses them. Jesus becomes the key for unlocking the meaning of those Scriptures, those sacred writings, which we call the Old Testament. Now His disciples grasp with a new intensity what the Moses and the prophets were all speaking about

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus say to his disciples, and to us, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." In the very first chapter of this same Gospel we hear that Jesus is sent as "light" into a world of darkness. Jesus is sent by the Father into a world of violence, manipulation, deceit and envy to expose the strategies and mechanisms of the powerful that make victims of the weak and powerless. With the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Jesus empowers all those who hear His word, who share His vision, His perception of how the world works, to possess that same compassion for the victims of our world. Amidst the injustice and oppression of our world, we too are called to be beacons of "light" to bring Jesus' vision of justice and peace to reality. And as we go about that task, we are called to critique our society from below, from the perspective of the powerless, from those traditionally left out. This requires a radical shift in our perspective, in our point of view, because the fact is that this is not the place where we are situated in our society. We do enjoy power and prestige. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with that, but if we do consider ourselves to be disciples of Jesus, we have to enlarge our perspective, our horizons, our concern, so that we consider not just our own needs, but the needs of those who are in fact victimized by our society.

Shortly we will hear the words of invitation to the Eucharist, "Behold the Lamb of God, behold Him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the

supper of the Lamb." Although you may not be able to come forward for the Eucharist, still we are all invited to share the life of the Innocent One who was slain, the Quintessential Victim, so that we can expand, so that we can enlarge our capacity for empathy. On Pentecost we pray that the same Spirit that supported Jesus in His ministry to the victims of His day, may support and sustain us in recognizing and assisting the victims of our day; that we create a society that benefits not just the people who look, think and act like us; that we build a society in which all people are treated with dignity, respect and fairness.

The road ahead is difficult, but we should not lose hope. And hope is not simply sitting idle and wishing for the best. St. Augustine of Hippo wrote, "Hope has two beautiful daughters: their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain the same." May that sentiment animate the actions we will take in the days ahead.