

Homily: Giving and Receiving

Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer

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Last week, a Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States 2020 was released by the Chinese government. The political push back on this report by the US government was swift and many American citizens, both political and non-political are quick to point out the long list of abuses of which the Chinese government itself is guilty. And still, I personally found this document fascinating. It so clearly lays out horrific inequities that we in this country seem to be used to or worse, de-sensitized to. Specifically, the report details the failures of the US government's response to Covid-19; it outlines the ongoing violence against African Americans (in fact the first words of the report are the last words of George Floyd – "I can't breathe") and it raises multiple red flags in response to the United States tolerance of gun violence and glorification of gun culture. If this report were issued by one of our allies, it would be considered an act of military aggression.

But it was created by one of our international political adversaries, so we dismiss it as antagonistically motivated and inaccurate. But I have to say, from my view, this report is embarrassingly spot on. In the United States, anti-blackness leads the anti-people of color racisms that dominate our social landscape and that are obviously growing to tragic ends. With over half a million dead from the coronavirus, and with vaccines having been available for 6 months, the fact that we continue to struggle with messaging and basic public health measures to keep people safe largely due to our addiction to commerce driven results and political wrangling is truly criminal. Voting rights are not just being eroded, they are being blatantly and deliberately stripped from populations who already struggle to have their voices heard in the political arena. And then there are anti-LGBTQ laws, state sanctioned transgender erasure, restrictions on women's reproductive rights, non-culpability for rape and the centuries long abuse and eradication of Native and Indigenous people, rights and land. The United States deserves to be called out on its dreadful domestic shortcomings, and if another government

from another nation is the voice to do it, so be it. If the United States wants to lay claim to some kind of social and ethical high ground...well then we need to do a much better job at proving it.

I don't want to sound too much like a moral scold, but really what other choice does someone in the faith business have at this point. I'm cried out. I can't offer another prayer for the victims of gun violence in this country. It's not the guns, its not the perpetrators of the crimes...at this point it is every member of this society that hasn't put the brakes on everything else and said, "hold on now...let's stop giving each other the means to wantonly kill each other." The most basic requirement of life is STAYING ALIVE!! I blame myself. This ongoing massacre is all of our fault and no amount of individual responsibility rhetoric will convince me otherwise. Get rid of the damned guns. And for those of my colleagues who believe having possession of a lethal firearm is some kind of God given right to self defense, I say back to them that this is a bizarre position to take when guns and specifically assault rifles and the tools to create mass death in a matter of seconds, were invented long after the Bible. There is no such thing as a good guy with a gun in any religious scripture and frankly, that logic is an insult to every entreaty to love in every tradition.

But of course we have rampant gun violence in this country. Everyone is an adversary. Our society teaches us from an early age that a core American value is competition with each other and that we live in a world of "winners" vs. "losers". The country founded on a land grab, human displacement and genocide is the country that today survives on competition, combativeness, conflict and forced assimilation. Guns make perfect sense in that equation because violence sits at the heart of all those efforts and goals. The more violence the better the system works... the easier it is to silence your competition. I'm going to go out on a limb here, but maybe, just maybe, we need to take drastic action to get out of this lethal feedback loop.

In order to find a different way forward, might I suggest that we go back to children as our teachers. Any parent knows that it is important to teach your child to share and to encourage them to interact fairly with other children. It is equally important to teach them how to receive. One of the most important lessons I remember from my own childhood was from when one of my birthday parties became a big community event in our apartment building and I received a ton of gifts. It was stressed to me that that day would not be about what I got as much as it would be about how I received whatever people brought. It could be a fancy new model car or a simple card or just a handshake, it would be important that I received them all equally because they were all given equally from the same place of love. This was important because my parents were also clear that I wouldn't keep all of the gifts that were given to me. It was my first brush with learning how to receive with grace. It is up to us to receive the gesture of generosity not the content of the gesture; if you do so, you'll find the world is full of abundance in unexpected places.

"Thank you" is a phrase that is crucial to this equation. It is an opening to the way we communicate the meaning of generosity. But there's another piece as well. So often when we do something kind or good for someone else and they recognize it with a "thank you", our first reaction is to say "oh that was nothing." But that's not very gracious. We could all use a lesson in learning how to say, "you're welcome". My favorite response, that I learned through all of my different service jobs is "It is my pleasure." This doesn't rob someone of their desire to acknowledge what you have given or done and it acknowledges that you also derived some benefit and joy from what you've done or given. "Thank you"... "Its my pleasrue." I believe as a country, the United States has been less and less adept at giving this kind of response in the world. We're too quick as a country to say "oh, that was nothing" and because we're not invested in generosity as a true exchange of humanity, we're just as quick to turn around and whisper how ungrateful people are under our breath.

This capacity for a gracious, balanced and healthy self-acknowledging response to generosity has to begin somewhere. This is where communities like ours built around principles, and faith

and shared beliefs come in. The thread of who and what we wish to actually be as wider social fabric is spun from our individual spirit and how we regard and value life. The big picture of being able to say something like “it’s my pleasure” on an international level with global partners will never happen if we don’t know how to do it first on a personal level and a community level and on a societal level. We have to train ourselves in order to train our society to reflect our better collective selves. If we are only capable of looking at every situation and interaction from a competitive perspective, that impulse will reverberate out into the wider world. And it is toxic. If we are uncomfortable with being gracious in the ways in which give and receive generosity, that will become our social position. If we continue to be in a posture of defense and protection and guarding, we cannot possibly know the deep gratification of being able to say “it’s my pleasure” when someone thanks us for our gift and we have given to someone from our abundance.

What can we do when other countries call us out on our failings as the United States? We can start small, one person, one interaction at a time. We can not only prove our critics wrong, but we can live into the greatest aspirations of what the United States says it wants to be. We can live this as a church community, as a shared culture and we can share it as we interact with the wider world. We can encourage others to take this example and share it with even more people. And so, we cultivate this specific community as a place of generosity and abundance and gratitude. My hope is that we can learn as much from how we say “thank you” and offer gratitude as we do from the ways in which we receive the gifts given to us with grace and from the ways in which we gracefully acknowledge our good fortune to be part of the formula for abundance. When we give financially, we can do so from the place of “it’s my pleasure.” Yes, we can feel good about it, not from competition or comparison, but from a place of acknowledging that our particular abundance, whatever that may be, allows us to give money directly to support this community, or other communities or other efforts in the world. And it is the same with non-financial giving... “It’s my pleasure”...you can feel good about it. Feel good about teaching that class, leading that workshop, gathering that group, joining that march. Feel good, again not from a sort binary between pride and shame, but from the place of being able

to acknowledge your unique capacity to give in your unique way. When you do this, I'm sure that when you receive gifts in the future, your "thank you" may come from a different place in your heart. And that small ripple of grace will turn into a tidal wave of abundance and peace that will be felt all the way around the world. Maybe, just maybe then this society will have a chance to live into its promise.

May it be so.