

Though it made its debut a few years before I was born, perhaps one of the most iconic ads of all time is the “Buy the World a Coke” commercial from 1971. Featuring a take off of the popular song from the New Seekers “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing,” the ad features people of different races and cultures all enjoying a Coke together on a sunny day on a hillside.

It’s a great ad because in the sense that’s kind of how things are supposed to be. Not so much with Coke, though it’s my pop of choice, but with respect to how people work and come together.

Unfortunately, as we all know, there can be much division in society.

Sometimes that’s not a bad thing at all; we have different tastes and see things differently. At times we can learn from one another. And sometimes we need to let go of something and compromise. Other times we need to recognize the gifts that others may have. And sometimes we have to stand up when there’s something really wrong for what is right, to help others see the truth.

Clifton Davis, the actor, singer and songwriter, came to know this one day as a child when he went on a class trip to Washington, D.C., and then found out some of the ugly realities of racism when the class was going to visit an amusement park in Maryland. But what he learned from that experience, and from something he saw years later, was that while inside mankind can be evil, inside is also an incredible capacity for love and mercy.

Clifton was in attendance at a ceremony at a ballroom in Cleveland on April 17, 1991, and was the entertainment for the evening.

The ceremony's main guest was Dondre Green, a black high school golf player from Monroe, Louisiana. He was surrounded by a lot of athletes and celebrities. Clifton did his best to make the nervous young man feel at home.

One month earlier, Dondre had been just one more black student attending a predominantly white Southern school. Although most of his friends and classmates were white, Dondre's race was never an issue. Then, on April 17, 1991, Dondre's black skin provided an incident that made nationwide

news. It took place at the Caldwell Parish Country Club in Columbia, Louisiana.

Dondre and his teammates were at the putting green practicing, too absorbed to notice the conversation between a man and St. Frederick athletic director James Murphy. After disappearing into the clubhouse, Murphy returned to his players.

“I want to see the seniors,” he said. “On the double.” His face seemed strained as he gathered the four students, including Dondre.

“I don’t know how to tell you this,” he said, “but the Caldwell Parish Country Club is reserved for whites only.” Murphy paused and looked at Dondre. His teammates glanced at each other in disbelief.

“I want you seniors to decide what our response should be,” Murphy continued. “If we leave, we forfeit this tournament. If we stay, Dondre can’t play.”

As Clifton listened, his own childhood memory from 32 years prior broke free.

In 1959, he was 13 years old, a poor black kid living with his mother and stepfather in a small black ghetto on Long Island, New York. His mother worked nights in a hospital, and his stepfather drove a coal truck. Needless to say, their standard of living was somewhat short of the American dream.

Nevertheless, when his 8th grade teacher announced a graduation trip to Washington, D.C., it never crossed his mind that he would be left behind. Besides a complete tour of the nation's capital, they would visit Glen Echo Amusement Park in Maryland. In Clifton's imagination, Glen Echo was Disneyland, Knott's Berry Farm and Magic Mountain rolled into one.

He hurried home and told his mom, and when he learned they couldn't afford it, he worked his tail off selling papers and cutting lawns and raised the money himself and joined his classmates to head to D.C.

Their hotel was not far from the White House. His roommate was Frank Miller, a white boy, the son of a businessman. Leaning together out of their

window and dropping water balloons on tourists quickly cemented their new friendship.

Every morning, almost a hundred of the kids loaded noisily onto their bus for another adventure. They sang their school fight song dozens of times en route to Arlington National Cemetery and even on an afternoon cruise down the Potomac River.

The visited the Lincoln Memorial twice, once in daylight, the second time at dusk. He and his classmates fell silent as they walked in the shadows of the 36 marble columns, one for every state in the Union that Lincoln labored to preserve. He stood next to his friend Frank at the base of the 19-foot seated statue. Spotlights made the white Georgian marble glow. Together, they read the famous words from Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg remembering the most bloody battle in the War between the States: "...we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom."

As Frank motioned Clifton into place to take his picture, he took one last look at Lincoln's face. Clifton thought to himself that Lincoln seemed alive and so terribly sad.

The next morning, Clifton understood a little better why Lincoln wasn't smiling. "Clifton," a chaperone said, "could I see you for a moment?"

Initially he thought he was in trouble for a direct water balloon hit on a lady and her poodle who walked under their window, but it wasn't about that.

"Clifton," she began, "do you know about the Mason-Dixon line?"

"No," he said, wondering what this had to do with drenching someone.

