

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, THE REVEALER AND THE SPIRIT OF LOVE!

I ended my last reflection in June with these words and gestures and begin this reflection the same way because today's readings remind us once again of who our God is, of who we are called to be, and of what we are called to do. In Paul's letter to the Romans, we are even told that NOTHING can separate us from the love of God. NOTHING!

In June the focus was on God as Trinity – as creator, revealer and Spirit. Today's readings call each of us to be proactive in our hurting world today as committed followers of Jesus – as creators, revealers and spirits of God's love.

This Gospel passage about the feeding of the 5,000 begins with the death of John the Baptist and ends with the memorable phrase: "Those who ate were about five thousand men, **not counting women and children.**" In between, there is much for us to consider.

I want to focus this afternoon on four points.

1. On Jesus
2. On realities of scarcity and abundance, in this time of pandemic and racial unrest.
3. On the life and legacy of John Lewis, who himself was a lifelong follower of Jesus.
4. On one action strategy I find helpful and believe you might as well.

We meet Jesus in the Gospel just after he heard of the death of John the Baptist, his cousin. His initial response, we are told, is to withdraw in a boat to a deserted place by himself -- most likely to mourn the loss of his relative. A wise choice on his part in order to grieve the death of one close to him.

How many of us have withdrawn to try and cope with the death of a loved one? However, a crowd hears about Jesus and follows him on foot. Matthew says that Jesus was moved with pity for them and heals their sick. This is one more example of Jesus acting as a creator, revealer and spirit of love.

When the disciples tell Jesus to dismiss the crowd because it is late and they are in a deserted place, he instead tells them instead to feed the people. When Jesus is told that the disciples have only five loaves and two fish, he blesses and breaks the loaves and 5,000 men, **not including the women and children**, are fed till they are satisfied – with leftovers.

Jesus turned scarcity into abundance whether by a miracle of multiplying the five loaves and two fish, or as some have said, encouraging all who came to be with him to share their abundance with each other. The challenge for each of us is to see abundance and not scarcity in our own lives.

A second challenge is to always make sure that we count the women and children around us, for they too are made in our loving God's image and likeness. Women's Lives Matter! Children's Lives Matter!

This brings me to share a few thoughts on the life and death of John Lewis. What a life and what a celebration in the last week leading up to his funeral and burial on Thursday! John Lewis wanted to study for the ministry and even, as the story goes, preached to the chickens on the family farm.

His parents, out of love for him and concern for his well-being, encouraged him to accept the status quo in the South of his youth -- with segregation all over, and whites only and blacks only water fountains, bathrooms, lunch counters and more.

John, however, felt a higher calling and decided in faith to challenge the racism of his time with non-violence. His faith in a God of love and the goodness of people led him to speak in 1963 at the March on Washington, to sit with friends at countless lunch counters, to the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965 and ultimately to 33 years as the "conscience of the Congress" in Nancy Pelosi's words. He was beaten on multiple occasions and jailed more than 40 times for seeking to reveal and embody a spirit of love. John Lewis brought an abundance of love into countless situations where there was scarcity.

What a life, but there is more!

In preparing for his own death, John Lewis decided to write a letter to be published on the day of his funeral. Many of you have probably already read it. I want to quote the challenge he offers us in his closing words.

Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring. When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.

What a man of faith in God and in his fellow human beings!

Finally, I want to share an action strategy to help us respond to our daily challenges with, in the words of John Lewis, a spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love." This is a concrete way to make good trouble, necessary trouble. It is called the "Power of the Weak and has four steps. I learned of this power we all possess from a theologian and psychologist married couple, Evelyn and Jim Whitehead.

To best understand this power we each possess, I want you to think of an area in your life where you are somewhat powerless right now.

The first Power of the Weak is the Power to Disbelieve – the way things are is not the way they have to be. Jesus used this power when he did not believe what the disciples said about sending the crowd away. John Lewis used this power when he did not believe in the status quo of segregation and whites and blacks only arrangements. Black Lives Matter is using this power today – the way things are is not the way they have to be..

The second Power of the Weak is the Power to Join Together – the opportunity to not act alone but together with colleagues toward a shared vision. Jesus got his disciples to work with him and respond to the needs of the large crowd. John Lewis joined together with other freedom riders, with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, with Martin Luther King, Jr. and so many others. The Black Lives matter movement is bring people together to both protest police brutality and to seek liberty and justice for all.

The third Power of the Weak is the Power to Claim Our Beliefs – in order for our actions to be productive, we must identify our own beliefs that call us to act out of love not hate, to seek justice not revenge. Jesus used this power when he related to the crowd with compassion and John Lewis rooted his actions in non-violence and love. Black Lives Matter is an expression of a care for all by caring for the most vulnerable.

The fourth Power of the Weak is the Power to Act on our Beliefs – as the prophet Micah says our loving God asks of us, only this: “to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with our God.”

May each of us find the courage to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and John Lewis to live and love with abundance not scarcity and to make good trouble, necessary trouble.

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