

Pentecost—Year A  
Acts 2:1-21  
Psalm 104:24-35, 37  
I Corinthians 12:3b-13  
John 20:19-23

*Where do we even begin with this week? Just three weeks ago, I sat here and preached about Ahmaud Arbery's death at the hands of two, now maybe three, white men while he was out jogging; one of those white men was a former police officer.*

This past Monday, we saw Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis white police officer, 'take a knee', as Michele Norris bluntly noted—*take that in for a minute—a white police officer took a knee on the neck of a black man whose arms were handcuffed behind his back.* The officer held that position for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, while Mr. Floyd gasped for air, repeatedly saying, "I can't breathe," while bystanders begged the officer to take his knee off his neck, while Mr. Floyd stopped moving and became unresponsive, while three other police officers looked on and did *nothing* to intervene.

We have watched as Minneapolis, and other cities, have erupted in protest, some turning violent. Seven people were shot during a protest in Louisville, KY, my hometown, on Thursday night, as they protested the death of Breonna Taylor. Breonna was a black woman who was shot by police who entered her apartment under a no-knock warrant at 1:00 in the morning on March 13<sup>th</sup>. She and her boyfriend, Kenneth Walker were in bed when the police barged in. Kenneth fired a warning shot, wounding an officer in the leg, and the police shot back 20 times, hitting Breonna 8 times.

Kenneth had a license to carry a firearm, and Kentucky adheres to the Castle Doctrine which gives "citizens in their homes the right to protect themselves, other people, and their property by force," but it sure *doesn't seem to apply if you're black.* Breonna was an EMT at two emergency rooms and had been trying to help out during the COVID crisis; she was studying to become a nurse.

*The same day George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, this exchange unfolded between a white woman, Amy Cooper, and an African-American man, Christian Cooper (no relation). Mr. Cooper was bird-watching in The Ramble in Central Park in New York City. There, dogs are to be on a leash to protect wildlife and the plants. Ms. Cooper's dog was off-leash, and Mr. Cooper calmly asks her to put the dog on-leash. She refuses, and he starts filming the encounter. She starts toward him, and he asks her not to come closer. She then takes out her phone saying, "I'm going to call 911 and tell them an African-American man is threatening my life." And she proceeds to do just that. Mr. Cooper said that he had a decision to make at that point—either to back down and participate in his own dehumanization OR risk having the police show up, knowing that that could turn deadly.*

AND this week, we passed the grim milestone of 100,000+ deaths due to COVID-19 with African-Americans dying at 2 times the rate of whites and Hispanics dying at 1 ½ times the rate of whites according to one CDC report. Over 40 million people have now filed for unemployment, hitting the service sector extremely hard, and as in every economic downturn, hitting communities of color much harder than their white counterparts.

COVID has laid bare the healthcare and economic disparities that are the *results* of systemic and intentional policies that have privileged whites and disadvantaged blacks and other people of color for centuries.

*Meanwhile*, white protesters continue to protest around the country in state capitols, some protesters fully and proudly armed. And last Sunday, on the grounds of the Governor’s mansion in Kentucky, those gathered for a 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment rally, also protesting the Governor’s COVID-related measures in Kentucky, strung a noose in a tree and hung an effigy of Governor Beshear, who has two small children who live on those grounds. Some bystanders were horrified and eventually cut it down; some bystanders were jovial about it and snapped pictures of it. Hanging an effigy of *any* human being is wrong and doesn’t honor the sanctity of life. And let us *never* forget that a noose in *any* tree around *any* image of a human being calls to mind the horrific history of lynching of African-Americans in our country, *often done with a spirit of entertainment*.

We have more than one pandemic going on right now—racist attitudes, racist policies, racist structures, racist behaviors, racist actions—RACISM is a virus that has infected every cell of our society. *How could it not?* Our country began with the taking of land and life from indigenous people and the enslavement of Africans, writing into our Constitution the great compromise that they were 3/5 of a human being. And we are HOSTS for this virus. Until we understand how deep and pervasive and systemic this racism runs, and that white supremacy and white privilege is the environment that allows this virus to continue to replicate, *we will get nowhere*.

Ibram X. Kendi released a book last August entitled “*How to be an Antiracist*.” It is now on my *must-read* list, and I would ask that you put it on yours. Kendi argues that “not racist” [as in “*he’s racist, but I’m not racist*”] isn’t really a thing...and that “not racist” is a term that “signifies neutrality...[b]ut there is no neutrality in the racism struggle. The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist.’ It is ‘antiracist’... One either endorses the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist *or* racial equality as an antiracist.” As one commentator [Sarah Stewart Holland] noted this week, “*You’re either working actively to dismantle racist power structures, to change racist policies, to raise awareness about racist attitudes and racist stereotypes OR you are allowing them to continue, which is racist.*”

