

Chaplain's Bulletin May 14, 2023



Dear Folks,

Talking about developing a less violent world, I think we need to look at the power of personal agency. So often, it can feel like what we do doesn't make much difference in the larger world. It is a terrible feeling to think that the world and other people can make marks on us quite easily, but there is nothing we can do to make our mark on the world. This is a feeling I lived with for a lot of years, and it can lead to desperation. If we can help people learn better to channel that energy, that can lead to more productive activity and less desperation.

This can involve developing a vision. If things are not good as they are now, what improvement do we want? It is good to be specific. Then we need a path between here and there.

We need to learn skills: learn to make a case for what we think should happen and making it effectively, both for the goal and the way to get there. Just because it seems painfully obvious to us doesn't mean it will be obvious to others, in fact, we can count on someone thinking it is completely wrong, and that can be frustrating. Seeing things from others' point of view is a good first step. We need to recognize that if people do change the way they think, it can be a slow process, and we need patience. I find however much patience I think I've learned God seems to think I need more. If we get attention, it needs to be in a way that helps people see things from our point of view.

We can cultivate more realistic expectations. This can keep people from giving up when things take a long time and get difficult. I don't know much about farming, but I think people take for granted that when they plant seeds, it will take months for the crop to be ready. On the other hand, if I put coffee in the microwave and it takes months for the coffee to get hot, I'm throwing that microwave away. Making profound, meaningful changes in society is long, slow work, often spanning generations. Getting people to change the way they think takes time, especially when ideas are deeply rooted and intertwined with their basic world view. I suggest lower expectations short term, higher expectations long term. Before we try to justify quick and dirty tactics, remember the other side might use them too, and they tend not to win people over.

Boundaries are essential! Just because we have good intentions does not mean our behavior is justified. We as a society need to reject excusing people's bad behavior because we think it is for a good cause (remember, everyone thinks they have a good cause). If protesters behave badly, it hurts the credibility of their cause. Jesus said, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. Be as clever as serpents and innocent as doves (Matt 10:16)."

We must support those who help make it a less violent world. This starts with law enforcement. We need to recognize the great risks and sacrifices that they make, and how much we depend on them. We need to remember many of the decisions, especially shoot/don't shoot situations, must be made in a fraction of a second, and if they get it wrong, they often die. They want to go home at the end of their shift like everyone else. Yes, we need to get rid of bad actors, but when there is an incident, we need to give the officer the same benefit of the doubt that we would want for ourselves. When people commit a crime, there should be quick and consistent consequences as much as possible. Lax or selective enforcement encourages more crime.

Let's not disparage thoughts and prayers. Yes, they are not a substitute for action, but action can follow from focusing our hearts. We can always invite people to action, and this is an opportunity to make our case.

Blessings, Fr. Jim