Standing in the Breach: *Navigating distrust, division, and prejudice at work and in the world*

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Chaplains can address politics in the workplace – very carefully

By Anne Windholz

People who enter chaplaincy are a committed and compassionate lot. Learning how to respectfully embrace people of different backgrounds is one of the primary lessons of CPE. This is not a call to forget our own identity or core beliefs, but rather to hold them gently, while outwardly, and whole-heartedly, serving the needs of the person before us. We are not called to evangelize, to convert, or even to convince. Our call is to ask questions. To try and understand. To serve all persons willingly and to listen to their stories with a non-judgmental love.

But as ministers, we are also called to prophetic engagement with society. To promote human dignity. To further racial, sexual, and economic justice. And that is where the prophetic necessarily bleeds into the personal and political. The United States’ tumultuous past year has shown that fault lines of opinion and belief are numerous. When a social earthquake comes (such as the pandemic, public demonstrations, and presidential election), edifices we considered secure may fall. People we were certain shared our beliefs may show up on the other side of the divide. We discover just how much our places of work, like our families, are made up of folks with diverse and fiercely held political positions. The professionalism which keeps us from proselytizing among the people we serve does not always hold with colleagues behind department doors.

In other words, chaplains are political animals too. We tend to have strong opinions about power, right rule, the role of government, and the best way forward in our current tumult. Our egos easily get invested in the competition for power; our politics mutate into idolatry. We become impatient, irritated, or enraged with “the other side.” We share the human predilection to think that our personal position is “right,” to condemn the side we think is “wrong,” and to hold in contempt those who disagree. Including any “misguided” colleague.

During my decade in chaplaincy, I have served in community hospitals as well as faith-based institutions, large teaching hospitals as well as smaller local facilities. I have witnessed the clashing of political views among colleagues at all these sites. Usually I’ve just been an observer, but not always. I confess that, in the office, I have joined other chaplains in publicly mourning (or celebrating) election results and political appointments in a way that surely made any chaplain or CPE student of an alternate persuasion feel silenced. I have taken part in polarized discussions of race that, on my side, became more self-righteous than illuminating. I have listened, with silent but rigorously judgmental consternation, to a Latino priest express disdain for the Black Lives Matter movement because “all lives matter” and “they are not special.”

I have not always been the servant leader, the child of God, that Jesus calls me to be. Both in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do. Experience teaches me this: It is not always necessary or advisable to share our political beliefs with co-workers. But neither is it right to avoid exploring important ethical questions that have implications for the kind of care we provide and how we represent our faith.

Even the best pastoral caregivers among us cannot always control feelings about politics, especially when those beliefs are tied to our spiritual understanding of good and evil. We can find it hard to respect politicians (and their supporters) whose actions and ideologies we find repugnant. In 1953, Dorothy Day realized her contempt for Joseph McCarthy in the midst of journal jottings about plans for an upcoming peace conference. “I’m afraid I have not kept this spirit of respect towards Senator McCarthy,” she wrote. “There is no room for contempt of others in the Christian life. I speak and write so much better than I perform. But we can never lower the ideal because we fail to live up to it.” ¹
Ministry planning comes right up against politics. Day’s personal injunction to “see Christ and only Christ” in others while “follow[ing] one’s conscience” leads her seven sentences later to McCarthy. Significantly, she does not express guilt for opposing the Wisconsin senator’s anti-communist persecution. Her compunction comes from recognizing her public contempt for him as a person.

Almost all chaplains are people of good will and competent professionals. We make a positive difference in people’s lives on a daily basis. But we are also different from each other, and if we sometimes converge at the same endpoint – love of neighbor and service to those in need of compassion – we often get there by different means. We sometimes get it wrong. We slip into political idolatry. We behave harshly, projecting our own negative emotions. We ignore coworkers with whom we disagree. We are human. And our behavior can destroy a department.

For this reason I advocate chaplains coming together to discuss where, within their shared space, they wish to create a “politics-free” ground. The value of such a place grew out my experience at one morning’s devotions when heated political debate erupted. Once the embers cooled, our department had to intentionally (re)establish that the table around which we gather each morning – to reflect, pray, and prepare for daily ministry – must remain a safe and sacred place where members can rely upon mutual respect and support. No political litmus tests. As Christian chaplains, we look to Christ. Jesus welcomed everybody.

