

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday 2016      Hebrews 12: 1-4; Luke 12: 49-53

Division or unity? In the self or in the community? Last week I was on the way to my beloved African-American parish, Holy Comforter-St Cyprian, as I have done many Saturday afternoons for fifteen years, when I broke the law. Turning from H Street just beyond Bladensburg Road, there is a small one-way through-street rising northwest. I looked both ways, but lazily drifted through the stop sign. *Then* I saw the police car parked near the corner. The siren didn't shriek; the revolving red light was enough to make me pull over at G Street. I smiled, took a deep breath, hoped I'd only miss a *few* moments in the confessional before mass. Miraculously I found registration and insurance card in the glove compartment (not to be assumed in a monastic car). Then I waited. A very long time. This procedure is, I believe, not only to determine whether the vehicle is stolen but to unnerve the offender.

There was time for many thoughts. I remembered a similar incident twelve years ago, also driving to mass (no good deed going unpunished) to Seton High School on Ash Wednesday. On Annapolis Road, I slipped into the left-turn lane a few yards before the white line allowed (there was no traffic in the three left lanes, so I excused myself). The policeman inflated his masculinity, was surly and sarcastic, emphasizing my stupidity and disrespect for the law, much as an inept teacher will bully a problem student, then capped this performance with, "Have a nice *day*," knowing he'd ruined mine.

Last Saturday I began thinking of how many unarmed civilians have been beaten or shot to death this year in situations exactly like the present one (700 dead, according to [killedbypolice.net](http://killedbypolice.net)). I noticed the neighborhood was like a ghost-town, with no pedestrians on the sidewalks. But I surprised myself. As in two medical moments which might have significantly shortened my life, I felt surprisingly calm and unafraid.

I had time for all these thoughts before the policeman approached my car. It was a she, a courteous she. Probably not thirty, she was sturdy build without being unfeminine. She would hold her own in a male squad. "You didn't come to a full stop," she said sympathetically as I apologetically surrendered the cards. She left me for another very long wait while she wrote me up. Looking at my watch I estimated only five minutes missed from confessions. I was wearing my clerical collar. I normally don't wear it while driving in case I shake my fist at an aggressive driver. But that day I had it on.

Officer Kelly came to the car. "Is it Monsignor or Bishop?" "So embarrassing to break the law looking like this," I answered. "It's just Father." "This is only a warning," she said kindly, without quite saying, "It's my duty to follow through." As she walked away, she turned and said, "Pray for us." I was almost turning the ignition, relieved to drive off having received no abuse. But I paused to say deliberately, "I know you face danger for us every day. We are grateful. So yes, I will remember to pray for you." And I did so, between penitents in the confessional, where I listened to a different sort of violation.

I narrate this illustration at disproportionate length to explore a trivial incident for its larger insights. An encounter with the police connects with the incendiary tone of today's gospel, in which Jesus speaks threateningly of discord and punishment. "I bring fire to the earth. I have not come to bring peace but division." He seems frustrated with the inadequate response to his message and so becomes shrill. The tone feels like our current polarized political discourse. There is a shoot 'em up, no-compromise attitude in all of us these days that does not bode well. It has been evident in the church for some time also. Tolerance, respect for diversity, "pastoral" approaches to delicate sexual dilemmas, hope for possible change, are now mocked as political correctness. On the other side, progressives lack sympathy to those who feel economically

trapped or cannot keep up with rapid social change. There is demonization of those who are “different.” There is disrespect for causes that I feel precious. Those who disagree with me feel like enemies.

I am aware that Jesus says, “Love your enemies. Turn the other cheek. Walk the second mile.” But I am also aware that the good fight must be fought; according to the second reading, the race must be run. Looking at scripture with a wide view, I am certain that the ultimate goal of all spiritual endeavor, divine and human, is unity, joy, and inclusion, not, as in this gospel, fire and division. Jesus prayed that all his followers be one. I feel confident that he wanted this to spread into the secular sphere. But he wasn’t simplistic about conformity. He mentions sheep outside his fold who belong to him in some less obvious way. St Paul certainly emphasized the oneness we are meant to have. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female. That means equal dignity, and each needing the other to be complete.

Many Americans, whatever their belief or lack thereof, wish to be united in diversity, and to live peaceably together. But we are living through a very troubled time when the goal seems far away. The national crisis crystallized for me in the death of Philando Castile in Minnesota on July 6, one day after a similar death in Baton Rouge. I have preached elsewhere three different times, in different forms, about this event.

Each time I focused on the prayers of Diamond Reynolds (her name too beautiful for the horror she records), who streamed a facebook video while her fiancée Philando bled to death, from multiple gunshot wounds, after being pulled over for a broken taillight. The video includes two profound moments, in which we hear the most sacred expressions that can come from human lips, made while the shooter shouts obscenely in the background.

“Stay with me,” Diamond begs Philando. She means, “Don’t die; stay alive.” Unconsciously she echoes the cry of two despairing disciples at Emmaus, on Easter evening, to the mysterious stranger. When the risen Christ, in disguise, does “stay with them,” he reveals his identity in a surprising way that changes them forever.

After Philando has died, Diamond, who has spoken respectfully to the police throughout the encounter, is ordered out of the car and onto the ground. Though innocent of any wrongdoing, she is *handcuffed* and taken into custody, as was our Lord Jesus Christ. Not having his degree of equanimity, she screams a protest in the police car. Dae’anna, her four-year old daughter who has watched it all from the back seat, speaks: “It’s OK, Mommy. I’m right here with you.” An innocent often speaks the words of God. Here the child precisely quotes the ascending Christ who, at the end of Matthew’s gospel, has just given the great commission. He says, “Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.” The world as she knew it has ended for Diamond Reynolds, but still there radiantly shines this four-year-old’s promise of (dare we say?) eternal presence.

I vow to remember her, as I have vowed to remember the children and teachers of Sandy Hook Elementary School. But my traffic violation experience encourages me not to do so in a belligerent and divisive spirit. I must learn to pray for the police with more than words, without resentment. I must somehow find compassion for those who commit grievous injustice in their line of duty and seem to get away with it. So I must also honor and remember Officer Kelly, Metropolitan Police Department. As well as “stay with me” and “I’m right here with you,” I must remember the words, “Monsignor or Bishop?” At the time her tone seemed utterly sincere, but in thinking it over, there must have been a little gentle teasing, don’t you think? Humor that helps and heals. “You call me sergeant, and I’ll call you eminence. Then we won’t be divided; we won’t hurt one another.” All this implied by her three simple words: “Pray for us.”

Praying doesn't seem like much, given the state we're in. The effects of prayer are not instant or obvious; they happen in "God's time." But in division and disaster, when the fire foreseen by Jesus is *burning*, prayer is what we *can* do. If we listen beneath the aggressive outer layer of today's gospel, we learn that we *must* pray, if we are to bring unity to our inner selves and, from there, to the outside world.

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