

Monitor ingrained reactions that hurt your soul

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

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[This is Bishop Paul's May column for secular newspapers, usually different from his column in Diocesan Life. Published by The Morning Call, Allentown, on the first (occasionally, the second) Saturday of every month, the column is sent to every daily and many weekly papers throughout our 14 counties. More than 100 columns have been published over the past nine years.]

The French say that if you smell the same bad smell in three different places, it's you.

Earlier this year I lived for nine weeks among 2700 people whom I had never seen before and with whom I had no professional or personal connection – a completely blank slate. You can imagine my surprise when some familiar stresses appeared in a few of those new relationships. Others were not having those problems in the same situations; but some, to be sure, had other conflicts.

Haunted by the French proverb, I began carefully monitoring my responses to people around me. I also sharpened my people-watching skills, looking for clues as others experienced their big and small stresses in that temporary community of strangers. (The bloody fist-fight between two women in the laundry room was probably the classic moment.)

It was a reminder that people will always be people; wherever we go, there will be stimuli to which we may react with aggression, anger, irritation, or hurt. Each response is a choice we made long ago, and is now so ingrained and automatic that it seems like a “feeling.” The problem is about us, not about those who stimulate us in ways we don't like.

Constant monitoring of one's perceptions and reactions can be a big

task, complicated for religious people when the person to whom we react in a bad-smelling way is actually in the wrong. Religion is very much about how to live, and that characteristic includes beliefs about right and wrong, clean and unclean, in and out. The clear violation of clear standards can trigger bad-smelling reactions that hurt our souls more than they set situations straight.

Part of the problem is that the many religious traditions generally endorse more than one model for the word “justice.” Some of us retain the message that justice restores: it puts things right and sets individuals on a path to healing.

Some of us retain the message that justice is about revenge, that things cannot be right until someone has been shamed and perhaps punished.

Focusing on revenge and shame is quite different from insisting on accountability, which I entirely endorse personally and in the criminal justice system. My concern here, however, is with the heart.

The need for revenge and punishment has to be carefully watched, especially when we disguise it. We have all scoffed at public figures whose various crusades betray their own needs to punish, avenge, and accumulate power. It is obvious in journalism, religion, politics, and law, to name just a few professions. My recent experiences, however, invite examination of how those needs can affect ordinary people in ordinary situations.

Readers of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures (Deuteronomy 32 or Romans 12) are invited to leave vengeance to God, and be themselves more concerned about the kind of justice that puts things right for all. The work of the Truth and Justice Commission in the new South Africa is probably the best modern attempt to enact these principles: white people’s owning of what occurred under Apartheid sets everyone free. The need for revenge evaporates.

In my comic book-reading days I used to fantasize about belonging to

the Justice League of America, those super-heroes who specialized in giving bad guys what they deserve. My recent experiences and my reflections on the French proverb have led to my resignation from the League. I will try to focus on putting things right rather than exposing things wrong. I'm hoping to be duller but more effective – and perhaps to smell better.