That said – Jesus also challenged everybody! How do we chaplains determine when we ARE called to challenge colleagues about personal/political beliefs? And how do we do so appropriately? Sometimes in our workplace we must honestly discuss how we can stand together in spite of divergent politics, and under what circumstances we may be called to reconsider our views. If we cannot, then we risk becoming infected with the silent virus of disdain and contempt – replete with passive aggression, triangulation, and demonization of the other. We preserve the sacredness of some spaces by practicing forbearance; we bring the sacred to other spaces by promoting open and free discourse. To build bridges across a dangerous political breach, the solution is not either safe silence or considered confrontation, but both.

Putting that into practice demands the wisdom of a serpent and the gentleness of a dove. When disruptive political arguments arise, Human Resources is a good place to turn for guidance. Ask about the official, institutional policy of your ministry site regarding political discourse. Review with colleagues the boundaries of acceptable speech within the workplace. If your institution does not already have an education module treating the subject, invite an HR representative to give an in-person presentation—and allow for questions.

Some spiritual care departments may feel further called to hold a forum for exploring the parameters of civil discourse. Opening with a shared reading (rather than rehashing an inciting incident) can provide a safe foundation on which to build discussion. Hospice chaplain Samuel Blair’s blog post, “The Political Chaplain,” offers a good starting place for beginning discussion. Another excellent resource is Susan Milligan’s article, “How Should HR Handle Political Discussions at Work?” published by the Society of Human Resource Management in 2020. Milligan identifies the intimidation and distrust that overt political endorsement can cause; explores how to set boundaries; and examines the tension between free speech and appropriate workplace interaction. Such a forum may, if successful, be offered to other departments and interdisciplinary groups.

Another tool for building understanding is the anonymous survey. Such surveys work best with a large participant pool that can safeguard individual privacy while also disclosing the spectrum of beliefs. A truly valuable survey can reveal the beliefs and values undergirding political affiliation and thereby opening the way for fruitful community exploration. Some key questions:
• How well do coworkers understand the boundaries of civil discourse?
• Where are the greatest points of tension – and how might institutional culture exacerbate them?
• How safe do employees feel about expressing their values?
• What values are shared by otherwise divergent groups?
• How do those shared values contribute to, or reflect, the departmental/institutional mission?
• What constructive possibilities for dialogue might be developed? And what might a healing discourse, founded on shared values and beliefs, look like?

Chaplains are continually called to be ambassadors of love and hope in situations of anxiety, distress, loss, and often injustice. We fail in our charge to others if we do not also look to healing ourselves, daring to acknowledge and support each other in spite of political difference; working together for the greater good of a world weary from pain, anger, and isolation. When Jesus’ cranky and competitive disciples argue among themselves about who is greatest, Jesus tells them that to enter the kingdom of heaven they must become like children (Matt. 18). Dorothy Day clues into this wisdom when she challenges herself and her coworkers to pursue justice work with the “spirit of a child,” as well as adult “judgment,” for only then will they be able to see Christ in those with whom they cannot agree.

Day was not one to romanticize childhood, and certainly at its worst politics can promote childish behavior. But this may itself be the point. Like children, we must learn to practice kindness and respect in our interactions with each other. And when we chaplains do hurt each other, we must practice the humility that allows us to embrace, make up, and commit to growing up in Christ – together.

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¹ https://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/News/Diaries.php
² https://chaplainsreport.com/2019/01/23/the-political-chaplain/
As families absorb bad news, chaplains stand in the middle ground

By Nicholas Perkins

For the third time, the palliative care team physician, two nurses, and I met with the patient’s family members on a Zoom call. The first two meetings had ended abruptly when we attempted to address their loved one’s prognosis.

“We know and understand this is a sad situation,” the nurse began. “But we need to discuss Bill’s condition, and his goals of care.”

