**When We “Get It”…**

By Bishop Marc V. Trudeau

The scene is a young black woman with a protest sign approaching a white police officer who is part of a line of men and women clad in riot gear. The young woman asks, “Can’t you just say it? ‘Black lives matter’?” He responds, “All lives matter.” Walking away, shaking her head, she utters, “You just don’t get it.”

The encounter above occurred this past summer when “Black Lives Matter” protests erupted across the country in response to the brutal murder of George Floyd. His death unleashed a powerful, and in some places violent reaction to the scores of black lives lost to our criminal justice system. It also focused the spotlight on the reality of racism in American society.

The question is, just what is it that the young man does not “get”? He is correct. All lives do matter. No one can argue with that, especially Catholics who assert the sanctity of all life, from conception to natural death. From the developing fetus to the octogenarian, the homeless and immigrant, woman or man, gay, straight, prisoner, student, CEO and unemployed, special needs individual, millennial, boomer, red or blue or any other color, person with terminal illness or elite athlete, …all lives matter because Life matters! Every person shares in a common dignity as a daughter or son of the Divine Creator. So, what are we missing?

Perhaps, a clue can be found in our nation’s history. The U.S. Bishops in the document*, “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love - A Pastoral Letter Against Racism”* describe the enduring and destructive presence of racism in our country in the context of three historical realities that are unique to the American story: the Middle Passage, the Dred Scott Decision and Jim Crow laws. With this past month of February, “Black History Month”, completed, it is vital that every American confront and understand these elements of our history. They have served to reinforce what many refer to as a systemic pattern of racism and xenophobia that has plagued our nation since its inception.

American Slavery was founded on a conjunction of European expansion into the Americas and the growing industrialization of a modernizing world. These created an opportunity for a rising merchant class and European nations, seeking power and wealth, to exploit the market of raw materials in the New World. The collection of raw materials is a labor intensive industry and so entrepreneurs turned to an already thriving and ancient slave trade in Africa for cheap workers. In what came to be known as the “Middle Passage”, the movement of slaves from Africa to the Americas, Europeans, Americans and African slavers became rich by trafficking fellow human beings. The word “Middle” refers to it being the middle of three legs of a triangular trading route, the first leg involving the movement of manufactured goods from Western European Nations to be traded in western Africa for slaves. The slaves were sold in the New World to support its vast agricultural industry that produced cotton, coffee, cocoa, tobacco, lumber, sugar and other raw materials that became the last part of the triangle, the sale of those raw materials back to Europe.

During the 400 years of active trade on the Middle Passage, over 12 million men and women were abducted, hauled to a new continent and sold off as commodities, a traumatic element that no other “immigrant” group coming to the Americas endured. Of the 12 Million, it is believed that about 2 Million men and women died in the passage. About 388,000 African slaves[[1]](#footnote-1) were brought to markets in what would become the United States. By the time of the Civil War, there were almost 4 million slaves in the United States, concentrated mostly in the South.

At first glance, this might not seem like a large number. But if you look at our country in the year 1790, the first year a census was taken, the entire population of the United States, including slaves, was just under 4 million people. At that time, Virginia, the most populous state, had a total of 747,610 people, of whom 292,627 (almost 40%) were slaves. In the whole country, about 18% of the Four Million population were slaves, with Massachusetts and Maine being the only states with no reported slave population.[[2]](#footnote-2) Eighteen percent of today’s American population of over 330 Million would amount to almost 60 Million people in slavery. That would place the combined population of California and Texas, the two most populous states in the country, in slavery. The effect on the entire country of a system that treated that many men and women as property cannot be overstated. Slavery is founded on the idea that the freedom and welfare of some people is less important than others. Slaves were the engine that drove the early American economy. It quite literally built what we know as the United States.

But slavery has always troubled the conscience of Americans. Legislation, court battles and eventually a civil war are evidence of a nation’s discomfort with this peculiar institution. However, it took centuries for that discomfort to force any change. And the change was painful.

