



JUSTICE, PEACE AND INTEGRITY OF CREATION



WHEN VIOLENCE IS THE WAY, WE MUST CHOOSE AND SHOW ANOTHER WAY

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“Mindful that we are bearers of peace, which must be built up unceasingly, we should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon. Messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance, we should strive to bring joy and hope to others.” OFS Rule, Art. 19

This year has been a year of unspeakable violence – mass shootings, bombings and war, divisions in hearts, minds, and speech. Where has civility gone? What has become of compassion and respect? What has happened to protecting the young, the innocent, the poor, and the marginalized? When did we become so desensitized to the plight of those who are suffering or abandoned? When has caring for our fellow human beings become a political statement instead of an act of good will? And more importantly, why have we allowed this to become the norm?

Once upon a time, a person’s word was their bond, their pledge of honor. It was all that was needed for many transactions in this world – a handshake, a knowing smile, a heartfelt agreement. Those were also the days when everyone looked out for the children – all the children, anyone’s children. And the children knew other eyes were on them – looking out for them, protecting them, watching over them. Except in certain remote places, this is no longer the case. Today, children do not honor mother or father, let alone other elders. And the elders? They are too busy doing what they need to do to survive themselves, so they have no time to look after their own children, let alone someone else’s children.

In those days when a person’s word meant something, there was also more conversation, less debate, and more dialogue. Debate is more about winning and making the other person wrong than about having a healthy dialogue and sharing ideas. Where have those days gone? Why do I need to make you wrong rather than just understand your point of view? When we make others wrong, we do violence to them. We also do ourselves a disservice, because we lose out on the opportunity to learn from them, and thus to grow.

As a grief counselor and a full-time caregiver, I have learned the importance of listening to understand, instead of listening to respond or rebut. The most important thing we can do is listen to another person. We don’t have to have the answers. In fact, more often than not, they already know the answer. They just need to get out of their own heads and talk it out with an empathetic, listening soul. If that is all we give someone who is suffering, we have given the greatest of gifts.

One of my favorite stories about Saint Francis was when he and his brother friar were going to a neighboring town to preach. They walked through the town greeting the people, listening to their stories and hardships, sharing thoughtful words and prayers. By the time they got to the edge of town, the friar questioned Father Francis about preaching. He thought they were going to preach to the townspeople. Father Francis assured his brother that they did – by their actions. The words often attributed to Francis, “Preach the Gospel at all times; and if necessary, use words,” speak to this little story beautifully.

As Franciscans, we are not called to fix our brothers and sisters, but to love and listen to them. When we can love and listen, we allow the Holy Spirit to do whatever fixing is needed. We do not know the heart and mind of another, but the Holy Spirit does. We must be humble enough to allow the space for the Holy Spirit to do the work. That is not our responsibility. This is a liberating feeling. Imagine! I don’t have to have all the answers. I don’t have to fix my brothers and sisters. I don’t have to do the job of the Holy Spirit. All that is mine to do is to love and to listen. May the Lord continue to grant you peace as you be peace to others.