There was a pause. Finally, the daughter said, “We appreciate that … but why is my dad’s fever continuing? When will another neurologist see him? Why does it take so long for a nurse to answer the phone when we call? When will he be transferred to another hospital for a second opinion?”

“That are important concerns,” the physician answered. “But right now, they are not the essential concerns. Your father has suffered a significant brain injury. We understand that you want to transfer him. But wherever he goes, the prognosis will likely be the same.” He paused, gently assessing the faces on the computer screen. “Bill is not recovering like we want him to,” he continued. “I think we need to discuss placement in long-term care.”

The three family members began to cry, quietly. All of us on the team acknowledged their need for silence. We were being transparent about Bill’s condition, while respecting their questions about second opinions. We were standing in the middle ground with them.

The middle ground avoids binary, all-or-nothing thinking and words like always or never. It challenges me to expand my thoughts and vocabulary so I can be open to different alternatives, ideas, and perspectives. These help me understand why some families choose to pursue aggressive treatment for loved ones with a terminal prognosis. The ability to stand in the middle ground with families means I support them with presence, education, and advocacy, even when they make decisions I may disagree with.

When a family is angry, the choice to stand in the middle is as much a competency as it is an art form. I think of the crucifixion when I confront another person’s anger and my own. Anger, like the crucifixion, can be heavy and rough, while the person who experiences it may feel exposed, naked, wounded, and vulnerable. When and if anger surfaces in a family meeting, it is important for me to be mindful. Sometimes I imagine that I am breathing under water and remaining comfortable in the uncomfortable.

I am learning that successful family meetings depend on my ability to suspend judgment, and the willingness to stand in the breach or the middle ground. When I stand in the breach with another person as a chaplain, I advocate for the individual. A sense of appropriate duty compels me to speak for the person who may not have a voice, and to see for the one whose vision may be obscured by frightening realities.

Brittle, fragile, vulnerable, and worried describe some of the feelings when families meet with palliative care teams. It is even more complicated now because of the isolation and separation that the pandemic has forced upon patients and their loved ones.
The word *dignity* is central to my chaplaincy; in fact, I mention it when I pray with patients because the stories that some share often depict a lack of dignity. When someone listens to you, how does it feel? What do you sense in your body and spirit? I hope those moments are free of advice or instruction, humorous anecdotes, and glib remarks. Standing with anyone – not just in the middle ground – means I acknowledge their dignity. I do not want to be the chaplain who follows up every comment with a comeback, the one who responds to every opinion or story with a rebuttal. It is more important to accompany a person and to listen.

When I was 24, I was on the other side of a family meeting, the night an incredibly kind physician told me that my father had died of an aortic aneurysm. Also, years later, an equally compassionate doctor informed my family that any further treatment for my brother’s liver cancer would only prolong his suffering.

On one hand, those memories are painful, but on the other they are redeemable, since having them allows me to consider another person’s perspective. This means I listen when someone shares how it feels to be alone, or when family members request some time to absorb information. I needed that same time the night my father died. I understand the need for time when bad news makes it seem like time has stopped.

I doubt I will ever discover the middle ground in politics or global events. I do, however, believe that when I stand in it with an angry or frightened family, I give them the very things that an emergency room physician gave me the night my dad died. He put his warm, tender hand on my shoulder. He did not say everything would be okay or tell me my father was in a better place. He stood in the middle ground and offered silence beneath the bright lights of a cold emergency room. I pray I do the same.

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How does a chaplain answer in the midst of an argument?

By Jack Conrad

“Do not worry beforehand about what you are to say. But say whatever will be given to you at that hour. For it will not be you who are speaking but the Holy Spirit. Brother will hand over brother to death, and the father his child; children will rise up against parents and have them put to death.” Mark 13: 11-14.

What an ominous prediction and prophetic statement.

One of my chaplains told me a day after the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol that the unit he worked on was all abuzz with thoughts, shock and fear.

A doctor exclaimed in an early morning rounding that he was not surprised that such a riot could happen in Washington, as crazy as politics have become.

Two weeks later, another told me of watching the inauguration of our new president in a room where the patient and his wife were all smiles.

