

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Fear, selfishness, prejudice require call for mercy



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Each year during the Christian season of Lent, the Grand Rapids Choir of Men & Boys present a concert of readings and songs appropriate to the season. Last week's concert included a favorite piece of mine, the "Miserere Mei, Deus" by Gregorio Allegri. The Miserere is based on the Latin text of Psalm 51, which begins "Have mercy on me, O God" and was commissioned at the request of Pope Urban VII in the 1600s.

While it is usually sung in Latin, in this year's concert, it was sung in English translation. It reminded me of not only the personal need for mercy, but also of our corporate need for mercy in our time. During times of conflict, fear and even hatred, we need the prayer: "Make me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me."

Mercy is a theme shared by nearly all of the world's religions. It is the recognition that we cannot, on our own, live up to what it means to be authentically human. It is the recognition that we do not always love our neighbor as ourselves, or love God with our whole heart, soul, strength and mind. It not only appears in the Psalm text shared by both Jewish and Christian scriptures, but

is also reflected in the Qur'an, where nearly every chapter begins with "In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful."

As we look at our world and even our own country, the need for mercy, graciousness, respect and love seems to be in short supply. Politics divide not only our country but families and friends. Captured by our individual echo chambers, we have lost the ability to understand, let alone love our neighbor. "Have mercy, O God."

Fear of the "other," because of their religion, skin color, or what they wear, has led to discrimination and violence. We build walls around ourselves that prevent our seeing the humanity of others.

One of the readings in the Lenten concert was from the allegory by Oscar Wilde called "The Selfish Giant." In this story, the giant was upset with the children who were playing and enjoying the beautiful garden that he had built.

"What are you doing here?" cries the giant. "My own garden is my own garden, anyone can see that, and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself." So the giant builds a high wall around the garden and posts a "No Trespassing" sign. In the Oscar Wilde allegory, the giant eventually has a change of heart, and, in the words of the Psalmist,

Rabbi Sigal Memorial Lecture

Who: Dr. Simran Jeet Singh

What: "Islamophobia, Hate Crimes and the Racialization of Religious Identity"

When: March 30, 7 p.m.

Where: Loosemore Auditorium, GVSU's DeVos Center

401 W. Fulton St., Grand Rapids

Register online: sigal2017.eventbrite.com

"renews a right spirit."

Another passage from Psalm 51 included in the Miserere speaks of burnt offerings, which in the Latin is "holocaustis." What a horrible word to use for that most terrible event of the last century. To think of it in any way as an "offering," no wonder many of our Jewish neighbors despise even the word and prefer to speak of the "Shoah," from the Hebrew word catastrophe.

Earlier in the week, I attended an event on my campus sponsored by the Hillel chapter, which drew more than 600 students. It featured Magda Brown, who described being

a "holocaust survivor" in 1944. As a Hungarian teenager, she was sent to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, where she was separated from her family. Magda never saw her family again in the death camp. Later, she was selected, along with a number of young girls, to be transferred to a munition factory in Germany, where the dangerous chemicals with which she worked turned her skin yellow and her hair orange.

Toward the end of the war, they were sent on a death march to Buchenwald, where they would certainly be killed. In the middle of the night, a few of them crawled to a nearby barn and hid in piles of straw until they were later found and liberated by American soldiers. Following six months in a displaced persons camp, she came to America, where now, at nearly 90 years of age, she goes to campuses to tell her story so that we will never forget. (Learn more about her story at: magdabrown.com)

History has shown that mankind is capable of great acts of evil, as individuals and as nations. We must continually be on guard against fear, which leads to violence, selfishness, which destroys joy, and prejudice, which can kill. We are continually in need of crying out, "Have mercy, O God."

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