

# Mass for Peace and Justice in Baltimore

## Introduction

Last Tuesday morning, I came by to say hello to Father Bomberger and to see how the parish and neighborhood were doing after a very difficult night. When I got to the Rectory, Father Ray wasn't there. We were told we could find him across the street and there he was, a lone figure, starting the cleaning up process. Later that day he was joined by over 100 volunteers.

Talking with Father Ray, I felt his deep love for this community, and for each of you who make up this parish family. I saw firsthand how he is leading and guiding this parish to be a community of hope and a place of love and service. Father Ray, you have our undying gratitude.

This morning I came to offer all of you, sisters and brothers, my warmest thanks for keeping the light of Christ burning brightly even when it seems to be eclipsed by injustice, indifference, and violence. I came to offer a humble and prayerful word of encouragement - to you, Fr. Ray, to parish leaders, to every member of this parish, and to all who look to this community as a source of hope and support.

## Freddie Gray

Freddie Gray was your neighbor and his family members continue to be your neighbors. On this Sunday following his funeral, we remember him. Freddie Gray was not merely a symbol but a real person who was beset by challenges that face countless young people in this city every day. His family, his friends mourn his passing and so should we. We should pray that he enjoy the happiness of life eternal. It was for him that Christ died on the Cross and rose from the tomb, just as Jesus died and rose for each one of us; may Freddie rest in peace!

Yet even as we pray for Freddie Gray as a unique person, created and loved by God, we know that his arrest and the manner of his death have struck a very deep chord, throughout the City of Baltimore and throughout the United States and beyond. The arresting officers have been indicted and we do not know what the outcomes of their

cases will be. What we do know is that Freddie Gray's death has brought to the surface long-standing issues of what we call in Catholic moral theology "structural sin" - Structural sin or social sin goes beyond individual wrongdoing. It is the sum of peoples' injustice and indifference that end up creating a society where it is difficult, almost impossible, for human beings to flourish, to lead lives that are happy, productive, and secure.

When we see loss of life, abandoned row houses, lack of jobs, failing schools, drugs, insecure family situations, mistrust between communities and civic officials, and we see this going on decade after decade, then we must acknowledge the right of people who see no way out to make their voices heard, to lift up their frustration and anger publicly - yet to do so in a way that does not create more injustice and more destruction. We are here as a church community because we want to make a difference. We are here to join hands with good people all over this city and beyond who are volunteering, educating, reaching out to young people, providing services for the elderly and the vulnerable. We want to build bridges of repentance, reconciliation, understanding, and trust. We want to take our rightful place in a larger dialogue, both local and national, that will truthfully and effectively address the deep systemic issues urban neighborhoods and families are facing. May our broken hearts be a source of healing!

### **Light From Today's Scriptures**

Yet today the Word of God tells us we cannot do this on our own. We are not a government agency or a political party; we're a church. And that means we take our direction and find our strength from the Word of God proclaimed in Scripture and the Word of God made flesh, received in the Holy Eucharist. What, then, do the Scriptures say? What does our Eucharistic Lord want us to see?

Jesus tells us he's the vine and we're the branches. He tells us to remain in him just as he remains in us. He tells us, "Without me you can do nothing." And here is how we should apply his words to our lives today: Before we can make good, life-giving connections with other people in our lives, whether it's our immediate family or in our community - we first have to be connected to Jesus - we have to personally encounter the saving love of Jesus - & we can say to ourselves, "I've already done that!" "I can check that off my list!" We can't afford to be branches that are barely

connected to the vine. Our connection to Jesus has to be strong, it has to be united; it has to be unbreakable. Only then does Jesus' love flow freely into our hearts, our families, our parish, our community. The way that connection is made strong is prayer: Mass on Sunday absolutely! There's no substitute for receiving the Lord into our hearts. But also prayer before a crucifix, the Rosary, reading the Scripture every day. The Gospel also tells us we have to let our heavenly Father prune us, to trim us back, to help us get rid of anything will cause us to wither & drop away from Christ the vine. That means we have to look into our own hearts to see what we're saying or doing to prolong injustice and indifference, to keep walls of mistrust intact, or what we might be failing to do so as to tear down those same walls.

Now, we're not the first ones to learn this lesson. Take, for example, St. Paul in today's first reading. Paul was not exactly wallflower - he was a man of strong opinions and fiery spirit. Before his conversion he persecuted Christians and he was good at it. After his conversion, he started preaching the Gospel but much of the time he was actually fighting with his opponents. In fact his fellow Christians were afraid of him, and the Greeks living in Jerusalem got so mad at him they were ready to kill him. So the disciple Barnabas took charge of Paul and they sent him back to his hometown, Tarsus, to pray and reflect. All the while God the Father was pruning Paul - not making him into someone other than other who he was - not making a coward out of a courageous man - but helping him channel his faith, his courage, his convictions, his personality ... so that instead of arguing he would preach the Gospel and preach it constructively.

Maybe that's what we need to pray for. I know that's what I'm asking the Lord to do for me this Sunday and friends, I hope you'll join me in that prayer and I'll tell you why I think it's an important prayer for me and for you. We have a lot of work ahead of us. In the coming days, the news cameras will move on and eventually Baltimore will be out of the headlines. And then, there will be the temptation to go back to business as usual: the same problems, the same unaddressed issues, the same anger, the same mistrust. We need to be connected as branches to the Vine so we will remain in the Lord and we will remain together. We need to allow the Father of mercies to cut away from us whatever is in our hearts that will make it harder to have those constructive conversations and engage in those joint efforts that will make a real and lasting difference in our community.

## **Conclusion**

St. John the beloved Apostle gives us some parting advice this morning: "Children," he says, "let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth." I think that's great advice for me, for us, and for our wider community. Let us believe with all our heart and soul in the name of Jesus Christ and love one another as he has commanded us.

Then the Church and this City of Baltimore will be at peace. God bless you and keep you in his love!