A dear family member sent me endless “proof” of the deep state’s efforts to overthrow democracy. I politely asked them to stop. They were offended.

Being divisive is popular now. I have heard that the way of Jesus is to find a third way. To me, that means not picking sides.

Jesus quietly sits and scrawls in the dirt while a woman is about to be stoned to death for adultery. He quietly says, “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” (John 8:7)

As chaplains we also must find the third way, even if we have a bias one way or the other politically. We stand in the middle and search out Wisdom, which I believe is the third way. But how do we access it?

I think we need to have faith that it is embedded inside us. That in God’s calling to us to become chaplains and in our subsequent training, we may have developed special awareness of that embedded Wisdom.

One afternoon I was requested to the ICU, where a mother was passing. The distraught son told me that his wife, who had recently had a “born again” experience, had questioned whether her mother-in-law was going to heaven, because she had not declared Jesus as her personal Lord and Savior.

The CPE manual or seminary courses might have warned me about this type of encounter, but they didn’t provide a ready solution. So like Jesus in my own way I scrawled in the dirt, and cleared my mind as I looked at a grieving son, suddenly grappling with the idea that his beloved mother would not go to heaven.

So I asked, “Tell me about her?”
She was described as a loving, caring woman, devoted to her husband and two sons. Always good to her neighbors and active and supportive in the community. Certainly a wonderful person, who just was never religious.

After the life stories were finished, I said, “Well I can’t speak for God, but if I were God, I would sure want her in heaven.” It puzzled the daughter-in-law, but gave great solace to the son.

I did not know how those words came to me except for the Holy Spirit.

That is where the Gospel quote comes in. “Do not worry beforehand about what you are to say. But say whatever will be given to you at that hour. For it will not be you who are speaking but the Holy Spirit.”

So, my sisters and brothers in chaplaincy – Count on Wisdom and that you have access to it. Have faith that the words will come when you need it.

As we navigate through these times, with divisions so pronounced, and dysfunctional politics added to the dysfunctional families we may engage — find peace in knowing you are not alone, and we have an Advocate who is always a reflective moment away, if we just allow the Wisdom to flow.

Peace…

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If you’re being introduced to a racist: What would Jesus do?

By Fr. Dons Onyeke

About three weeks into a new posting, a man at my new parish invited me to have breakfast with his family. My first thought was that it was too soon, but then I remembered that a lot of people were still wryly eyeing me and being very measured in their interactions. Why not embrace this offer of friendship? So we agreed on a Saturday morning after Mass. I had desired to drive in my own car so that I could leave on my own time, but he volunteered to drive me and I agreed.

Then, on our way to his house, he turned to me and said, “I really don’t know whether my wife will accept you.”

I froze and my heart sank. Why didn’t he sort it out with his wife first before inviting me? This isn’t right. And then he continued: “She is one of those people who don’t like people because of the color of their skin.” I felt a stab to my heart. What am I supposed to do? What kind of man is this? What is he trying to show, anyway? He continued to drive and talk, but like a patient under anesthesia, I was gradually losing my consciousness under my own thought process. My first thought was to command him to stop and then to get out of the car and walk back to the church. That would send a very clear message to him that I don’t have time for racists.

But then a disturbing thought flashed through my mind: “What would Jesus do?” Suddenly, in a macabre sort of way, I felt a very deep connection with this man. Like the multitude of disabled people in John 5:3, bound together by their shared fate, I felt bound together with this man by the ignorant worldview of his wife. Should I focus on the love and friendship of this man, or the expected racism of his wife whom I had never seen? Should I focus on his pain (disappointment in his wife’s racism); his anticipated embarrassment (that his wife might not accept me); his vulnerability and moral distress (sharing such intimate truths openly with me); or the anticipated hostile reaction from his wife?

What would Jesus do?

My new friend’s problems were my problems: how to deal with a racist. He had a wife who judged people by the color of their skin; I had the skin color she didn’t like. What a connection! Suddenly, we arrived at the house and walked in. I could see a woman sitting in the kitchen area and another young man standing and facing her. They did not turn towards the door. My host looked at me and froze. You could see horror in his face.

