

Pentecost Sunday Homily – May 31, 2020
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I think at different times in our lives, we've sung that song ["This Land Is Your Land"], something of a folk song, written by Guthrie. When he wrote it, he intended it to be more than just a folk song. When I was singing it, and most of us in our campsites and family groups, we speak about this land being "ours." It's interesting that there is a verse that is left out. One of our members told me that when she came to this country from Venezuela, it was one of the songs that struck her. But there's a verse in it that is sung by Bruce Springsteen, that is called the omitted verse. The words are this: "I saw the people, the very hungry, and they were wondering if this land is made for you and me."

We have that same hunger, that concern, in our lives today. Truly, for you who are black and brown sisters and brothers, you ask about this promise, this dream, on this Pentecost Sunday. You cry out from our streets, from our cities, indeed from our jails our confinement centers: "Is this land made for you *and for me?*"

For us, this Pentecost is a great day, a great feast. And like the feast of Easter, there are readings that are chosen for vigil reflection. I would probably imagine that less than 10% of you have prayed those readings. If you did, God bless you. But as you go through them, there are two texts in those readings to prepare us for this day of Pentecost. One of them is the text from the book of Genesis, in the time when Cain kills his brother, Abel. That killing: a preparation image for Pentecost. Think of that. A second reading to prepare us is the people building the tower of Babel. In it, they look to break apart from their relationship to God and break apart from one another, and there's confusion throughout their land. You can see why these issues are so strong for us on this day, when we recall and are painfully aware of the violence that has hit our streets. But this reflection for us should not be about the violence; it should be about *Why do we hear the cry of the poor? Why do we respond? Why do we bury our heads from the racism that exists?*

When we hear the spirit of Christ pour out the very heart of God to us, the very breath of the spirit – is that painfully a reflection that we heard, "I can't breathe, I can't breathe."

What George Floyd experienced is symbolic for what so many people do: they can't breathe. And we're called to know the breath of the spirit that gives life and gives hope, and yet our black sisters and brothers are dying with the breath driven from them. They cannot breathe because of injustice, cannot breathe because of inequality, cannot have a hope that our world be free of fear: a world in which their children can walk safely without fear of terrorism, abuse, or racism.

So we look back to Babel and look back to the killing of Abel by Cain, but we're called to look forward on this Pentecost feast and to look forward with the hope and the gifts that God pours

out to us. God equips us to be a people of peace and justice. God equips us, and I pray for that equipment, that you have cried and watched over those dying and those abused. How do we move ahead? How do we find, not a new normal...because the normal that we just left was a normal of racism and inequality. It was a normal of oppression for some people. Our call is that the new normal is awareness of God's face in each sister and brother on this planet. I'm gonna offer you a way that I think will help us when we feel frustrated. *What do I do, how do I move, where do I go?* It's something I offered in my reflection this week. I simply called it Aura, the Latin word for prayer. It's for us to **observe**, to really **reflect**, and to **act**.

You can watch and be absorbed by all that has been happening on the streets of this country. You can watch that and then with that uniqueness that is so American, as weeks or months go on, painfully forget it. But if we *reflect*, we cannot lose it in our memory. This Pentecost is a call for us to reflect. And some of the best ways are to listen to the pain and the experience of others. There are ways to do it safely, ways to do it with courage, ways to do it with excitement in your life because you are expanded and you grow and you have the *courage*, one of the gifts promised by the Holy Spirit.

I know Father Brian Small loves to talk about media and films that he's seen. I think that's an important part of us beginning to enter the experience of others. Part of our observing, our reflection together. We have stories that are around us, a whole listing of films. You may have seen one. You should see them all. They will help you taste some of the experience of our American history: the imprisonment, the refusal of jobs, the refusal of accommodation, the refusal of basic toilet facilities, the refusal of equality, being pushed not only to the back of buses but to the back of our society, where people cannot survive and they lose their breath, the very breath that God should give. There's some important visuals, so if you've got the opportunity, look at these films: *Hidden Figures*, about the wonderful black women who made our astronauts able to fly into space. *Green Book*, that amazing film of someone respected in the field of music and yet treated as second, third, and fourth class by our white society. Recently, *Harriet*, the story of Harriet Tubman. We have to see those films and see what people have gone through, because we tend to forget anything that is beyond last week and last year. The movie *Twelve Years a Slave*, another one that really speaks of our vacillation as a people, as a nation itself. And then I'd invite you to also look at words that are out there. Words of justice, things that have been spoken of in regards to imprisonment in the state of Alabama and the lack of access.

If you process that, you may still need to reflect some more. And so, you have friends, people of color, black and brown, who can speak to you of their experiences—where they have been treated and mistreated. Sit with them. Let them share with you their stories. Don't interpret. If you're a good listener and you want to let things soak inside you, simply just listen. There's no way that I, as a white man, can know what people of color have gone through. But I can listen. And when I hear their pain, perhaps I can understand that pain. Please don't interpret.

When you hear their cries, then our last word: **Act**. Those actions are part of who we are and the very fabric of being Catholic Christians. We walk with other people, we grow with other people, and with that, our actions cannot be about ourselves. Our nation's goodness is not about our bank accounts or class or privilege. It's not about our restaurants or clubs. Our goodness as a nation is because we care for the disadvantaged and the hungry and the needy. Our real spirit is the power of the spirit. Breathe it in, this spirit of courage and justice. We talk about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. *Wisdom* is a part of reflection. *Courage* is doing something about that wisdom. And it has to happen.

Our great model, our great prophet of Atlanta, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote this letter from the Birmingham jail: ***"We are caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in the single garment of destiny."*** That reminds me of the images Jesus told of the fabric being pieced together. When one is weak, we are all weak. When one is hurting, we are all hurting. The fabric of God's spirit says we are one body in Christ. So may we broadcast that oneness.

I'd like to conclude with the words of the pope, words that Archbishop Gregory Hartmeyer has spoken in his statement on the situations we face: *If you want peace, work for justice*. You can't simply dream about it. We have to work, we have to vote in these coming elections, we have to let our voices be heard, speaking of the needs for justice rather than injustice, for wisdom to overcome racism, for peace to overcome violence. Do this with the conviction of your heart, for this is the gift of the Holy Spirit. [We Shall Overcome - Sung]