

*You have received without payment, give without payment.* This is the closing line in today's gospel and the starting line for Christians. Gratitude. *All good things around us; they come from heaven above, so thank the Lord, so thank the Lord; I really want to thank you, Lord.* We often see life as a quid pro quo but we know better. All that we have comes from God so there is only for us to return the favor. The main way to return the favor is to look around at God's other children and see to it that they also have access to the same gifts. And when we see that others are preventing them from having these gifts, put a stop to it. In other words, dismantle it.

From the Washington Post this week: *If we are to have any hope of creating real solutions to these three crises, we must dismantle systemic racism by restructuring those systems that allow it to perpetuate. This is, of course, a complex task. But Dorian Warren, the president of the Center for Community Change Action, has put forward an important idea for how we can begin: redistribution for reconstruction. According to economists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, the United States spends twice as much on "law and order" — prisons, courts and police forces — as we do on cash welfare programs such as food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. The events of this year highlight the urgency of fixing that imbalance.* How do people of faith who believe what we read in today's gospel: *you have received without payment, give without payment*, respond to this reality we have all created through our action or inaction?

Do you know that in Willimantic there is an MRAP? This stands for mine resistant ambush protected vehicle. Really? The Willimantic police department has the funds and the need for something that can't be blown up by a land mine and can resist an ambush from a military force? And it is parked one block away from the Covenant Soup Kitchen which is housed in an Episcopal church, and the Windham Area Interfaith Ministry – WAIM. Really? The argument for defunding the police is: if they can afford the MRAP which they will never need, that money could have gone to agencies like WAIM, which, when funded properly, helps families meet their needs and then the members of those families are healthier and happier, and we know that happy, healthy people don't typically commit crimes. Oh, except for white collar crimes. So, for many, defunding the police just sounds like letting the bottom drop out, then we have no cops, then it's anarchy. If that's your perception, please take the time to do the homework. It is really about deciding between an MRAP or WAIM. An MRAP or textbooks. An MRAP or mental health, and so on. It's really about dismantling a way of being that never should have been created in the first place.

The solution to public safety is sometimes the police but not always the police. By shifting the funds to other necessary programs we reduce crime by helping crime never happen in the first place. Caring for our sick, poor, mentally ill, youth, equally and effectively – equally and effectively, creates an environment where people can thrive and live happy lives. This is the epitome of an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. And it's done, in part, by following Jesus' instruction to the disciples today: go into these places and find the lost sheep. So, no keeping people at arms-length – well maybe during this pandemic, but you know what I mean.

The other thing to consider is why a police department thinks it needs an MRAP. What is happening in the minds of those making this decision that leads to purchasing a military vehicle capable of resisting a land mine or military ambush. Are they afraid? Do they feel the need to

intimidate? Is the neighborhood really that rough? There is no good answer to any of those questions. Therefore we arrive at the issue that the system has to change. We might wait until people change but if you know people you know that is really not a viable choice. Instead, rules and regulations, laws and procedures have to be created and enforced so that all people involved: police and citizens feel safe. This is what we mean when we say dismantle. Jesus is always calling us to dismantle.

Particularly in Eastern Christianity there is the notion of divinization. We inch toward the divine in our prayer, ethical living, love toward each other and so on. We know we will never get there but because we are created in the image of God, we move towards God like a gravitational pull or a magnet. Each time we fall short of being at unity with the divine we wonder about what needs to change. Sometimes we have gone so far off course that we need to do something seismic like revamping a whole society. This happened with slavery in our country, the Civil Rights Movement and all the legislation that came out of that, and it is happening now. Although the issue aren't new, we are living through a renewed movement to bring us closer to God. Our instinct for divinization is making us look at fundamental issues that need to be resolved in our lands so that all of us can experience the Kingdom of God. What is our responsibility as Christians?

Our lectionary readings give us the answer. Israel is called to be a chosen people: God's royal priesthood. Meaning that, as a society they will have the responsibility of bringing people to God through prayer, ethical living, and their example. Jesus believed they had lost their way and forgot the responsibility of their chosen-ness. The 12 disciples are sent to remind them by bringing healing for bodies and souls. If the royal priesthood could only remember what they were chosen to be and if only they could get it together, then the world could get it together and this would truly be the Kingdom of God – heaven on earth. Fast forward in Matthew's gospel to last week's reading where these same twelve, minus Judas are sent once again, but to fulfill the promise of bringing the whole world into the fold. We call it the Great Commission.

We inherit this Great Commission as modern day followers of Christ. We have the joy and responsibility of being chosen in baptism to be a royal priesthood to show the world the love of God and, following the example of the disciples' first missionary endeavor, we go first to the downtrodden who have been neglected. We go into the world and tend to those who can't breathe. We go into the world and release those with a knee upon their neck. And we do this now. Remember, Jesus' ministry happened during the Roman occupation of Israel. Jesus didn't say: oh, as soon as this is all over and this mess is cleaned up we can really get down to business. No. In the middle of what has been one of the worst periods in Jewish history, Jesus said the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. The time for Jesus is always now.

So we courageously ask ourselves: what must be crucified so that we can all truly experience the resurrection? Who is choking and needs that knee removed? Where is the Roman Empire keeping people down? What must be dismantled so that we can rebuild? How can we give without payment, since we have received so much without payment? What can I do to ensure we all truly experience the Kingdom of God?