

PRAY Life-giving
God, your love flares
forth in all that is. You
bless us with Jesus as a
light to show us the way
of love and nonviolence
in our world. Amen.

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 29, 2023 Vol. 35, No. 16

SPIRIT

Fifty-one years ago Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. went to jail rather than stop his nonviolent resistance to Jim Crow law in Birmingham, Alabama. In 1963, a hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves, African Americans faced Jim Crow laws and couldn't vote.

Over Easter weekend Dr. King wrote his now famous *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* to black clergy who thought his protest was making it hard for their congregations and should stop. "An unjust law is no law at all," Dr. King wrote. He insisted that he would be "the first to advocate obeying just laws" but had "a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws."

What is an unjust law? "Any law that degrades human personality is unjust," Dr. King said in the letter. "An unjust law is a code inflicted upon a minority which that minority had no part in enacting or creating because it did not have an unhampered right to vote."

For Dr. King nonviolent resistance offered a middle way between complacent people in the African American community who had adjusted to segregation and black nationalist groups that were close to

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice (Matthew 5.6).



violence. "Will we be extremists for hate or extremists for love?" he asked.

For a month adults marched daily in Birmingham until there were no more adults who could go to jail. On May 1, over a thousand children and

young people marched. The police arrested 900 of them.

The next day 2,500 children marched. The police chief ordered firefighters to turn high-powered hoses on the children. For three days the demonstrations grew larger.

Dr. King encouraged his people to protest with love. "We must say to our white brothers all over the South who try to keep us down: We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. In winning the victory, we will not only win our freedom. We will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process."

On May 5, 3,000 young people assembled for a prayer pilgrimage to the Birmingham jail. The procession approached the police barrier. Firefighters waited with hoses. Dogs strained on their leashes. The procession stopped, and all 3,000 knelt in prayer.

When the police chief ordered them to turn back, the black minister leading the procession said, "We're not turning back. We've done nothing wrong. All we want is our freedom." When the police chief ordered the hoses turned on, the firefighters stood by and let the young people march through. They could no longer fight love with violence.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



by Jen Rooney

This year I celebrated Martin Luther King Day by joining about 80 high school students and adults in a Theatre of the Oppressed retreat on nonviolence.

Participants identify oppressions and act out power struggles in Theatre of the Oppressed exercises. Augusto Boal of Brazil created this way of inviting people to find alternative, nonviolent responses to oppressive situations or institutions. Oppression occurs when one party has power and the other does not.

Retreat leader Kevin Lally tells us how a boyhood experiment that failed motivated Boal to develop the Theatre technique. As a boy, Boal found chicken eggs. In order to set the baby chickens free, he cracked the tops of each of the eggs. The chickens, only partially developed, did not survive.

This lesson stuck with Boal and made him realize one cannot liberate another person. But one can create space for that liberation to happen.

Lally introduces the process. "The Theatre" is not a building, but a group of people involved in acting, viewing, and thinking about breaking an oppression.

Who are "the oppressed?" Lally asks us to think of the oppressed we see every day. We name young people, females, immigrants.

Lally asks the participants to join a group that will explore the oppression that bothers them the most. Each group has an hour to prepare a one to two minute dramatization for the other participants.

STEP 1:

Create a Scenario

The largest group chooses to tackle sexism. Student assistant, Elizabeth "Biff" Keough, works with the group to create the who, what, and where of the presentation. They decide to enact the blatant sexual harassment girls receive from boys in high school.

Biff directs them to create a scenario that allows everyone to have a role. The group decides that an average high school classroom will make a good setting.

STEP 2:

Dialogue

Biff begins writing down some of the words of oppression she hears every day at school. She encourages others to share what they hear. "The key to making the scenario feel real," says Biff, "is to use actions and language that make everyone uncomfortable and the situation believable."

Soon other group members are contributing their own stories and words. Phrases like "you're so hot" create uncomfortable pauses and giggling. In spite of this, or possibly because of it, Biff suggests using a technique sometimes used by the Theatre of the Oppressed: gender role change. The males will take the female roles and the females will portray the males.

STEP 3:

Taking Roles

Biff will play "Luke," the ringleader who thinks degrading women is appropriate and funny, the guy other guys follow. The group points out

not all guys harass girls. Many of them don't say anything and wish they could stand up to Luke.

Equally realistic, many girls tune out the catcalls and innuendo. However, the group also develops the character of "Tatiana," a girl who is abused at home, who can't ignore the verbal attacks because she is on alert at all times. Another character, "Shandra," loves the attention and aggravates the rest of the girls by egging the boys on.

What will the teacher do? In this scenario the teacher character decides to be anxious and too stressed out with the lesson plan to pay attention to the negative remarks.

STEP 4:

set the stage

The group creates a classroom scene by moving chairs into three rows. The group practices the scene.

STEP 5:

Action

The students enter the classroom with the boys casually tossing out sexually demeaning remarks to the girls. The teacher ignores this, begins the lesson, turns his back to the class of actors, and starts writing on the imaginary chalk board, creating another opportunity for the boys to make lewd comments and gestures.

"Tatiana, you are so fine. Quit pretending you don't hear me," Luke taunts.

As directed, the presentation lasts about two minutes, giving a good sample of what sexual harassment is like for high school girls every day.

SUNDAY GOSPEL

Feast of the Presentation

Beatitude people bless us.

NARRATOR: When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on the mountainside. After he sat down, his disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them:

JESUS 1: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

JESUS 2: Blessed are the sorrowing, for they shall be consoled.

