

Tuesday, September 22, 2020

There is no law against such things

- Pastor Hank French

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things (Galatians 5:22-23).

Eleven years ago I wrote a book about the late Maya Angelou, the American poet, memoirist, essayist and civil rights activist who died in 2014. To write the book, I read all of her many books of poetry, her three books of essays, and her seven autobiographies. I found her to be a person whose life experiences gave her an uncommon wisdom and keen insight into American culture and the many issues that still trouble our country.

Among those issues is the increasing collapse of civility, increasing tribalism, growing mistrust of the fundamental institutions of American society, strife in our streets, urgency over the need to address ongoing racial inequality, gender inequality and economic inequality. Maya Angelou identified the problem. I quote:

“Curious, but we have come to a place, a time, when virtue is no longer considered a virtue. The mention of virtue is ridiculed, and even the word itself has fallen out of favor. Contemporary writers rarely employ such words as *purity, temperance, goodness, worth, or even moderation....*

“We need to examine what the absence of those qualities has done to our communal spirit, and we must learn how to retrieve them from the dust heap of nonuse and return them to a vigorous role in our lives.

“Nature will not abide a vacuum, and because we have let the positive particulars go, they have been replaced with degeneracy, indifference, and vice. Our streets explode with cruelty and criminality, and our homes are rife with violence and abuse. Too many of our leaders shun the higher moral road and take the path to satisfy greed while they voice hollow rhetoric.”

I think she is right. The growing absence of virtue is harming our communal spirit and “we must learn how to retrieve them from the dust heap of nonuse and return them to a vigorous role in our lives.” But how do we do that?

The “virtues” whose diminishment in both public and private life that Maya Angelou writes about mirror the Christian virtues that St. Paul wrote about: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” These virtues Paul calls the “fruit of the Spirit.” His use of the word fruit is both intentional and critically important. Fruits need to ripen if they are to nourish our lives; they need to be tended to, cultivated and cared for or else they will rot on the branch, shrivel on the vine.

The fruit of the Spirit have been planted within us, but to no avail if we do not intentionally, deliberately tend to them, cultivate and care for them. For the sake of both our communal life and personal lives, we can do nothing better than to reclaim the fruit of the Spirit as essential for our health and the health of our communities.

Prayer: Holy God, help to ripen within me the fruit of your Spirit that I may be a part of the healing of the world. Amen.