But I decided to take charge. Am I not their priest? They are now my patients. Let me look, listen and learn. I squeezed past him and instead of allowing him to lead me into his own house, I led him. “Hello! hello! hello!” I said. “There's a stranger in your house.” They turned and looked at me. I placed my left arm around the woman’s shoulder in a hugging gesture. She smiled and thankfully did not swat my hand away. Facing her were their three children, a boy and two girls – all college kids, all whom I hugged one after the other. In a few short minutes, they were all chattering like parrots while telling me what they were studying and doing. My host was looking at us. I wondered what he was thinking. I suddenly turned to the woman and said: “I’m so hungry. Anything to eat?” She got up and said, “OK, let’s see.”
As usual when you visit an American family for the first time, my host showed me around their house and property. We eventually made it back to the dining table, where a sumptuous breakfast was waiting for us. I sat down with the whole family, and for the next three hours, we shared and giggled and laughed. The atmosphere was electric. Finally, I got up, thanked them, and said it was time to go. The woman, beaming, held my hand, thanked me profusely for visiting, and made me promise to come again.

I did. In a space of five months, I visited them three times. They are still my very good friends. As we say: there are no strangers in this world, only friends we haven’t met. We all come from a place of deep insecurity which manifests in so many different ways.

So next time a patient says that s/he doesn’t need you due to your skin color or gender or religion, remember to ask yourself the question: what would Jesus do? Next time someone asks where you are from or where your accent is from, pause and ask yourself: what would Jesus say? Then, remember, at that very moment to “do whatever he tells you.” (John 2:5)

Never forget that Jesus is the quintessential chaplain; the director of spiritual care, Heavenly Hospitals Group, Forgiveness Plaza, Love City, Paradise. He experienced it all – distrust, division, prejudice and eventually death – and all the while maintaining his moral center!

Amen and Amen!

It shall be well.

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Jesus and the Samaritan woman model how to bridge gaps

By Fr. Joseph F. Mali

After the killing of George Floyd in 2020, and the violent insurrection that rocked the Capitol on Jan. 6, there is a growing concern over America’s political divide. In politics, religion, and families, the tensions are running high. However, we can heal with the right approach – the way Jesus did with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42). Even today, Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well and her compatriots is replete with lessons for uniting people.

The Samaritan-Jewish enmity dated to the religious schism that followed Israel’s split, with the Jews worshiping God in Jerusalem, and the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim, each condemning the other as heretics. This is the awful past the woman revisits in her reaction to Jesus’ plea for water: “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” Our polarization is something similar. It is the byproduct of historical racism, inequality, social injustice, and religious bigotry.

An essential step in addressing tensions is a painful admission of our history, and then rising above it. Jesus, perhaps more than anyone in his day, saw that it was time for a change. This realization is central to his reforms, including promoting a culture of inclusion, and building bridges between factions. Notably, in this story, Jesus abandoned the custom that a Jewish religious teacher should not talk to women in public.

Similarly, to improve the Catholic Church’s relations with other religions, the Second Vatican Council toned down the traditional Catholic teaching that “Outside the church there is no salvation,” paving way for today’s interreligious dialogue that is unifying people with different beliefs. The same is true of mixed marriages, which in bygone days were discouraged, but now allowed in Catholic circles.

We also cannot be too proud to take the first step. Jesus does not wait for the Samaritans to initiate peace. He crosses frontiers to talk with them. He places the woman’s interest above his own, promising her “living water,” which for her means no more trips to the well in the heat of the sun. When we treasure other people’s perspectives, we stand a better chance of getting along with them. We have seen this in interreligious dialogues with world religions, and this is a path forward for both Republicans and Democrats. Don’t just see the world solely through your own lenses or make your interest the supreme good. Step into other people’s shoes and see as they see; feel as they feel and get a better outcome.

As the discussion progresses, Jesus earns the woman’s trust with a deep, compassionate consideration of her complicated marital status. Without passing judgment on her, he applauds her honesty. Empathy and understanding are fundamental. When Amy Biehl, an American student in South Africa, was murdered by angry militants in 1993, her parents felt “a void.” After they saw the miserable conditions in the murderers’ hometown, they understood how the youth could be violent¹, and invested a substantial amount of money in the community to improve their lives. If only we know the sorrows of other souls, our empathy can be ignited, and we can bond with them.

