

I have been flummoxed by the reactions to the whole Black Lives Matter movement. There is a lot of anger that has been unleashed in white communities, with the complaint that “all lives matter.” But the reality is that all lives have NOT been given the same opportunities, direction and support to ‘make it’ in society. And when I’ve said anything about how privileged we are as white people in a homily – it always provokes some nasty emails/notes.

I had some idea of what is going on, but found a piece from Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, which helped me make sense of this. The rest of my remarks will be an adaptation of what he said in an article called FROM THE HOUSE OF FEAR TO THE HOUSE OF LOVE.

Henri Nouwen frequently asked the question: “How can we live inside a world marked by fear, hatred and violence – and not be destroyed by it?” This is a major task of growing in the love of Jesus Christ. As His followers, how do we stop from being sucked into the house of fear so as to live in the house of love?

We live in a world of great division, hatred, and violence. It’s the main course of the news every night. Fear and hatred get translated into violence and death. But what’s true at that level is true also, in a less pronounced way, in our ordinary lives. Inside our families, churches, and communities we see the problems of the world played out on the small-screen of our daily lives. Bitterness, suspicion, dismissing those we disagree with, anger, a sense of losing our place of privilege penetrate our most intimate relationships. We often don’t recognize these for what they are – and consider them simply part of the normal give and take of everyday life. But gossip, slander, cynicism, cutting remarks, coldness, dismissing family members because we disagree with them are really the public events of the evening news manifested in our private lives. What we see on the big-screen of the evening news, is pretty much what we have lived during our day.

What this does is keep us inside the house of fear. Because we live inside of families, churches, and communities where suspicion, gossip, cynicism, fractured relationships exist – our first instinct is to protect ourselves – to be suspicious, to be hard, to be cynical, to be angry. We live inside the house of fear rather than inside the house of love. It’s obvious where the gospel tells us we need to reside.

So how do we save ourselves from getting lost in the house of fear? How do we remain tender when so much around us is hard? How do we remain free of fear when there is so much anger around? How do we continue to share what is deep and intimate inside us when we live inside of circles rife with anger, judgment, and dismissive attitudes? In fact, how do we even strive to deal with this when, so often, we are just as guilty as everyone else?

There are no easy answers. Moreover this is not something that we can ever accomplish once and for all. The world is not divided up between those who have conquered fear and those who haven’t. Rather our own days and hours are divided up between those times when we live more in fear and those times when we live more in love. There are times when our fears take over and we act out of them, just as there are other times when grace opens us beyond fear and we can act in graciousness and love.

The task of growing in Christ is linked with moving from fear to love. This is partly what Jesus meant when He urged us to save ourselves from this world and when, in His priestly prayer (cf. Jn 17), He prayed that we might be where HE is – in love, free from fear.

To be free of fear, suspicion, judgment, anger is a major spiritual task. One of the great ironies is that, both in spirituality and human life in general, this is often easier for us when we are young and immature than when we are older and supposedly wiser. Why? Because when we are young, totally independent of maturity, we are still naturally more idealistic, more wary of cynicism and quick judgments, less jaded, and less in touch with our wounds. Deep neuroses, as Freud pointed out, hit us with a vengeance in mid-life and beyond. It's then that it becomes harder to live inside of the house of love, free from bitterness and distrust. It's there too that the air that we breathe can be so bitter and angry.

The spiritual task of mid-life and beyond is to resist hardness, cynicism, bitterness, and fear and to become childlike and trusting again. But this is not easy, as any therapist or spiritual director will tell you. Alice Miller, the great Swiss analyst, suggests that the spiritual task of mid-life and beyond is that of grieving – grieving until the very foundations of our lives shake. Grieving, she suggests is the only thing that can save us from bitterness – not a bad phrasing really for a key element within the process of transformation – of dying and rising in Christ.

The full answer of course lies in prayer, sustained daily prayer. God is always inviting us into the house of love, but, given the hardness we so often experience in our everyday lives, it is only in deep prayer that we can hear a voice gentle and trusting enough to entice us to let go of fear and move beyond the need to protect ourselves. And allow others to thrive as well! (adapted from posting of 19 May, 2002)