

Dear friends in Christ,

As we are all well-aware, the last ten days or so have been particularly sad and disturbing for our nation. I watched in a state of disbelief the video of Minneapolis resident George Floyd being killed by a city policeman. That this horrible event was not at all unbelievable to my African-American fellow citizens speaks to the central issue: there lingers enmeshed in our society racial injustice often ignored or unseen by those of us with white skin color. Like all profound sin, it is seeped down into subterranean layers of everyday life. But occasionally it erupts into view undeniable to all with eyes to see.

Last weekend, I read a helpful essay written by an African-American pundit. He exhorted his white readers to do one thing: listen to what black voices were saying before speaking. That struck me as wise counsel, especially for one like me who tends to process events “out loud” as a way of thinking them through. These past days have seemed a time for humble circumspection and listening, including to voices with whom I do not agree on everything. I am grateful for reflections I have read and heard from black commentators and friends in recent days, including concerned leaders in our city.

I would not presume to speak in their voice, but one consistent theme I am hearing is this: deep grief that so much remains unchanged about racial injustice in spite of much progress over the past 50 years. If I am listening well, this moment is not revealing so much that we have more work to do on race relations in America (of course we do) as much as that this moment feels different. The threadbare fabric of whatever remains of basic social solidarity has been frayed further. The intense energy we are seeing in response to these events emerges out of grave cultural division in our nation. And at the same time, it is being fueled by a sense that now is a moment of real opportunity to address ongoing racial prejudice in new and profound ways.

In unsettling times such as these, I believe faithful Christians should avoid at least two temptations. The first is retreat from engagement with the issues of the day. The second temptation is to engage today's issues but to forget Christ. The power to heal racial inequalities in all their deep-seated, myriad complexity ultimately has its source in God.

So I am listening attentively to Christian voices in the midst of this storm: those whose call to repentance issues from genuine love and hope, those whose Christ-shaped vision for a better, more just society is more compelling than anything we have yet known as a nation, those who are able to articulate the Good News in spite of the bad news of the day. And an amazing part of that Good News is that our Lord has incorporated the church - you and me - into his powerfully healing purposes. As a fellow struggler on the path into God's Kingdom, I remind you that you are one baptized and chosen to represent our Lord's justice, love, and peace in today's terribly fallen world. When things come apart, authentic Christian faith will be revealed.

Among the many ways we can serve as ambassadors for Christ in this time is through our prayer and worship. Look for information forthcoming about ways we intend to be doing just that here with greater intentionality in the near future.

Another opportunity we have is to be especially intentional having conversations with our African-American friends, co-workers, neighbors, fellow Christians, etc. And listen before speaking. This is not easy. But the moral vision of the Scriptures is clear: humanity's inter-relationships are a means of participating in the holiness of God. This season in our national life issues a call to do much better. In fact, injustices, divisions, separations, antagonisms, and violence between peoples are not just moral issues. They are spiritual ones.

Last year I read Wendell Berry's novella, *Andy Catlett*, a sweet story set in 1943 about a nine-year old Kentucky boy named Andy. Over Christmas holiday he travels alone to visit his grandparents who are farmers. A middle-aged black couple, Dick and Aunt Sarah Jane, work for Andy's grandparents and live at the edge of the farm in a small two-room house. The boy recalls his visit to Aunt Sarah Jane one morning, the two of them seated on rocking chairs by the drum stove in her simple kitchen. The conversation turned to racial justice.

She was my first preceptor in the matters of race and civil rights. Because I always listened attentively to her, everything she said struck in. She made me feel responsible, for I knew, as she required me to know, that I was a product of my culture; but I felt it vaguely, for I could not precisely locate in myself the cause of injury. . . Starting probably with those conversations so long ago with Aunt Sarah Jane, I have learned to understand the old structure of racism as a malevolent convention, the malevolence of which is hard to locate in the conscious intentions of most people. It was a circumstance that was mostly taken for granted. It was inexcusable, and yet we had the formidable excuse of being used to it. . . Aunt Sarah Jane's plain talk of racial injustice as she knew it, thereby introducing the fester of it into the conscience of a small boy, who knew it only as the accepted way and a mandatory etiquette, was by measure of that time remarkable. To the extent her talk was a discomfort and an instruction, it was a service. To the extent that it was interesting and a part of conversation, it was hospitality.

I am trying to imagine updated contemporary scenes of this beautiful passage for my own life, for yours, for our parish. I am trying to imagine my place too in the many conversations Jesus had with people from various backgrounds that struck the privileged as uncomfortable and out of place. One does not need to read far in the gospels to find these. And I am wanting you to join me in imagining new gospel-centered ways we at St. George's can be agents of reconciliation and heralds of hope in these troubled times.

Yours in Christ,

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