

## Pastor's Wednesday Reflection – June 3, 2020

A blessed Wednesday to my faith family,

As unrest engulfs our nation, I am transported back 52 years to my childhood in Detroit. My grandmother lived in the suburb of Grosse Pointe Park, northeast of the city. But in that summer of unrest, 1967, I remember looking to the southwest toward the city, and observing this rather ominous orange glow. As it happens, the fires that had been set were so numerous and so intense that they painted the southern horizon an angry orange. They were the Flames of passion, the flames of injustice, the flames of frustration and they were making ashes of the narrative that there was, in fact, true justice for all. Although it had been more than a century since the signing of the emancipation proclamation, the remnants of slavery, America's original sin, continued to exert an ugly oppressive force upon those who had been "freed " and the deep frustration refused to be contained.

Once again, the nighttime sky in many cities is painted an angry orange. It has been more than a half a century since the Detroit riots in 1967 and the more widespread unrest the following year in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Certainly there has been progress since then. Jim Crow has been dismantled. The desegregation battle has been won (after a fashion). The Voting Rights act was passed (though subsequently dismantled). An African American has occupied the highest office in the land. There's been growth in black owned businesses, college enrollment, local and state government gains and progress along many other fronts.

But in the past several years, we have seen a resurgence of racist rhetoric, and a growing acceptance of xenophobic expression by people at all levels of our society. We remember the events of Charlottesville; the spectacle of Nazi's marching by torchlight through an American City spewing hatred – a sight that, by the way, made my WWII era veteran father nauseous. Now, in just a few short weeks, we've witnessed (I say that, because we have the video) a black jogger hunted down by vigilantes, a young black woman by the name of Breonna Taylor, an EMT whose life was about assisting others in their time of need, shot 8 times in her own home by the police, and now George Floyd.

Having witnessed all of this, I want to say that I understand what my black brothers and sisters are going through. I want to say that I understand the forces and feelings that drive protests and even the frustration that causes those protests to move from peaceful demonstration to violent expression. I don't. I can't. I don't live that reality. But I sure as heck can be frustrated, saddened and outraged.

When I see George Floyd's face down on the pavement with a white cop's knee on his neck murdered on the street in broad daylight, I can feel the sickening contorting of the call for justice and care for the oppressed that sounds nearly 200 times in Scripture. I can weep for our utter failure to heed God's direction in

Amos 5 to ***let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*** And I can feel Godly condemnation for our society as I remember the words of Isaiah: ***...Justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. .... Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter.***

All of that said, I am keenly aware of the fact that I can never speak to the plight of black and brown folks from the position of lived experience. I can guess at it and form reasonable conclusions about what “it must be like” based upon my observations, but that’s as far as I can go.

In some ways, it does not seem to be my story to tell. That’s why I want to share with you a Message from the Bishop of our Synod, The Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the ELCA, penned in response to the killing of George Floyd. As an African American, Bishop Curry writes from the position of one who has actually lived the experience. Here, then, is his message:

A Message From the Bishop  
Dear Partners in Ministry,

I am grateful for those of you who have reached out to me recently, and those who have encouraged me to write a statement about the events taking place in this country. As one of two African Descent male bishops in the ELCA, that is what I am doing here. Please know that as I write, my emotions are still raw, painful, and constantly changing. But here is what I have right now.

On the morning of Tuesday, May 26, 2020, I saw the headline shared by Bishop Pat Davenport in a Facebook post, and I cried. Skipping over the commentary, I clicked on the link. Immediately, I became fixated on the posture, the eyes, and the sounds of George Floyd as life began to leave his body and his face began to change. I moved my cell phone closer to my face and I continued to stare. I thought of myself, my brothers, my nephews...

I saw all of us in this, our neighbor, George Floyd. What’s next? I wondered. Will racial profiling lead to an officer’s knee on my neck? As George stopped breathing, I paused the video. I closed my eyes, and I cried some more. I cried for George Floyd. I cried for Ahmaud Arbery. I cried for Breonna Taylor, and for Dreasjon (Sean) Reed. I cried for Trevon Martin and Tamir Rice. I cried for Walter Scott and Laquan McDonald. I cried for all of these children of God, and for the countless others, known and unknown, who have fallen at the hands

of racism and brutality.

As my tears slowed, I felt compelled to sit in the tension of the moment. Hoping against hope, I restarted the video—looking for some sort of resurrection. Instead, I saw Officer Chauvin’s knee. His demeanor was so cavalier, and he appeared to be so comfortable, that one might mistakenly think that this act of murder was normal or routine.

I shared the video with the hashtag #ImTiredOfThis and turned off my phone. I was not okay! And yet, like all among us who experience racism, micro-aggressions, over-policing, and harassment every day, I quietly packed away this experience and returned to my life routines. But the things we pack away can’t stay packed away forever.

Within communities impacted the most by both police brutality and COVID-19, suppressed trauma has been transformed into direct action and civil disobedience, empowering communities to organize for justice throughout Metropolitan Chicago, Minneapolis, and the United States.

Unfortunately, some suppressed traumas have also ignited looting and the destruction of property. Such activity is neither the cure for the pandemic of systemic racism nor the perpetual brutality exercised against Black and Brown bodies, but it is a symptom of these things.

When developing a cure for a disease, doctors, scientists, and specialists of all kinds assemble with one common goal—to find a cure. Distinct from simply treating symptoms, a cure gets at the root of the thing that was causing the symptoms in the first place, so as to eradicate the disease.

Family in Christ, we need a cure. Our siblings are dying. If we choose to remain silent while benefiting from privilege, then we become complicit in that death, ensuring that justice and change will not be achieved.

Social statements are good and fine, but for change, for real and lasting change, we need to be in relationship. We need to come together with a common goal, striving collectively to eradicate racism and injustice in our communities, in the church, and in the world. May it be so, and in the words of 1 John 3:18, may it be so not in word or speech alone, but in action and in truth.

In this season of Pentecost, I pray for the Spirit to fill us all again with a renewed passion for God’s reign of justice and love, and a deepened desire to live out God’s mission in this synod, to proclaim the Gospel,

