

Pastoral Letter in the Midst of Crises

June 5, 2020

Dear brothers and sisters in the faith,

Now that most of you have received my stepdown letter, I thought it was time to send you another letter. While my last day as your General Presbyter will be December 31, I intend to go full bore until that day, not just cruising toward retirement.

We have all experienced several crises in recent months. First, we have had the pandemic, upending the way we work and worship. Those of us over a certain age or with underlying health conditions are still sheltering at home, living with some fear, and nearly all of us are carefully practicing social distancing. In our area, these steps have helped a great deal. The worst hit of our counties has had fewer than 250 cases, and very few deaths, so we are very fortunate.

Then there is the financial situation. Many people in our area have been furloughed or laid off from their jobs, and for those dependent upon the stock market for retirement funds, its rapid downturn can cause anxiety. Please don't take anything out of your investments. Right now, the losses are just in print, and not real. The money will come back. Please just give it time.

Third, and the main reason I am writing you today, is the horrific murder of George Floyd, captured on a phone camera, played over and over again on all sorts of media, and what it says about us as a nation. I don't know about you, but I am not accustomed to seeing someone callously killed with onlookers crying out for the person doing the killing to stop... and he doesn't. It reminds me of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, in the book of Acts, only now the crowd is crying out for the violence to stop. Then it doesn't. This is almost too painful to write.

You know the results; our cities have exploded with protests, mainly peaceful, some not. We see crowds of people holding signs saying, "Black Lives Matter". Political figures, pundits in newspapers, TV, radio and the web, and ordinary citizens hold forth, left and right. Our initial horrified unity around the unjust death of a man who may have committed a minor, nonviolent crime, that surely was NOT deserving of a vigilante style death, is now threatened with fracture along political lines.

Crowds are still crying out for the violence to stop – violence against persons of color, violence by those with the power against those without the power, violence against businesses that are life-sustaining in neighborhoods already blighted by the burden of poverty. The issue of race in America – who has power

and who doesn't – has risen to the fore in the midst of our two other crises. This third crisis may well go down in history as far more important than the other two.

To encourage you to not allow the bloviators to divide you from your primary allegiance to the Christ who died equally for all people, from the God who declares every single one of us in God's image, and from your own commitment to making our country the best it can be, please indulge me as I share with you my own life story around the issue of race in the United States of America. If you aren't interested in that narrative, please don't read any further. It has taken me a few days to process my own feelings about where we are as a nation, and I hope not to slop anything inappropriate all over you. But here goes.

In August of 1955, a 14 year old African-American boy from Chicago named Emmett Till went to visit his relatives in Mississippi. A white woman, Carolyn Bryant Donham accused him of "wolf whistling" at her. Her family members kidnaped him and so viciously beat him that he died, one of his eyes even having been beaten out of its socket. We know this because his mother, in her quite legitimate grief and rage, turned the image of him in his coffin over to a national magazine. Even white America was horrified. Two months later, I was born. But that was then, 65 years ago, and this is now, right?

Fast forward to 1965 in Severna Park, MD, part-way between Annapolis and Baltimore, just a bit below the Mason Dixon Line. My father and I were driving on the old B & A Boulevard, and passed through a traditionally African-American neighborhood, Jones Station. I saw children about my age – ten or so – playing outside. They had thin, bent legs. I said to my father, "Daddy, what's wrong with those children's legs?"

He said, "Well Dolly (that's what he often called me), they have a condition called rickets. It makes their bones soft."

"Why do they have rickets?"

"Because they have a vitamin deficiency."

"Why do they have a vitamin deficiency?"

"Because they haven't been able to get enough good food to eat."

"Why can't they get enough good food to eat?"

"Because their daddies can't earn enough money to buy enough good food."

"Why can't their daddies earn enough money to buy good food?"

"Because they can't get good jobs."

"Why can't they get good jobs?" (About now, you are probably thinking my father was a saint for answering all these questions! He was a gentle soul.)

“Because when your mother and I and their parents were in school, the black children weren’t allowed to go to school in our county past the sixth grade. Without a high school diploma, you can’t get a good job.”

“Why weren’t they allowed to get a high school diploma?”

“Because they are black.”