As we so often do with evil, we locate it in an individual over there—in this case, a bad apple, a racist cop, a racist, entitled woman—and like the scapegoat that we send off into the woods bearing all our sins, we feel better and absolved *because we’re not THAT*. But we ARE THAT. As one older white man asserted a few years ago in a Dismantling Racism workshop, “*I am a recovering racist.*” Just like a recovering alcoholic is *never NOT* an alcoholic, so will *being racist* be for us. All we *can* do, AND what we *must* do, is DO THE WORK, every day, for the rest of our lives. As Kendi notes, “*like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination.*”

I ran across this short video this week. We’re on zoom, and so I can actually share it with you. It’s a 12-year old boy named Keedron Bryant, “*just singing what’s on [his] heart.*”

*"I'm a young black man /  
doing all that I can /  
to stand /  
Oh, but when I look around /  
and I see what's being done to my kind /  
every day, I'm being hunted as prey /  
My people don't want no trouble /  
We've had enough struggle /  
I just want to live /  
God, protect me /  
I just want to live /  
I just want to live."*

***"I just want to live..."***

***Dear White People, are you still breathing? Every breath we struggle to take in as we sit with the immense discomfort of confronting the racist realities in the power structures and policies of our society, and the racist realities in ourselves, our struggle to breathe amidst this discomfort is nothing compared to the breath that George Floyd gasped for this past Monday; it's nothing compared to the breaths that black and brown people are holding every day of their lives as driving, jogging, sleeping, birding, and a thousand other ordinary activities that you and I take for granted, become activities where they could lose their lives.***

**I don't condone the violence of the riots that have broken out all over the country. Martin Luther King, Jr. *never* wavered from his commitment to nonviolence, calling it "the most potent weapon available to the Negro in his struggle for freedom and justice," BUT he understood the pain that pushed people there. In September 1966, he said, "A riot is the language of the unheard." *Surely*, we can understand why centuries of oppression are boiling over now. And, as people of faith, *surely*, we can understand that *mortal wounds keep being inflicted* on the body of Christ, and a wound to *any* part of the body is a wound to us *all*.**

On this Feast of Pentecost, we are about to **renew our baptismal vows**, and in the renewal of vows, we will reaffirm our **renunciation of evil and renew our commitment to Jesus Christ**. And that **renunciation of evil is shorthand** for the *three* renunciations we profess in baptism, and the *second* of those renunciations asks us this: "***Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?***" We answer: "***I renounce them.***" This is the **renunciation that draws our attention** to all the "ism's" that **infect our society**. And, in this **renewal of baptismal vows**, we will promise, with God's help, to "**persevere against evil, and whenever we sin, to repent and return to the Lord,**" and we will promise to "**seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our very own self,**" and we will promise to "**strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.**"

I have been asked frequently over the last few weeks, "***But what do I do?***" I'll be sending out an article later today entitled "***For Our White Friends Desiring to Be Allies.***" It's a good place to start.

One of you wrote me this week and noted that, while **older and at-risk and having to stay home due to COVID**, you *could* make phone calls. Every day, that person **calls five people in Congress to register their outrage**.

Phone calls to Congress, state officials, and local officials, demanding that they review and change policies that are destroying our black and brown brothers and sisters are great actions to take.

*Yes, I am talking about structural change.*

I also believe, *with every fiber of my being*, that *if you set your intention before God and consent to use your Godgiven voice, THEN situations WILL come your way, calling you to STAND UP and proclaim the dignity of those whose bodies and souls and spirits are being disregarded. It will become clear WHEN you are to speak—Jesus promises us that—but it starts with a WILLINGNESS TO speak, and trust me, once you become WILLING, you WILL BE called upon to SPEAK UP, and that SPEAKING UP will be costly—it will upset people; it will make them uncomfortable; it will trigger their shame; it will trigger their anger, BUT our continued silence because we don’t want to offend people is why these cries of pain continue to go UNHEARD; our continued silence is COMPLICIT in allowing this evil to continue.*

Today is Pentecost, and we have never needed the Spirit to breathe upon us like we need it today.

As Peter quoted the prophet Joel on that first Pentecost so long ago, we need our “young men,” like Keedron, to “see visions,” and to help us see what they see. We need our “old men,” who have suffered so many humiliations, to “dream dreams” that we have lost the capacity to dream. The prophet Joel had a vision, “Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.” The Spirit is on the move, and we need the sons and daughters of former slaves to prophesy, and we need to bow before their cries and the longings of their bodies and souls *to breathe*.

We need to remember, as Paul reminds us, that we are all members of the one body in Christ—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

As people of faith, we *cannot, we must not*, turn away from the pain that has engulfed our nation. Lord Jesus, have mercy on us. Transform the fires that are raging across this land *into* tongues of fire resting upon *our* heads. Ignite *us* with your Holy Spirit and set *us* on fire to do THIS work THAT the Keedron’s, and Ahmaud’s, and Breonna’s, and Christian’s, and George’s, and *the millions they represent*, can breathe *and* live the life God longs for them to live. And Lord, through THIS work, *lead us to the life that you long for us to live, too.* Amen.

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