

Black Lives Matter

By Carol Serafin, Lay Spiritan

When someone says or posts something that says, “Black lives matter” the response is often for someone else to say “All lives matter” and of course, all lives matter. Life is a precious gift from God. However, when one group has consistently been left out of “all” it is important to specify.

In the 1950’s and 60’s, when I was growing up in Detroit, Michigan with my 4 brothers, our working class neighborhood began to experience “white flight“ to neighborhoods further west or to the suburbs until only my Black and Native American friends remained. Spending more time with my Black friends soon caused me to realize that they were treated differently than I was treated in the same or similar circumstances. When I went into a store with a Black friend to buy candy, we were followed until we went to the counter to pay, but when I was by myself or with one of my brothers, this never happened. I didn’t understand this very obvious difference and spoke to my parents about it. They told me God loved me and all of my friends but that some people have the understanding that Black people were not as good as white people. They asked me to pray for those people who held that mistaken belief. So, I prayed and prayed, but it didn’t seem to me that God was answering my prayers.

And then the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act were passed and I saw that as an answer to my prayers. I thought that would fix things, but I had yet to learn that legislation does not change people’s hearts. While some things seemed better, at least superficially, for a while, racism simply became more nefarious and often moved underground where it became systemic in many of our institutions. For example, redlining combined with gerrymandering of voting districts were used to lessen Black opportunity and their voices, and education in those areas suffered from the resulting lack of resources.

The judicial system punished black offenders more harshly so that more young men ended up in jail, further limiting their long-range opportunities. Corporations were less likely to hire qualified Black candidates for open positions, so the power structure in our industries, banking and technology was primarily white. As a nation, our prejudices were limiting our progress but we were afraid to admit it and do what was necessary to change it. Instead, we settled for small, mostly ineffective changes that did little to change the thinking and hearts of racist people. We told people of color to be patient and that change would come in due time, as they worked their way through the “system” only to have them reach the point where they were told, “no, you cannot”. Laws passed in the 1960s prohibited outright discrimination on the basis of race, so many other reasons were given for Black people not being promoted, given a job, or an opportunity that was commensurate with their education, experience and ability.

Much of this still happens today – more than 50 years after our laws were changed to eliminate discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion...and yet it is so clear that we still have much work to do as a nation. Black lives are being lost – to crime, incarceration, murder, police brutality and neglect. And we wonder why they have grown frustrated of waiting for things to be made right. That girl growing up in Detroit so long ago doesn’t wonder at all at the frustration. I used to think that I would be rich if I had a nickel for every time someone told me, “No you can’t because you are a girl.” I was just supposed to accept that when it made no sense to me

whatsoever. I would swallow my anger for a time, and then I would explode in frustration and anger that the system was rigged against me and everyone else seemed to think it was OK. I understand that years of hearing “No” and being treated as less than brings great frustration and a need to bring about change in whatever way works. If being civil and working through the system does not bring about real change, than you feel like you have to do whatever will get the attention of those able to do something about it.

Our country just laid to rest John Lewis, one of the original freedom fighters whose work, along with that of so many others, led to those laws in the 1960’s. He dedicated his whole life to this cause. He wrote, “There is an old African proverb, ‘When you pray, move your feet.’ As a nation, if we care about our Beloved Community, we must move our feet, our hands, our hearts our resources to build and not tear down, to reconcile and not to divide, to love and not to hate, to heal and not to kill. In the final analysis, we are one people, one family, one house – the American house, the American family.”

I am blessed to be part of the Spiritan Community that tries always to “pray with our feet.” I have experienced community here in a way that I do not anywhere else. We need to pray mightily while continuing to “move our feet.” May our prayers be answered.