COVID-19 JOURNAL #7  TWO PANDEMICS—I CAN’T BREATHE

This morning I opened my eyes from sleep, and before even rising from the pillow asked the air:

Is this the day when I wake up and hear someone telling the truth?

Is this the day they decide to stop protecting their hides, stand up and speak the truth?

“Truth to power,” I’ve heard. “Speak truth to power.” Some think doing so is to speak it by destruction: “You have hurt us; I will hurt you, indiscriminately, whoever you are. I’ll hurt somebody. I have a right. I am angry. Injustice has been done to me. Let me do it right back. Anyone will do.”

How about speaking the Truth to the Lie? The best ones doing this lately have been the late-night comedians. They’re not afraid.

But how about the ones in what we take to be power—in what everyone takes to be power, even though in reality, it’s not true Power.

And yet it is power: power to allow human beings to suffer and die—stand by and do nothing but tell lies to protect one’s hide—and protect the hide in power, in the power of the Lie, supported by those afraid not to support him any longer even though the Lie is so apparent—more and more apparent every day, to all the world. Why does no one stand up?

Too late now, for if we step forth and say, Oh, wait, oops, sorry, that’s a lie he just told, a desecration he just committed, an appeal to racism he just implanted, an incitement to violence he just uttered, an autocratic power grab he just implemented, an abject lack of leadership in protecting the nation’s people he has displayed—we’ll be seen as fools for having put his powerful hide in the seat of what we think is power—and is power—power by inaction—power to allow others—thousands—tens of thousands—one-hundred-thousand-plus human beings and counting—to die—to allow 100,000 people to die, when an unknown number of those deaths might have been prevented by effective, informed, timely federal leadership. We dare not speak up now!

Well, I got up and launched into the day—the hundredth or so of solitude in my apartment, keeping company and contact with the world only virtually via electronics, in between the mundane chores of keeping body and soul together.

Then came the voices. As is usually the case, a look at my email leads by links to related info on other websites, which leads to research into still other related learning, readings, and watchings. Somebody was standing up! Somebody was speaking truth to power—loud and clear! The more I looked, the more somebodies I found doing so. Better yet—FINALLY—someone was speaking Truth to the Lie.

**Context:** We now have two pandemics raging in the USA—the Corona Virus pandemic and the pandemic of racism. If anyone reads this some months or years hence, be aware that this is not only the fifth month of the ongoing sickness and death toll of the Covid-19 pandemic—still
cutting short the life-breath of Americans by the hundreds each day—but is also the week of the murder of African-American George Floyd by police on May 25th, when a cop knelt on George’s neck for eight minutes while George, already handcuffed and prone on the ground, kept pleading “I can’t breathe,” until he was dead—video-taped and circulated on the Internet for all the world to see—so we now have the added situation of thousands of nation-wide protests—even worldwide—at least half of whom are cheek-by-jowl and not bothering with masks, even as the virus continues spreading globally; protests, some peaceful, some accompanied by violence and looting, in the face of which on June 1st we’ve just had the spectacle of the President of the United States sending out armed police to rush into a crowd of peaceful protesters with tear gas and riot shields so that he could walk to the Episcopal Church (which he doesn’t attend) across from the White House and have his picture taken holding up a bible in front of it.

The length of the previous sentence reflects the current context of tangled turmoil in this nation right now, throwing all the more into relief the clear voices that next rang through my day today, excerpted below…

At the heart of that western freedom and democracy is the belief that the individual man, the child of God, is the touchstone of value, and all society, all groups, and states, exist for that person’s benefit. Therefore the enlargement of liberty for individual human beings must be the supreme goal and the abiding practice of any western society…

—Robert F. Kennedy June 6, 1966

This evening, the President of the United States stood in front of St. John’s Episcopal Church, lifted up a bible, and had pictures of himself taken. In so doing, he used a church building and the Holy Bible for partisan political purposes. This was done in a time of deep hurt and pain in our country, and his action did nothing to help us or to heal us.

The bible teaches us that “God is love.” Jesus of Nazareth taught, “You shall love

your neighbor as yourself.” The prophet Micah taught that the Lord requires us to “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.”

The bible the President held up and the church that he stood in front of represent the values of love, of justice, of compassion, and of a way to heal our hurts.

We need our President, and all who hold office, to be moral leaders who help us to be a people and nation living these values. For the sake of George Floyd, for all who have wrongly suffered, and for the sake of us all, we need leaders to help us to be “one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.”

— Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church Michael B. Curry June 1, 2020

And the following day came a crystal-clear set of voices of leaders standing right up speaking Truth to Lie in his very face—the first uncompromising statement of truth I have seen to date since this man (who did not win the popular election) was deposited on what he seems to consider his throne, his power being “total” as he put it, in the White [very] House. Every Episcopal Bishop in every diocese of every New England state signed a joint statement they issued to protest “the President's ‘cynical’ photo op” in no uncertain terms:

What President Trump did in front of St. John’s Episcopal Church, Lafayette Square on the evening of June 1st was disgraceful and morally repugnant. Displaying a Bible from which he did not quote, using as a mere backdrop an Episcopal church where he did not pray, and—more callously—ordering law enforcement to clear, with force and tear gas, a path through demonstrators who had gathered in peace, President Trump distorted for his own purposes the cherished symbols of our faith to condone and stoke yet more violence. His tactic was obvious. Simply by holding aloft an unopened Bible he presumed to claim Christian endorsement and imply that of The Episcopal Church. Far
more disturbingly, he seemed to be affecting the authority of the God and Savior we worship and serve, in order to support his own authority and to wield enhanced use of military force in a perverted attempt to restore peace to our nation. His actions did nothing to mend the torn social fabric of our nation. Instead, they were a blatant attempt to drive a wedge between the people of this nation, and even between people of faith. No matter where we may stand on the partisan spectrum, we, as Christian leaders called to proclaim a God of love, find his actions repugnant. Jesus taught us to love our enemies, to seek healing over division, and make peace in the midst of violence . . .

As if these clarion voices were not enough, there then came a heart-felt and courageous letter in my email, speaking truth to both power and the lie:

When peaceful protestors are dispersed by the order of the president from the doorstep of the people’s house, the White House—using tear gas and flash grenade—in order to stage a photo op at a noble church, we can be forgiven for believing that the president is more interested in power than in principle. More interested in serving the passions of his base than the needs of the people in his care.

For that’s what the presidency is: a duty of care—to all of us, not just our voters, not just our donors, but all of us.

The president held up a bible at St. John’s church yesterday. If he opened it instead of brandishing it, he could have learned something: That we are all called to love one another as we love ourselves.

That’s hard work. But it’s the work of America.

Donald Trump isn’t interested in doing that work. Instead, he’s preening and sweeping away all the guardrails that have long protected our democracy. Guardrails that have helped make possible this nation’s path to a more perfect union. A union that constantly requires reform and rededication—and yes, the protests from voices of those mistreated, ignored, left out, and left behind.

In addition to the Bible, he might also want to open the U.S. Constitution. If he did, he’d find the First Amendment. It protects “the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

Amid violence and fear, Dr. King persevered. He was driven by his dream of a nation where “justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Then, in 1968, hate would cut him down in Memphis.

A few days before Dr. King was murdered, he gave a final Sunday sermon in Washington. He told us that though the arc of a moral universe is long, it bends toward justice.

And we know we can bend it—because we have. We have to believe that still. That is our purpose. It’s been our purpose from the beginning. To become the nation where all men and women are not only created equal—but treated equally.

To become the nation defined—in Dr. King’s words—not only by the absence of tension, but by the presence of justice. Today in America it’s hard to keep faith that justice is at hand. I know that. You know that. The pain is raw. The pain is real.

A president of the United States must be part of the solution, not the problem. But our president today is part of the problem. When he tweeted the words “When the looting
starts, the shooting starts”— those weren’t the words of a president. They were the words of a racist Miami police chief from the 1960s.

When he tweeted that protesters “would have been greeted with the most vicious dogs … that’s when people would have been really badly hurt.” Those weren’t the words of a president—those were the kind of words a Bull Connor would have used unleashing his dogs. . . .

I wish I could say this hate began with Donald Trump and will end with him. It didn’t and it won’t. American history isn’t a fairytale with a guaranteed happy ending.

The battle for the soul of this nation has been a constant push-and-pull for more than 240 years. A tug of war between the American ideal that we are all created equal and the harsh reality that racism has long torn us apart. The honest truth is both elements are part of the American character. . . .

—Joe Biden

Though the excerpt is long, his email message was much longer—but it felt to me less like a political speech than a sincere expression of his deeply held convictions. Of course words are only as good as the actions backing them up, yet to be seen, but his incisive words were balm to hear today.

I close out my day with a grateful sense of hope, and faith in the integrity of those who are ardently pursuing “the arc of a moral universe” to the best of their lights.

God bless America.

—Lfj Gill  June 3, 2020

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