

“BECOMING STRONG AT THE BROKEN PLACES”

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“I’m tired of waking up every morning and seeing the same thing over and over and nobody has any answers,” said a youth about why he was there, to protest the deaths of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge and Philano Castile in the Twin Cities

A quintessential American mix of blacks and whites, men and women, Jews and Latinos, young and old assembled peacefully. By all accounts, the police protected the 800 protestors and did a great job, marching right alongside them. They kept the route clear and the participants safe. Not only were the many protestors processing their palpable grief at senseless loss. They found strength together, jubilantly lifting hope at finding a better way. The next thing they knew, a mass of humanity was fleeing, panicked and terrified. When the smoke cleared, the greatest loss of police lives since 9/11 had compounded the earlier losses in the week.

So it has been another agonizing week of senseless killings and profound losses. Our Conference Minister, Rev. Kent Siliadi, similarly said: “I’m tired. I’m sick and tired of being asked...to make a statement on the latest killings. I’m tired of struggling to find words that’ll make sense or have impact...Yet I know my faith and outrage compel me to say something.” With Kent, I wonder, where are the words?

Again, it has come to this. We are incredulous and numb, stunned and heartsick. Like Jeremiah we’re struck mute and dejected, exiles lost who seek a way home.

“A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.”

I’m learning things in recent weeks and months that I didn’t know before. Our cell phone videos are creating a whole new accountability. I’m learning that our sisters and brothers of color are not whining, complaining or exaggerating as they tell of being brutalized in situations when we’d be just fine. Much as we speak of the birds and the bees with our children as they come of age, black parents must rehearse with their young how not to get “taken down” in a variety of situations. How much more, we must ask, has and is going on without anyone recording it?

I wish it weren’t true, but there is a difference in how lives are valued in America. That surprises me because I thought we had come a long way since I was 13 in Detroit when riots resulted in the death of 46 people, the largest loss of life in the US since the Civil War had ended, just over a century before that. But maybe I let myself be too much persuaded of “progress” because of the funny black situation comedies on television and the black and white Mel Gibson-Danny Glover buddy

movies, what with everyone getting along fine. Sentimentality isn't enough here.

No, we need greater truthfulness. One such truth is that we white people need to wake up, work harder, and get into the trenches to demand equality for everyone. We can do that marching in the streets, if we like, or petitioning Congress as well. But how about at the local BBQ? We need to be as loud in this cause as hateful friends, family, or coworkers, because there are only two choices in this scenario. Either we are part of the problem, or we are part of the solution. Notice I didn't say we need to be bitter, rancorous, menacing, threatening, bullying, or arrogant. Intimidating hate only puts more fuel on the fire. We must speak the truth in love.

It's time for European-American people like us who say "not all white people are racist" to call out those white people who are—or racism will reign. If we refuse to stand up for the humanity of our brothers and sisters of color, we forfeit our own. Make no mistake, beyond our Bill of Rights it's our covenant of faith that compels us to insist that all peoples of God should be treated as created in God's image: police and protesters, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, rich and poor. Nothing less can be acceptable. To do less betrays our faith, and denies Jesus.

We cannot flag in our zeal to root out both the racism and the violence that, as our tears reveal, are endemic within our land. These are not isolated incidents. They happen daily when the cameras are off. They are tragic examples of America's original sin: racism and violence, with their death-grip upon our way of life.

I don't know how to change the world. That's too imposing to ponder. But I am sure that saying and doing nothing within my own circles is complicity. I liked the interfaith gathering in Dallas the day after the sniper ambush of police. Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and other clergy said, "We refuse to hate each other." We can say that within the circles where we live, move, and have our being. Also, those clergy lifted up the forgiving folks of Charleston's Mother Emanuel church, a tangible reminder that love wins the day in spite of violence's seeming omnipotence.

Yes, we need to do this work. We need to listen, we need to engage and we cannot accept anything less. We need to open our eyes anew to be led by those most directly impacted by the systemic causes of racism to find ways to engage in this wider ministry of reconciliation. We can't make it without one another and we need each other to make an impact and eradicate the hate within our lifetime.

Our cries of grief and protest must morph into tenacity, determination, stamina; what one pastor calls "long obedience in the same direction," like water wearing down stone, changing what seems inescapable and immutable. "Let justice roll down like waters," Amos dreamed, "and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Can we retain these sensibilities and lift these truths not just now, when we are reeling? Can we retain moral outrage and not relax this urgency in normal times?

For what we are learning simply can't be taken for granted. We can't allow these hatreds, racial and otherwise, to fester. We must scrape them clean to heal them.

Our Gospel--Jesus on the cross--reminds us that having lost his own Son, God's heart was the first heart to break as Alton and Philano went down, as the 12 policemen were savagely wounded and slaughtered like cattle. Lately our hearts are broken afresh with God's. But as Ernest Hemingway said, "Life eventually breaks us all, but some become strong at the broken places." How can we with love become a redemptive power to make us strong at places in our common life, which are clearly broken. Will you ask, pray and inhabit that question with me? Amen.