The inscription on the pediment of the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C. reads, “Equal Justice Under Law”. Even in 1935 when the court building was completed, that statement would not have applied to people of color. The landmark 1857 Supreme Court Dred Scott decision was probably the most famous case of how “equal” does not always equal “equal”. In federal court, Dred Scott and his wife, having lived for extended periods in two “free” states, sued their owner for their freedom. In a highly convoluted and shaky argument, Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney, backed by a mostly southern, pro-slavery Court, ignored all legal precedents and wrote the opinion that the Constitution and its framers did not intend for African Americans to ever become citizens. Slaves or freemen of color had no right to sue in federal court. Furthermore, the Court stated that the federal legislature could not make decisions for states as to whether they would be free or slave. This put thousands of people in the untenable position of being citizens of a state but not citizens of the United States. This status was not to be corrected until after the Civil War with the ratification of the 13th and 14th Amendments and the end of slavery. Some would say, however, especially in light of the George Floyd murder, that the ideal of “Equal Justice” still eludes us.

Jim Crow laws describe a collection of state and local laws enacted during the 100-year period after the Civil War and ratification of the 13th and 14th Amendments. These laws had the purpose of limiting the movement, education, voting rights and access to housing, transportation, work and healthcare of African Americans. Even in progressive states like California, so-called ‘sundowner laws’ restricted travel by African Americans after dark. Voting suppression, not very different from proposed voter identification laws today, was extremely common, requiring voters to be landowners or to have an identification card that was not possible for black citizens to obtain. Criminal penalties for African Americans were harsher and of longer duration and lynch mobs enacted their own form of justice, often on false charges. White supremacist groups like the KKK, the Proud Boys, Aryan Nation, etc., arose in support of this inequitable system.

Returning to the story of the young man and woman at the beginning of this article, it is necessary to state that Black Lives Do Matter. Because in the history of our country, in our laws and in our society, the word “All” in “All Lives Matter” had never included Black Lives, just as “all men are endowed by their Creator” and “with liberty and justice for all” did not include Black Lives. The Middle Passage, Dred Scott and Jim Crow are all historical proofs of this inequity.

 Understanding that racism has been a constant feature in the history of our country is the first step toward eradicating it. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops defines Racism as the attitude that “arises when—either consciously or unconsciously—a person holds that his or her own race or ethnicity is superior, and therefore judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy of equal regard.”[[3]](#footnote-3) But racism is not just an individual sin. The abuse of power and privilege has been an unfortunate staple in our government, our criminal justice, housing and education systems. Sadly, this extends even to our Church, although I pray that we are getting better at listening to the cries for justice. The Civil Rights Movement has done a great deal, but it is hard to change the hearts and minds of groups who, on one side, are fearful of a loss of control or power and the other side who have been told that they do not matter for so long that even they believe it. Racism demeans everyone. Although slavery as an institution was outlawed in the United States in 1863, its legacy endures. The Middle Passage, the Dred Scott decision and Jim Crow continue to inflict trauma on the psyche of our country. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the three ideals of the Declaration of Independence, did not apply to African slaves for the first quarter century of their presence in what became the United States and some would argue that they do not apply to this day.

June 19, 1865, the date when slaves were liberated in Galveston Texas, also known as Freedom Day, Cel-Liberation Day and Jubilee Day, or simply, Juneteenth, may have marked the end of slavery in the United States but the journey to racial equality is a long and tortuous road whose end we still have a difficult time envisioning. I believe that Juneteenth will take on special significance in the coming years as our nation continues to wrestle with the issue of racial injustice and discrimination, the legacy of what has been labeled the “original sin” of our nation, Slavery. The protest marches and violence of the summer of 2020 spurred by the murder of George Floyd and others are the responses to continuing legacy of slavery. As people of Faith, we are called to contribute to the healing of this terrible wound that has left our society so broken. When Black Lives are included in the “All”, we will finally “get it”.

1. It should be noted that the first slaves in the American colonies were Native Americans. These were captured by either the colonists, themselves, or through inter-tribal warfare and then sold to colonists. As many as 50,000 were sold in the South Carolina market between 1670 and 1715. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ellis, Joseph J. *Founding Brothers* (2000) New York, Random House with data from 1790 U.S. Census [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The document Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love - A Pastoral Letter Against Racism was developed by the Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It was approved by the full body of bishops as a formal statement of the same at its November 2018 General Meeting. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)