Wow. I was stunned. At age ten, I realized that every system I knew – health, food, work, education – everything – was turned against little children just like me and their parents just like my parents just because of how they looked.... By people who looked like me. I cried myself to sleep that night because I knew Jesus was so very disappointed in us white people. But that was then; this is now, right?

Now go to 1972. My high school friends and I were 16, and two of us joined the Anne Arundel County Racial Justice Coalition. We were too young to each pretend to be one half of a couple seeking to buy a home, but we took part in the planning meetings. You see, many of the realtors in our county, a county chock-a-block with NASA engineers, CIA and NSA and FBI “higher ups” and lots of people with a lot of very fine formal education, were still red lining. Red lining is the practice of drawing a red line on a map around the areas within which the realtors thought only white people should buy homes. It was a line within which they quietly, silently, without actually letting anyone know, would not take African-American couples. We put together several “couples”, some white, some black, all with identical types of education, work experience, and incomes, and sent them to all the realty firms in our area. We pretty quickly could see who was red lining and who was not. Then we publicly named them and the practice. But that was then; this is now, right?

Now we zip ahead to the winter of 1983-84, and I’m in seminary in New York City. We’re well north of that famous line that divides the north and the south in our country. You would think that racial attitudes would be all fixed in the north land, right? No hint of white supremacy in New York, right? Wrong. One Saturday morning, there was quite a stir in The Hub, the place where many of us gathered to buy our morning bagels and coffee on campus. One of our classmates, Lee Johnson, an African-American man who had been out the night before with two friends – one a doctor and one a lawyer, both African-American - had been stopped by New York’s finest (that would be the police for those of you who haven’t lived there.) After being ordered out of the car, ostensibly for a tail light that was out, they were viciously beaten on the legs by one of the officers using his large, police-issue flashlight. Those officers picked the wrong African-American men. My colleague and his friends turned their car back to the seminary, and they went right to the President’s apartment. The President of the seminary, The Rev. Dr. Donald “Don” Shriver (a good Presbyterian pastor) immediately called the police commissioner. Or maybe it was the mayor. When you are white, have a good education, and are president of a major institution, you have access to the halls of power. You might say, “Did they really get beaten by the police?” Yup. They surely did. I saw the ugly bruises, all purply-brown on my classmate’s legs, in The Hub that morning. On Monday, the seminary held a very large protest march down Amsterdam Avenue. We stopped traffic as we marched from the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine to the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. By whom were we protected as we marched? By New York City’s finest. Welcome to America. We are so mixed in our thoughts and feelings and responses to overt racism. Most of the police officers were horrified and offended by the actions of the police officers who had beaten

my classmate, even as many police officers and chiefs are offended now by how George Floyd died. None-the-less, the beating happened. But that was then and there; this is now and here, right?

Now go to Guatemala in 1995. I was the 39 year old associate pastor of a downtown church in Harrisburg, PA. 15 of us were on a mission trip to three Central American countries, meeting with local people to hear their perspectives. We were warned not to even take out our cameras in front of either military members or police officers, because in that country, they were all turned against their own citizens. We were told that at the least, they would confiscate our cameras, and maybe even make us “disappear” as they did their own citizens. In coming home, I remember thinking how grateful I was that this would never happen here – our military and police officers are all here to protect us. So that was there, but this is here, right?

Now we are at today. Within one week, the accounts have been shared of

a black man, Ahmaud Arbery, shot to death in February by a white father and son, acting as self-determined vigilantes;

a black woman, 26 year old Breonna Taylor, was shot and killed in her own bed, in her own apartment, in Louisville, KY, the town where our own denomination’s headquarters are located, because officers thought someone who might have committed a crime might have been there (he wasn’t.)

And George Floyd was murdered right in front of us.

This is now. And here. In our own beloved country. Not some place long ago or far away, but here and now. We dare not turn away or avert our gaze.

Now, I don’t care what your political party is. I don’t care what you think about whether protest marches are the best way or a less good way or no way at all to respond to white racism and white supremacy and white privilege. But I do care that white racism and white supremacy and white privilege are real. I do care that when those of us who are white get up in the morning, we don’t have to think about whether or not we will be safe going out our front door (that’s just the tip of the white privilege iceberg.) I do care that Pennsylvania has consistently for at least the past quarter of a century ranked third or fourth in the nation for the number of white hate groups we have. I do care that white people around us still tell racist jokes and make racist comments and assume, with no basis in fact, that people of color are inferior to white people. I do care that every person of color in a leadership role of one sort or another in our presbytery has, at one time or another, told me stories of racist behaviors turned against him or her. I do care about the pain and anger and the amount of energy it takes from persons I respect and love when these things happen to them within the bounds of our own presbytery.