"Before the Civil War," she explained, "the Mason-Dixon line was originally the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania-the dividing line between the slave and free states." Having escaped one disaster, he could feel another brewing. He noticed her eyes were damp and her hands were shaking.

“Today,” she continued. “The Mason-Dixon line is a kind of invisible border between the North and the South. When you cross that invisible line out of Washington, D.C., into Maryland, things change.”

There was an ominous drift to the conversation, but he wasn’t following it. Why did she look so nervous?

“Glen Echo Amusement Park is in Maryland,” she said at last “and the management doesn’t allow Negroes inside.” She stared at Clifton in silence.

He was still grinning and nodding when the meaning finally sank in.

“you mean I can’t go to the park,” he stuttered, “because I’m a Negro?”

She nodded slowly. “I’m sorry Clifton,” she said, taking his hand.

“You’ll have to stay in the hotel tonight. Why don’t you and I watch a movie on television?”

He walked to the elevators feeling confusion, disbelief, anger and a deep sadness.

His friend asked him what happened, thinking they got in trouble for the water balloon.

Without saying a word, he went to the bed, laid down and cried. Frank was stunned into silence, as junior high boys didn't cry, at least not in front of one another.

It wasn't that he was just missing the class adventure that made him sad; it was as he put it the first time in his life he felt what it was like to be a "n" (n word).

Yes, there was discrimination up north but the color of his skin never kept him from an amusement park.

He explained to Frank what happened that it wasn't because of the water balloon. And then Frank shocked his friend by saying "well then I won't go either." For an instant they just froze. Frank was just a kid; he wanted to go

to the park as much as Clifton. But there was something even more important than the class night out. The next thing he knew, the room was filled with kids, and Frank was telling them “they don’t allow Negroes in the park, so I’m staying with Clifton.”

“Me too” said a second.

“Those jerks” said a third.

One by one the others said they were with him; a pint sized revolution began as he put it.

Dondre Green’s story brought that memory back to life. His golfing teammates, like Clifton’s childhood friends, made an important decision. If they stood by their friend it would cost them dearly. But when it came time to decide, like in that hotel room, those seniors said “let’s get out of here” and the all went to the van. As Dondre put it “they just turned and walked towards the van and didn’t even debate it.”

What followed was an awakening. The whole state of Louisiana was outraged, unaware this kind of thing was still going on in 1991, and wanted to make it right. The Louisiana House of Representatives proclaimed a Dondre Green day and passed legislation permitting lawsuits for damages, attorneys fees and court costs against any private facility that invites a team and bars them because of the race of a member.

Dondre concluded, his eyes filled with tears, "I love my coach and my teammates for sticking by me," he said. "It goes to show that there are always good people who will not give into bigotry. The kind of love they showed me that day will conquer hatred every time."

His friends had shown that kind of love too. A chaperone came into the room announcing he bought 13 tickets to the Senators-Tigers game for them all. No one in the group had ever been to a big league ball game before.

On the way to the stadium, they grew silent as the driver paused before the Lincoln memorial. He reflected that the statue made Lincoln look sad and tired, and he thought of the words of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address:

“...We here highly resolve...that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom...”

Clifton closes by saying that in his words and in his life, Lincoln made it clear that freedom is not free. Every time the color of a person’s skin keeps him out of an amusement park or off a country-club fairway, the war for freedom begins again. Sometimes the battle is fought with fists and guns, but more often the most effective weapon is a simple act of love and courage.

And so whenever Clifton hears those words from Lincoln’s speech at Gettysburg, he remembers his 11 white friends, and he feels hope once again. He likes to imagine that when they paused that night at the foot of his great monument, Mr. Lincoln smiled at last.

As we are all aware, there is so much division in the world. It’s not how it’s supposed to be though. And as Christians, we are called to remember we are all created in God’s image, and also meant to work together in this world He created.

It would be great if everyone “got it” like those 8th grade kids, or like the people who reacted to Dondre’s injustice. But sometimes we as humans can judge quickly based on race, political ideology, a last name or a rumor. Due to original sin, sometimes people can’t see that we are all humans, all created by God. It’s a result of division and animosity and all around us we can see jealousy and pride, from our workplaces to schools to our country to society as a whole.

This week our readings illustrate this from Numbers and Mark.

In the first reading, we are told that two men, Eldad and Medad, are not in the gathering when the Lord came down to Moses and took some of the spirit that was on Moses and given to the others so they too could prophesy. Eldad and Medad nonetheless are prophesying even though they were not with the others, having received His Spirit too. Moses asks him though why are you jealous for my sake, and wouldn’t it be wonderful if all were prophets and doing the work of the Lord. He says don’t be jealous.