For her part, the woman divests herself of negativity and acquires a new knowledge of Jesus as a prophet. Resentment of others is easy if we have an erroneous view of them. When we get to know a stranger, our bias may give way to friendship.
As soon as Jesus mentions her marriage, possibly to avoid embarrassment, the woman changes the subject to an age-old theological question — the right place to worship, in Jerusalem (for Jews), or in Samaria (for Samaritans). According to Jesus, in the future, both places will be irrelevant, for true worshipers of God will adore God in “Spirit and in truth.” Jesus’ interest is in what binds them together, the “Spirit and truth” of their devotion, not their houses of prayers, which separate them.

During the last bitter U.S. presidential election, we were more in the likeness of the woman than Jesus, stressing party loyalty at the expense of our union and the American spirit. However, during the first wave of Covid-19 pandemic, it was the American spirit that triumphed. At my workplace, Albany Medical Center, we witnessed an outpouring of support from diverse groups for our healthcare workers, irrespective of creed, color, ethnicity, or political affiliation.

When Jesus’ disciples find their master in an open talk with a woman, which is a taboo to them, they are scandalized. Supporters of racism, discrimination, and inequality today stand in the same old tradition. It is not beneficial to shut our doors to such people, as many have done after the last U.S. presidential election results. With a strategic approach like that of Jesus, they can become kinder, friendlier like the Samaritan woman.

The way you transform society is one life at a time. Through the courage of one Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, and the transformation of one Samaritan, the woman at the well, former rivals became allies. At the end of the narrative, the Samaritans flock to Jesus, urging him to stay with them, and he socializes with them for two days. What an amazing reversal of that long, painful history! If only we take a cue from Jesus and the Samaritans, our own riven society may one day be restored.

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Inner silence helps chaplains navigate interpersonal chaos

By Deborah Armenta

One of the greatest complexities of human behavior is the lie of “otherness,” meaning that the other is the adversary. A wise friend told me that perhaps the adversarial (and sometimes violent) defense of one’s opinion is actually a fearful person fighting to convey what they desperately wish others to hear. Humans long to be heard. Yet we also can’t listen. We stand across the chasm and shout or scream. In the era of social media, we use words and images excessively in ways never before available. The desire to be heard increases, but the ability to listen has only decreased.

A chaplain is trained to stand in the trenches of tension and discomfort, to hold the threads of fragmented discord from all directions. The challenge is to hold these jumbled threads with just enough gentle touch that they do not become too taut or too slack in any one direction. The chaplain is called upon to breathe space into the chaos and to be “the” person exhibiting peace and compassion in the face of discord, rage, despair, and even hatred.

Over the years, I have worked with persons who are aging, sick, dying, addicted, or facing disabilities – to say nothing of the family struggles involved. My key daily resource is my personal spiritual practice of cultivating inner silence. This is no easy task. Pragmatically, it could seem that in this frenetic world of social distress, silence is a peripheral luxury. I believe, however, that this practice is the critical tool for chaplains in this struggling world.

One must begin with a set time daily to tap into the Mysterious Universe, God, Higher Power, or personal belief system that connects the chaplain with their vocation and others. The ability to listen deeply is cultivated consciously throughout the course of our lives. It does not happen instantaneously. Listening to the inner God of self allows me to listen to the inner God of my patients. As practitioners, we know we cannot give what we don’t have. I cannot hear and know the sacred within my patient, if I am unwilling to know and accept the sacred within myself. This all begins with practiced listening and humbly appropriating the reality of mystery within self and all of humanity.

In my personal life, as a Catholic Christian, I commit my early mornings to my hour of prayer and silence. I begin by seeking a place of interior quiet. I acknowledge the distractions present and I let them go – though some days the distractions seem louder than other days. But I persist. I allow myself to be aware of “who is present” inside me at that moment. Is there fear and anxiety? Unaddressed anger or shame? Frustration from work or an encounter that still stings and raises my hackles?