JESUS 3: Blessed are those of low status; they shall inherit the land.

JESUS 4: Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall have their fill.

JESUS 1: Blessed are they who show mercy, for mercy shall be theirs.

JESUS 2: Blessed are the single-hearted, for they shall see God.

JESUS 3: Blessed, too, are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

JESUS 4: Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for the kingdom of God is

theirs.

NARRATOR: Blessed are you when people insult and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, for your reward in heaven is great.

Matthew 5.1-12

STEP 6:

Re-action & change

The sexism group informs the audience they are going to perform the skit again, but this time the audience can stop the scene. By clapping his/her hands together loudly once, an audience member stops the action on stage and physically takes the place of one of the actors.

It's time to experiment with what changes the oppressive dynamic and what doesn't.

One replacement actor switches spots with one of the quiet boys and stands up to the harassment. It definitely surprises Luke and his friends and stops the harassment momentarily. Then, the harassers turn against the quiet boy and start picking on him.

On the next run through, another replacement actor changes roles with the teacher and changes the seating arrangement to separate Luke and his groupies. The entire retreat group discusses the outcome. Some feel it will be help, while others feel it is a short term band-aid for an overwhelming problem.

Does anything get solved?

"The goal is to re-create an oppressive situation with a different outcome," Biff reminds us. In the

sexism skit and discussions about it, a few main thoughts surface.

- The key to stopping harassment among the class is stopping Luke, the ringleader.
- The teacher needs more support from the administration and policies. He is overwhelmed and doesn't want to take on another problem.

Sexism is an issue of respecting and treating everyone equally. The boys must be convinced the girls are their equals.

Other groups portray other scenarios of oppression. For example, a small group presents a situation in which two teens are at the mall, each with a younger sibling. One of the little kids needs to use the restroom. The teens ask for the restroom key. However, the mall has a rule that teens cannot use their restrooms without a supervising adult present.

Teens have feelings about this rule, which many have encountered. The actors and replacement actors invent ways to shift the balance of power.



A group gets ready to perform their sexism scenario at a Theatre of the Oppressed retreat day. Set in a classroom, boys in the front will play roles they experience as familiar with girls and girls in the back row will act out roles familiar with boys. The retreat helps participants find nonviolent alternatives to oppressive situations.

When all the skits are done, we evaluate the day and results. Students and adults alike appreciated working with each other. Everyone left the retreat day with the same challenge—to develop new nonviolent ways to dismantle oppression.

QUESTIONS 1 What gives nonviolence its power? How does Dr. King live the beatitudes? 2 What makes a law unjust? 3 What experiences do you have of oppression, situations in which one party has power and the other does not? 4 What reasons you have for joining or not joining in current unjust laws or movement? 5 Who do you bless? 6 How do the beatitudes call you to live?

The Church continues Jesus' mission

by Becky Chabot

Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his ministry and pictures him filled with the Holy Spirit and as beloved of God. Jesus lives in loving communion with Father and Spirit.

Our Catholic faith sees our world and our lives as full of grace—God gifts us with life and light. God gifts us with freedom and the capacity to love one another and love God in return, to go beyond our individual selves and form families and communities—new communions of love.

As Jesus begins his ministry, his first action is calling disciples to follow him. He gathers together companions who will share and continue his mission. In the gospel this Sunday Simeon anticipates Jesus' mission to the whole world.

into Christian community—the Church.

Mission is about the dynamic of going out and drawing in. The Church reaches out and the Church draws in.

Simeon speaks to Mary after his prayer of praise. He anticipates that Jesus' mission and destiny as the messiah will cause her pain. "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that is opposed."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., lived Jesus' mission. He went out to those who didn't believe African Americans deserved equality and civil rights for the purpose of winning their hearts and forming in our nation a more perfect union.

When he called the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII invited all

Catholics to renew our commitment to Jesus' mission. Before the Council, Catholics worked toward a better life in heaven. The Council called Catholics to make life better for the poor and afflicted on Earth.

In the document called *The Church in the Modern World*, the bishops of the Second Vatican Council challenged us to bless the poor as Jesus

teaches in the beatitudes. The document begins:

"The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor and afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

In baptism all Christians commit to live Jesus' mission. All of us are responsible for

Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently.

The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead.

Catechism of the Catholic Church #2447

the mission of the Church, not only priests and bishops.

We can live Jesus' mission by reaching out to serve in a soup kitchen and raise money to build a school. We also live the beatitudes in our everyday lives when we put ourselves in the shoes of classmates and family members and listen to one another's stories.

We live Jesus' teachings in school when we reach out and draw in those others dismiss as unimportant, low in status. Theatre of the Oppressed builds skill in creative ways to work against oppression and violence we experience.

Jesus' mission rips us out of our comfort zones and drags us into our world to live Jesus' values. In his world everybody matters.



Franciscan priests carried the gospel into the jungle of Peru.

The word *mission* means *sent*; it contains a *to* and a *for* meaning. A person receives a mission *to* something and *for* something. Jesus sends his disciples *to* all peoples *for* the purpose of announcing the good news of his resurrection from the dead and making them disciples. Jesus and Franciscan priests were sent *to* the people of Latin America *for* the purpose of spreading the gospel and drawing people

FAITH in ACTION

- 1 Work threes or fours to make a list of Jesus' teachings that you try to live.
- 2 Give a practical example of a way to live the teaching in school, in sports, in your family and neighborhood.
- 3 What is an oppression you want to end?
- 4 Write a mission statement for yourself as a Christian.