



## THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### MORE THAN ONE PANDEMIC: REFLECTIONS ON AHMAUD ARBERY

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to dominate the news. From medical advice to political implications to a gradual re-opening, these are the stories discussed each night in a thirty-minute newscast or a multi-page newspaper. It's all about the virus.

But tucked away in some of those broadcasts there is a video. It's a tape of a young man running. His name is Ahmaud Arbery. He is running in a neighborhood near Brunswick, a small town in southeastern Georgia.

It is the last time Ahmaud would run.

This chilling video of the last moments of Ahmaud Arbery's life are painful to watch. But it gets even more disturbing when you find out that one man was taping the incident while two men brought an end to his life. They were white.

Ahmaud Arbery's story has largely been lost in the push to cover the Covid-19 pandemic. It is a story of how this country is severely divided on racial lines and seriously dominated by systemic racism. It is a story that has become so disturbingly commonplace: an unarmed Black man or woman who is senselessly murdered for simply living life in their skin. And it is a story that continues to largely be left unaddressed in the midst of growing tensions.

The reality of systemic racism gets even more complicated when you add yet another dimension to this story. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, no one has been able to hide from the metrics. The numbers that clearly reveal that the elderly, the poor, and people of color are disproportionately affected by this disease. These are the ones who are not afforded the luxury of sheltering in place, forgoing a paycheck in order to social distance, or relocating to safer, less crowded living arrangements. The numbers tell the story. It's largely racial and ethnic minorities that cannot readily take the necessary steps needed to survive.

The combination of these two stories, quite independent from one another, provide a disturbing reality that must not be lost in the midst of the Covid-19 coverage. It is a reality that dares not be lost because the combination of these two stories reveal an ongoing injustice that is never adequately addressed, often shelved to the last few pages of the newspaper, and frequently downplayed as a reality that we just have to live with.

Ahmaud Arbery went out for a run. He, like countless numbers of persons of color, shutter in fear every

time they encounter someone on their run, are stopped by a police officer in their car, or are intentionally ignored while they seek service at a restaurant. I am not a runner. But on my walks, I never fear encountering a stranger, feel safe when I am stopped by a police officer, and always seem to receive prompt service at a restaurant. You see, there is a difference. I am white.

Racism has been a part of our story since the founding of this country and continues to shape our story today. Part of that story is that often we do not know what racism is, what it looks like, or how to recognize it when it is staring us in the face. What happened to Ahmaud Arbery is not just another terrible story in the news. It is a real-time story of three white men who racially profiled a person because of the color of his skin. Sadly, it took seventy-four days to arrest them for their actions. This is not just another story. It's a heart wrenching story for Ahmaud Arbery's family and a personal story for everyone who fears that they or someone they know or love might be the next victim. It is a story of racism, a sickness that is deeply embedded in our systems, our culture, and our beliefs about one another.

Letters like this have been written for years with little impact. Calls for prayer, while the natural thing for people of faith to do, seem shallow. Stories highlighting the depth of the issue get lost in other, more pressing headlines. The problem is deeper than a letter, a prayer, a news story, or a Facebook post. It's deeper because it dwells within us.

To confront complacency about racism in all forms and seek the cleansing from God that will enable us to see one another as sacred on the journey is a daily discipline. To find the courage to name racism when we see it and to carry the banner of dismantling racism should be the real content of our prayers. To advocate, in the midst of this constant injustice, for those who are victimized by a history of racism that extends backward through time and has been built up for centuries, should be the pursuit of anyone who calls upon the name of Jesus and seeks to live in the image of God.

There is no doubt that we should pray. We must lift our prayers for Ahmaud Arbery's family and for everyone, everywhere, who are afraid that their lives might suffer the same fate just because of the color of their skin.

But there is more. Much more. May each of us commit to not letting the stories of injustice, racism, and pain, be confined to page twenty of the newspaper or the deep recesses of our minds.

Webster's Dictionary defines the word "pandemic" in this way: *"an outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area and affects an exceptionally high proportion of the population."*

There are more pandemics than just COVID-19. I pray that we can continue to address the pandemic of racism with the same resolve that we address the present one.

The Journey Continues, . . .

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas J. Bickerton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small star above the letter 'i' in "Thomas".

Thomas J. Bickerton  
Resident Bishop