We white people have a problem. It is our problem, not our neighbor’s problem. It is not the problem of black people or other people of color. It is our problem, and we need to own it. It is a problem of not wanting to understand the holy Scripture when it tells us all human beings are made in the image of

God. It is a problem of refusing to believe the Bible when it tells us Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, died equally for all. It is a problem of our not wanting to love our neighbors as ourselves, of not wanting to hear the cry of the unjustly oppressed, of wanting to live our quiet, comfortable lives in peace here in these green hills and valleys. It is OUR problem as white people!

Racism is not done and gone in our country or our counties or our communities, or, I sometime fear, even in our own congregations. If you have ever heard a racist joke and not called the person on it, then racism is still acceptable in our place. If you have heard the guy on the park bench or at the shooting range or on the ball field make a racist comment, and you haven't spoken up, then racism is still assumed to be normative. If you look at persons of color and don't see beloved children of God, then you – we – are adding to our nation's original sin. Racism and violence and "the problem" are not just in our nation's cities; it is here as well.

But (I love the word "but" – it takes what we've just said and throws it out the window) we are a people of hope. God offers us a better way. We can help each other in our condition of total depravity (yes, I believe John Calvin was correct when he said we all participate in that condition.) In the Church, we can create safe space to look at God's Word, to listen to one another, to hear hard things, even things we don't want to hear, and then act on what we know is right.

Do you want to be part of the on-going, two steps forward and one step backward, solution for our country? Or do you want to ignore what is all around us that God declares sin?

One of the silver linings of the pandemic crisis has been the high number of acts of kindness and love we all have seen. People of all races, colors, creeds, languages, income statuses, and neighborhoods have stood together to take care of one another. City people have cared for country people and country people have cared for city people. Black people and white people and brown people have worked together for the common good. But the acts of racial hatred have got to stop. We can't let the pressure of a pandemic and the loss of jobs and the prevailing political divisions in our country make us less than what we truly could be, what God wants us to be.

If you want to do something, as an individual or as a congregation, there are resources available to you.

- You might start with a conversation with a person of a race other than your own. You could share your story about race in this country – when you first become aware that race is an issue, where you were and how old you were. How did it make you feel? What have your experiences been? – and also listen to the other person's story. What is it like being a racial-ethnic minority person where you live? What are the practical obstacles to every day life? What have people said or done to you that have made you hurt or angry? Please don't be afraid of one another's stories and surely don't be afraid of one another's or your own feelings.
- You might start by reading a book. There are tons of good ones on this topic. For starts, you might read White Fragility by Robin Deangelo, or, using humor, Dear White People by Justin Simien, or

Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race by Debby Irving, or The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics by George Lipsitz or, if you don't mind the occasional feeling that you've had a glass of ice water dashed in your face, Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehesi Coates. You could start with a listing of books such as "Understanding Dismantling Racism: A Book List for White Readers" with its quite good list of serious, but accessible reads.

- You might start by putting together a wisdom group including people of many races. You could share your stories and think about positive actions you can take where you live.
- You might start by going to our denomination's homepage, pcusa.org and clicking on the Stated Clerk's rumination on our current circumstance, or clicking on the Racial Equity tab to view the film "Just Mercy" – free during the month of June.
- You might start by reaching out to fellow believers in other contexts than our own. For instance, what if we, as a presbytery, put together a group of people who were willing to have exchange visits with people in Philadelphia Presbytery to share our reality and to listen to theirs?

At the very least, speak up whenever you hear someone say or do something that is just not acceptable. Racism need no longer be a cultural norm, unquestioned and left to quietly simmer away, until it boils over as we now are seeing. We can be part of the solution, but to do so, we have to start somewhere.

We need to act together for the common good, in the name of Christ, to dismantle racism in our time.

This is where we are, here and now.

In Christ's love,

Joy