I greet each emotion as it shows up, and I do not judge, condemn or allow self-recrimination. When I open myself up to my own vulnerabilities and fear, I bring them forth and invite God’s healing presence into that conflict. I ask my God to guide all movement. Then I seek to relinquish my own agenda. As a leaf falls on a river passing by, I seek to allow each dynamic to be present, and to fall adrift on the river. Sometimes however, my struggles do overwhelm, and so I sit with those tsunami-like moments in the presence of my God without judgment.

To be present without judgment to what is unfolding around me, I must accept what is happening within myself. Without identifying my own prejudices, my own triggers of judgement, and seeking to bring them to my God in all vulnerability for healing, I cannot stand compassionately with a person or situation rife
with anger or brokenness. It is only because of this daily practice that I can begin to authentically stand in the breach of chaos and practice hopeful healing acceptance.

Particularly following the events of the past year, the gifts of the chaplain are needed more than ever. We live in a world starving for stillness and healing acceptance, kindness, compassion and non-judgment. It is impossible to give, and to be, something I do not possess within myself.

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Hearing racism, chaplains can say many things – but do say something

By Elaine Chan

Years ago, I visited a white hospital patient who spoke to me about her parish, a church I knew to have a vibrant and active congregation. “Yes,” the patient said, “but it’s been taken over by Haitians now.”

I was unsettled, but I wanted to remain constructive. “Well, congregations change over time,” I said. “Old-timers in your parish, or their children, are moving to other boroughs or even out of state. Having Haitians is a blessing. They’re keeping the parish alive.”

The patient nodded, and we moved on to other subjects. Eventually, she asked me if I had a rice pudding recipe. I told her I didn’t. But her roommate, a West Indian, overheard us and said she had a recipe she could give her.

My patient accepted the offer. I did wonder if the West Indian woman had been offended by the earlier conversation, but I hoped to myself that my patient would remember this generous interaction when she went back to her church.

As a chaplain, I sometimes find myself in awkward situations when patients unknowingly make prejudicial remarks. How is one to respond? Do I say something or not? What is my role? I don’t always know. At times I say a silent prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to help me know what to say. I try not to judge or criticize. I ask questions, rather than make assumptions. “What do you mean?” in a neutral tone is often a good line. Or I make observations, such as the comment about congregations changing. But it’s important to say something. Otherwise my silence may be interpreted as agreement with what is being said. I cannot be a bystander.

Recent events such as the storming of the Capitol and the protests after the death of George Floyd have pushed the issue of racism to the forefront. We are being forced to confront it now, but it remains America’s original sin. People understandably are comfortable with others of their own culture, ethnicity, faith etc. We don’t understand people who speak a different language. We don’t know why they can’t be like us. We ask why they don’t want to be “saved” by accepting Jesus. I sometimes hear anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim remarks, but educating myself about the Jewish and Muslim faiths as well as the Catholic teachings about relating to other faiths has helped me to respond.

As a chaplain I try to educate and model what it means to be a Christian, to love one another and to do unto others what we want for ourselves. In the short time I have with patients in the hospital, I try to plant a seed to encourage them to be more open-minded, get to know the “other” and think about how their words may be received. I need to be prophetic but also diplomatic as I don’t want to lean toward either pole of the political spectrum. I seek to create spaces where individuals can share and seek to be a supportive presence. I also need to self-monitor my own feelings on these issues and practice self-care.
My workplace has held a series of listening sessions on diversity, equity and inclusion in which I participated. Being a woman and an Asian-American, I needed to educate as well as listen, since some don’t feel that Asian-Americans experience racism, even though during the pandemic violence against Asian-Americans has increased.

At my chapel meditation last month in the hospital, I mentioned Black History Month and included a prayer by Thurgood Marshall and the poem that Amanda Gorman read at President Biden’s inauguration. Sometimes I mention the Catholic Church’s social teachings in the chapel services and offer prayers for racial equity and social justice. We all have a role to play to combat misunderstanding, prejudice, racism and injustice. I pray for God’s guidance in this and all things.

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