Racism and the Gift of Sorrow

By Becky Eldredge

These past few weeks as I listened to people in spiritual direction, on virtual retreats, and in conversations with friends, colleagues and neighbors, I am acutely aware that many of us are holding a deep sorrow about the long suffering of our Black brothers and sisters. God broadened my awareness these past few weeks as I watched black friends and colleagues’ grief reach a depth that makes my heart ache as I write these words. One colleague shared with me, “George Floyd’s death was the straw the broke the camel’s back for me. I don’t feel safe anymore.” Another friend shared how afraid she is for her children to be out playing in her neighborhood for fear of what people may assume of her kids.

I hear their words and pain, and I am aware, too, that as a white mother this is a suffering that I will never experience. This does not, however, give me permission to ignore the pain of an entire community of people who are crying out in pain. Their sorrow is real. The sorrow it wells in me is real as well. I feel God urging me, and all of us, to pay attention to the grace of sorrow rising within us. George Floyd’s and Breonna Taylor’s deaths bring racism back to our collective conscious and vividly remind us that racism never went away.

During the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, there is a kind of sadness that God allows us to feel as we pray on God’s mercy and on evil and sin in the world. It is a sadness that wells in us as we are awakened to sin in our lives and in the world. As it wells within us, it calls forth in us an urge to change. This is the grace of sorrow. Grace defined theologically is a gift from God that helps us come to new insights about ourselves, God, and each other. Sorrow is a gift from God that can aid us in understanding suffering in ourselves and in others.

Sorrow as defined in Ignatius’ rules of discernment is spiritual consolation. It is the Holy Spirit awakening us to something that is keeping us individually or collectively from fully loving others and God.

What do we do when we feel the grace of sorrow?

We acknowledge the grace of the moment we feel it. God is with us in a real, palpable way. When we are moved to tears because of our own sin or due to the suffering of others, we are sitting in a moment seeped with the Holy Spirit’s presence.

Right now, I feel the Holy Spirit is begging us to acknowledge the sorrow we feel as we hear the cries of pain from our Black brothers and sisters from the impacts of racism in our world. Aren’t we being invited to notice how an entire race does not feel fully loved? Aren’t we being challenged to ask ourselves- are we loving as Christ loves? Isn’t the Holy Spirit inviting us to see the rippling effects of the sin of racism in our world? I feel we are being challenged to notice our own bias, evaluate our behaviors that contribute to systemic racism, and discern what our actions can be to bring about change.

Noticing and naming our sorrow can be painful. As humans we do not tend to want to acknowledge our faults. Sometimes, too, it is hard for us to sit in the suffering of others. Sorrow can also bring a sense of helplessness as we realize how hard it is to change anything by ourselves. The grace of sorrow also brings to light our dependency on God, our need for God’s mercy and help. We are not alone in naming our sorrow.

St. Ignatius offers us a prayer tool, the Triple Colloquy, to help us name our sin. This prayer tool invites us into a colloquy or conversation with Mary, Jesus, and God to awaken us where we contribute to sin in the world.

I offer us this Triple Colloquy to pray with our role in racism below.

We go to Mary first and ask her to go to her son and ask for these graces for us:
To know deep down the sin of racism and the rootedness of this sin in my life and in the world.

To have a deeply felt understanding of how I might contribute to the sin of racism.

To recognize any moments that have kept me from loving my Black brothers and sisters in the way God loves them.

To experience a deep desire to amend my life and my actions and turn away from all that contributes to the sin of racism.

After we speak to Mary, we go to her son, Jesus, and ask him for these same three things. Then we go to God and ask for these three things from God.

As Kevin O’Brien writes in his book The Ignatian Adventure, “Notice the beauty of the triple colloquy: even in our very real and visceral struggle with sin, Ignatius reminds us that we are surrounded by divine company and help. We are not alone.” (P. 101).

I believe praying the Triple Colloquy will help us acknowledge our role in the sin of racism, confront our personal bias and behaviors, and grow our desire to be part of the solution to eradicate racism.

Once we acknowledge our sorrow and sin what do we do with it then?

St. Ignatius invites us to take our sorrow and sin directly to Christ in prayer. In prayer, we can honestly talk to God about what we are noticing and the sorrow we feel. As we bring our sorrow to Christ, God enters what we are feeling and brings mercy.

God longs to free us from our own sinfulness. God also longs to enter our hurt, brokenness, and pain in order to heal us. Some of our pain is due to our own sinful capacity as humans. Sometimes the brokenness we experience is not caused by us or our actions but is simply the result of life’s journey and the risk of being in relationships. Sometimes what we feel is the ripple effect of another person’s choices. Sometimes our sorrow is the result of our listening to the wrong voices and forgetting who we are.

Bringing our sorrow to God allows God to enter into what we are feeling; and it also invites us to discern how we are being invited to call forth change in us and in the world. St. Ignatius offers us a prayer tool that helps us bring our sorrow to God and discern our response. This prayer tool is the Colloquy with Christ on the Cross.

Imagine Christ Our Lord suspended on the cross before you, and converse with him in a conversation about what rose as you prayed the triple colloquy on our role in racism. Then ask him these three questions to help guide your discernment as to what you are being called to do:

*What have I done for Christ?*

*What am I doing for Christ?*

*What ought I do for Christ?*

We go to Christ crucified and speak honestly to him with whatever comes to our mind and ask Christ to guide our steps and actions to change our bias and behaviors. We ask Christ to show us what our response might be right now to confront and help eradicate racism in our world.

I urge us to not ignore the sorrow we are hearing from our black brothers and sisters and the sorrow we might be feeling in us, too. I invite us to go to our inner chapels and pray so we can listen and discern our response. Prayer always sends us outside ourselves and leads to action that is generous in spirit. It spurs us beyond ourselves to take part in God’s mission and to love others as God loves them. May the gift of sorrow we feel be offered to God to eliminate the sin of racism in our world today.