When we get to the Gospel, John complains to Jesus in the same way as Joshua complained to Moses, saying someone was driving out demons in your name. Jesus said do not prevent him, as whoever is not against us is for us.

It's a reminder that we share a common mission, doing the work of God, bringing about good. Sometimes though we can't see it. But those kids saw it in Clifton's hotel room, and those seniors saw it the golf club, and soon many others did too. In fact, just two years after Clifton's story, protests started at the amusement park as people across races saw the injustice and it was fully integrated by 1961. It just takes a reminder of our common mission. The challenge for us is to strive to remember this truth. Sometimes it entails taking a stand; other times it entails letting something go trusting that maybe a different perspective is one to take when we share a mission. And it always involves introspection too, making sure we carefully think through our actions and that we're not doing them just for ourselves or to get our way.

With respect to taking a stand, our conscience tells us when there's something not right. Maybe a kid at school sees someone being picked on;

or someone crosses a line with comments at the dinner table; or the meeting after the meeting in the parking lot or conversation with neighbors or other parents becomes toxic with gossip. Other times a person may be saying things that are contrary to our faith in conversations. Or maybe they are being cruel or even abuse to a spouse or child. So what will we do in these situations? Some looked at Clifton and Dondre as different and surely some said “well, I’m not black so it doesn’t impact me.” But not those kids in the hotel room on Clifton’s trip or Dondre’s teammates. When we see things that aren’t right or someone hurting, we have to be compelled to act.

Sometimes though, we need to listen, and check our ego. Certainly we do this before we act, but sometimes there’s different ways of doing something. I think of as a priest in parish situations; from a building project to putting together a festival to trying to sort out liturgy and many other things, in a parish you have a lot of gifted people who come together. But these gifted people also have different opinions. It goes back to trying to remember we have a common mission that we hear about in that first reading and Gospel. As a pastor, there are times for instance when I have to make a decision that people disagree with. But other times I may

disagree with a person's position in a parish setting, but go forward anyway trusting the person saying "ok, we'll do it your way". It doesn't mean a decision isn't revisited later on, but it does mean that we have to also compromise and recognize the gifts of others, and avoid being jealous. So a good question to also ask ourselves is not only do we act, but do we listen to our parents, our spouses, our kids, our coworkers or fellow volunteers? Can we let something go? Can we compromise?

Authority can quickly corrupt and some people can't handle power. We have to remember we aren't the ones who should set limits to God's power. We have power given to us by God, but, as Moses reminded Joshua, so do others like Eldad and Medad. The disciples are taken up with their own power and authority. Power is given them to serve the kingdom, but it is easy to divert that power and authority to self-serving purposes. Priests have authority from God, but it is easy to use that influence for our own self-promotion, we can easily degenerate into money-grubbers, petty tyrants in our parishes, careerists, or snobs. Parents too are given authority in their homes for the good of their children. They can abuse that authority for selfish ends through possessiveness; never allowing their children to grow up. They can be authoritarian parents, always laying down the law and refusing to listen to any point of view but their own: 'My house my

rules. 'Children in their turn can be good at discovering just the right technique for manipulating their parents so that they do what they want. As they get older and discover their own powers they know just what to say and do to drive their parents into a frenzy of frustrated bad temper. All of this is a use of God-given authority for selfish ends. This is what the Gospel is about: how to use the authority given by God in his way not in our way. Using it at times means acting, like Jesus who turns over the tables in the Temple or the friends of Dondre and Clifton. Other times it means listening and recognizing we are connected to others and we need to respect them as well, or refrain from having it "our way" but taking another approach, reminding ourselves of our common mission.

All of us are very much aware of the divisions in our world today. Some of these are necessary; I have strong beliefs on issues that are rooted in my faith, and I have very strong beliefs on liberty that reflect my belief that rights come from God, not governments. But I am also impacted as we all are by original sin. And sometimes this can cloud my intellect even when I try my best. Coming to be with my Lord though at this altar reminds me that my mission is to follow Him; the King who came not to be served but to serve. And in doing that, it requires listening to Him, but also knowing I

have to act in the world, and sometimes do challenging things that upset people like our Lord did, but other times keep my mouth shut and listen and trust others too who work with me in the vineyard too, remembering Jesus trusted the apostles and many others to lead His Church. As we prepare to welcome our Lord into our souls at Communion, may our eyes and hearts be opened to this reality as we strive to serve Him, and see Him in all of God's people, working together as a people of hope who strive to make our world a better place and God's love known to all people.