

## **Waking Up: Conversations about Race for the Passionist Family.**



The Passionist Solidarity Network recently offered a six week series of "circle" gatherings for the Passionist Family to engage in conversations about racial justice. Anchored in prayer and the Passionist charism, conversations explored the reality of systemic racial injustice, white privilege, economic disparity, police violence, and how we can move out of our comfort zones into action.

Fr. Jack Conley CP, a member of the team facilitating the series, recently delivered a homily in his community where he "took a chance" to speak of how we can fail to learn when we avert our eyes. "I am embarrassed — ashamed, to admit that I never heard story--and I grew up in Chicago. Maybe it was simply succumbing to the temptation to avert one's eyes--but I never heard the story of Emmett Till until six years ago when Laquan McDonald, 17-year-old African American was killed in Chicago on October 20, 2014. While McDonald was slowly walking away, a police officer unloaded 16 bullets into the youth, most of them as he lay on the ground

"We don't need to demonize, nor bludgeon each other with guilt, but we do need to enter into a crucial conversation, we need to talk about it, because it's pretty clear we have not talked about racism in the past." (Fr. Jack's Homily follows.)

**Fr. Jack Conley  
Homily**

**St. Teresa of Avila • Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> Week Ordinary Time • October 15, 2020**

### **1**

I'm a softie when it comes to those short vignettes of thoughtfulness and kindness on the final footage of the evening news.

Some time ago I was stirred by the narrative around a skating park in South Brunswick, NJ

13-year-old Gavin Mabes got caught on video-tape showing his true character.

Gavin and several middle-school friends had just arrived at the skate park.

The park was **empty** — except for little Carter Bruynell, who was there with his mother, celebrating his fifth birthday.

Carter is on the autism spectrum, and big groups of older kids can make him nervous, so his mom, Kristen, was fully prepared to get him out of there.

But she **wasn't** prepared for what happened next.

Immediately Gavin started chatting with the little guy, telling him he was already better on the skateboard at 5 than he was as an older kid.

And the rest of his friends kind of followed suit and then started singing Happy Birthday to Carter," Kristen said, beginning to tear up.

"That really blew me away, because you just want to see the kindness in the world. And I wanted Carter to have a good birthday, but he had the best."

Today's readings got me thinking of all the kinds of human experiences that can increase and swell, almost naturally.

Gavin Mabes and his classmates are wonderful examples.

Way back when I was in college students would drink a very sweet and very cheap wine called **Ripple**.

Mind you, I never drank the stuff...!

I had cultivated a far more refined taste for good quality cabernet sauvignon!

Anyway, today's feast Teresa of Avila,  
reformer of the Carmelites and reformer of the Church,  
got me thinking of another RIPPLE:

...the kind of ripple that occurs when you toss a stone into a placid lake,  
and concentric circles begin to move out and form and transform the lake

## 2

Remember how with Elijah's intervention,  
the widow's jug of oil lasted far beyond one batch of loaves.  
Or the little boy's lunch of a couple of fish and several loaves of bread  
fed more than 5000 people.

When we do something in God's name,  
however small and insignificant the act may look to others,  
it has the capacity to create a 'ripple effect',  
touching other people and drawing them closer to God.

These things are often described as 'random acts of kindness'.

The ripple effect is defined as

*'the continuing and spreading results of an event or action.'*

The healing of the cripple described in Acts of the Apostles chapter 3  
was like a pebble being thrown into water;  
it created ripples all around.

Some of these were positive (*2000 people being added to the church*);  
some not so much! (*less favorable was an overnight stay in prison for Peter and John, and a  
subsequent interrogation by the religious leaders resulting in being instructed not to speak in the  
name of Jesus again!*)

Today's readings offer another ripple — in a series of contrasts actually:

Ephesians: "In Christ and through his **blood** we have been redeemed."

(*early church hymn, a mini-confession of faith  
woven into these lines of wonder and adoration*)

Luke: "the **blood** of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world."

Jesus repeats stories about the Kingdom of Heaven having this ripple effect:

small bit of yeast leavens or transforms the whole batch of dough. (Matthew 13:33)

And the Gospels are saturated with examples of this ripple effect —

as Jesus liberates those weighed-down with oppressive yokes

bringing joy to broken hearts

sowing seeds of hope in the desperate and the doomed

And this is what God is doing NOW in human history.

And it's having a ripple effect... however...

## 3

Archbishop — Saint Oscar Romero once said,

"Preaching that does not point out sin  
is not the preaching of the Gospel.

A preaching that awakens,  
a preaching that enlightens,  
as when a light-turned-on  
awakens, and of course, annoys a sleeper...  
That is the preaching of Christ, calling:  
Wake up! Be converted!  
This is the church's authentic preaching." Romero thundered.

**"Woe to you who build the memorials of the prophets  
whom your fathers killed."**

Isn't it interesting how we as Church canonize Joan of Arcs, Martin Luther Kings, Oscar Romeros...  
just decades after they were criticized by journalists, disparaged by Church authority, then  
martyred!

And today, I think of another junior high student, a 14-year-old African American,  
whose name became an icon in civil rights movement.

**Emmett Till** lived with his mother in Chicago, but on August 28, 1955,  
while visiting with relatives in Mississippi,  
was accused of offending a white woman in her family's grocery store.  
That night he was kidnapped by the woman's husband and his half-brother.  
Emmett's body, tortured and brutally murdered,  
was found in Tallahatchie River 3 days later.  
His killers were acquitted by an all-white jury.  
Emmett's mother insisted on an open casket;  
as tens of thousands viewed his horrendously disfigured face  
through the casket's glass enclosure.

I am embarrassed — ashamed, to admit that I never heard story  
(and I grew up in Chicago)

(Maybe it was simply succumbing to the temptation  
**to avert one's eyes**)

But I never heard the story of Emmett Till  
until six years ago

When Laquan McDonald, 17-year-old African American  
killed in Chicago on October 20, 2014

While McDonald was slowly walking away  
the police officer unloaded 16 bullets into the youth,  
most of them as he lay on the ground

Political scientist Dr. Megan Ming Francis,  
"Not a few bad apples, the tree is infected"

Don't need to demonize, nor bludgeon each other with guilt,  
but we do need to enter into a crucial conversation, we need to talk about it,  
because it's pretty clear we have not talked about racism in the past

I need not recite the long litany of names this morning,  
as racism continues to haunt us in this country.

But we DO need to enter into that conversation,  
as challenging as it may be.

#### 4

Finally, under the umbrella of **RIPPLE EFFECT**,  
we know this phenomenon can be either positive or negative,  
the impact can be life-giving and hopeful, or corrosive and violent

Gavin Mabes' true character was captured on that video  
challenging lots of us, not just his 8<sup>th</sup> grade classmates  
The decision to be kind, to engage, what Pope Francis calls "culture of encounter"  
will determine the outcome

But we are living in an age where civil discourse is dissolving,  
a time when even families decide that Thanksgiving Dinner must have rules  
where particular topics are not allowed for discussion

Isn't it interesting that Jesus reserves his harshest rebuke,  
not for sinners — tax collectors and prostitutes,  
but for leadership... because of their hypocrisy, their rigidity,  
their unwillingness to engage, to encounter, to compromise  
Part of the responsibility of leadership, it seems to me —  
(whether Church, corporate or business, political leadership)  
is to **portray "best practices"**, to **model good behavior**  
to create a positive, life-giving and hopeful ripple effect

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I conclude with a stanza from Robert Frost's, *The Road Not Taken*

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

Photo: Linus Nylund