Baltimore: The Unheard and the Helpers

On Monday, April 27th our daughter returned to graduate studies in Baltimore after a weekend visit. By that evening we were watching media reports of riots, looting, and fires in the city she has called home for the past year. Protests had spiraled just hours after the funeral for Freddie Gray, who died of a severe spinal cord injury while in police custody. By Friday she had joined thousands of peaceful protesters who marched for over six hours demanding justice. Many were celebrating state’s attorney Marilyn Mosby’s announcement that charges had been filed against six police officers involved in the arrest and death of Gray. As a parent I am grateful that my children participate in peaceful protest as a way of demonstrating the values they uphold and the solidarity they can express with those who struggle.

Over the past week I have read and watched countless reports and commentaries about Baltimore from every political and spiritual persuasion representing the far left to the far right. And I have tried to make some sense of it through the lens of my own experience and conscience. Two quotes have been especially helpful to me. The first is from Martin Luther King, Jr. who said “...a riot is the language of the unheard.” While never condoning violence himself, King understood that righteous indignation and anger are natural human responses to oppression and persecution. I am sickened by the number of tragic deaths of unarmed African Americans at the hands of those charged with their public safety. If I was the mother of Eric Garner or Freddie Gray or Michael Brown I know I would be enraged, especially if I knew my child was but one of so many others in a litany of loss and pain. I cannot condemn the riots, the looting, and the arson if I am not equally willing to condemn the history of racism, violence, and corruption that often leads to such explosive responses. A riot IS the language of the unheard.

The second quote that resonates with me comes from Mr. Rogers: “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’” In the last week all kinds of people have turned out to help the city of Baltimore. While it might not be surprising that clergy of all faiths have been working together to help establish calm and to continue to work for racial reconciliation, helpers have come from unexpected corners as well. According to some reports rival gang members came together to protect local businesses from looting and vandalism. One gang member said they made sure no black youths, or reporters, were injured by rioters. Other helpers were ordinary citizens who came out to sweep up debris and to make sure no black youths, or reporters, were injured by rioters. Other helpers were ordinary citizens who came out to sweep up debris and to make sure no black youths, or reporters, were injured by rioters. Other helpers were ordinary citizens who came out to sweep up debris and to make sure no black youths, or reporters, were injured by rioters.

While some level of calm may have returned to Baltimore the story is far from over. In the days, weeks, and months ahead much more soul searching still needs to happen in that community and in every community. May each of us in our own little way listen to the song that underlies the anger and may we be among the helpers who are trying to respond.  

By Anne Gibbons
Assistant Chaplain and Director of the Bonner Leader Program

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