“Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America”
(With abundant thanks to Michael Eric Dyson for his new book by this title)

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READINGS – “Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America,” Michael Eric Dyson, St. Martin’s Press, 2017

Although it sounds delusional, perhaps more than a few of you feel the way Donald Trump’s former campaign chair in Mahoning County, Ohio, Kathy Miller, does. “If you’re black and you haven’t been successful in the last 50 years, it’s your own fault,” Miller said. “You’ve had every opportunity, it was given to you. You’ve had the same schools everybody else went to. You had benefits to go to college that white kids didn’t have. You had all the advantages and didn’t take advantage of it. It’s not our fault, certainly.” She also said, “I don’t think there was any racism until Obama got elected.” (76-77)

… Civil rights icon Joseph Lowery often says that we live in the fifty-first state, the state of denial.” (78)

“Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America”
Rev. Bruce Southworth

Some years ago, driving on a back road in Westchester County, I was pulled over by the police… a state trooper actually. It was dusk. I saw the cruiser lights flashing in my rearview mirror and quickly realized mine was the only other car around.

I have an excellent driving record and was not speeding on an ever so slightly winding road. Fear? Anxiety? Embarrassment! What could be going on? It was unnerving, and I was worried. I was alerted by the trooper that one of my rear brake lights was not working. I don’t recall having to show my license and registration. I received a warning, not a traffic ticket from the courteous officer, and so it goes, for those of us with our unearned white privilege….

So, yes, I have been stopped by the police while I was driving.
Michael Eric Dyson, in his recent best-seller *We Cannot Stop the Tears*, describes his son, who is a physician, being stopped one evening – driving from Queens through Harlem to New Jersey with his own young son in the backseat… stopped for no apparent reason. The officer asked for his license and registration and after ten minutes or so came back and announced that it was illegal to talk on a cell phone and to drive at the same time. Dyson’s son denied having done that; he kept his cell phone on the dashboard.

The officer, he reports, began lecturing and bullying the doctor – apparently trying to get him to confess to using his cell phone while driving. Dyson’s son, an anesthesiologist, explained he had seen first-hand the consequences of that kind of recklessness, in many emergency rooms. And no, he would not risk his own son’s safety.

The officer grew belligerent and insulting, and the father remained calm. The officer also at one point took a few steps back, and then placed his hand on his gun. Only because he did not want to have deal with a five-year-old boy in the back seat, he said he would not arrest him and take him to jail. Eventually, the officer gave him a ticket and left with a series of threats.

Dyson reports his son’s “dance of complete compliance” and his grandson’s continuing fear of the police. He summarizes:

The cop’s tone was threatening his hand was on his gun, and … my grandson had awakened from sleep to see his father being disrespected and threatened by an officer of the law. Fear struck … (my son) hard. He glanced at his (own) son in the rearview mirror and had one thought.

*I don’t want to die tonight. I don’t want my son to see me shot.* (27-31)

Michael Eric Dyson ends that chapter: “O Lord give us the courage to tell the truth to white folk who need it more than air itself – who, we pray, will come to hunger for it more than they hunger for our death.” (33)

Regarding my attitudes to police, I want to report that my back-door neighbor when I was growing up in Tennessee grew up to be a city police officer in Knoxville… and he always seemed like a good, very nice guy and probably still is, probably not abusive (except of course I don’t really know after all these years away).

Which is only to say, my and his white privilege gives him the benefit of the doubt. (And here I would add I was co-founder of The Interfaith Coalition against Police Brutality in the year 2000, working against stop-and-frisk then… so I am aware of systemic issues over the years.)
Growing up in the perniciously, overtly racist South, I can imagine the scene that Dyson describes when his daughter on a vacation in Florida with her parents was verbally assaulted by “the cutest little” five-year-old white girl who matter-of-factly uttered the “N-word” at the pool of the modest motel. His daughter and her friend, also black, were stunned, straightened up, and leaned away. The white little girl seemed equally stunned by the impact of her word. “For a moment they all froze.”

“And then, spontaneously,… (his daughter and friend) burst out in laughter.” Dyson reports, “It was an all-too-familiar gesture of self-defense. It was a way to stave off the creep of hate inside your brain.” (24-25)

On a similar occasion, this time visiting a suburb of Chicago, when a little younger, his daughter and some friends were surrounded by some white girls who taunted and threatened them – her first encounter with racism, which Dyson records as her loss of her childhood innocence of the world’s racism.

Dyson continues,

… (Suddenly), the oldest black girl had harked up a mouthful of spit. For the occasion it may as well have been holy water. Lord, it should have been regarded as Holy Communion. The saliva in her throat was transmuted from mere water to divine disgust. That blessed angel of a child planted her feet and then showered those white girls with her liquid resentment. That may have been the biggest miracle since … (Jesus) turned water to wine. (22)

He admits then that he usually counsels taking the higher road. (23)

With help from diverse members here, over more than 35 years, I have been traveling the road that reveals evils of attachments to whiteness, white privilege, white innocence, white supremacy, the social constructs of racism and false delineations of race. I revisit some of this with support from Michael Eric Dyson and continue to learn much.

For a further taste of the flavors and provocations that Dyson offers, a few of his observations:

- Invoking Dr. King, “Do you know that a lot of the race problem grows out of the … need that some people have to feel superior? A need that some people have to feel… that their white skin ordained them to be first.” (36)
- And he observes that Dr. King in the last three years of his life began to believe “sadly, that most whites are unconsciously racists.” (38)
- To which Dyson agrees, “He spoke the truth that we have yet to fully acknowledge.” (40)
His sermon is a lamentation and jeremiad – a call to action, a change of heart.

- “The only way to save our nation, and yes to save yourselves, (addressing so called white folk) is to let go of whiteness and the vision of American history it supports.” (49)
- “How many of you have really tried to put yourself in our position (as black people)? It’s hard to be white and empathetic to others.” (59)
- “And there are a lot of privileges that white folk get that do not depend on cash. The greatest one might be…. (Here is a not so secret secret!) getting stopped by a cop and living to tell about it.” (66)

Dyson is emotionally honest, with his fears, anger, even rage, and his hope.

- “Beloved, I must admit that I have encountered many of you as white allies who know whiteness is privilege and power. You know that white skin is magic, that it is a key to open doors. Yet you also know that for the most part whiteness is invisible to many white folks.” (66)

He rightly argues that whiteness, and race, and blackness are constructed ideas, “a fabricated idea” that helps to sustain the power of the preferred, dominant group. And if constructed, such ideas can and also should be deconstructed… a recurring theme in his writing and in the journey toward healing and wholeness.

For me, for a good while now, I have tried to be part of the deconstruction, the naming of this dehumanizing labeling. I would with a little twist speak of my own identity as a “white, pink, privileged person” – a little bit of chipping away and an invitation to other so-called whites to understand the role of whiteness.

However, I have also grown with the help of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ clarity. In Between the World and Me, he names the profound plunder by whites. In writing to his son, echoing Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time, Coates writes,

“You have to make your peace with the chaos, but you cannot lie. You cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold.” (71)

“… you are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory, but because it assures you an honorable and sane life.” (97)

“The people who must believe they are white can never be your measuring stick…. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.” (108)

White… pink… privileged… plunderer…. Not me personally, but how can I divorce myself from the status quo… created by American history, denied by claims of
white innocence, and ignore as Dr. King put it the inescapable network of mutuality…. Of interconnection?… Or do so, at the risk of my own spiritual health.

Dyson went to Knoxville College, one of the historically black schools, founded by Presbyterians. It hosted an inter-racial day camp when I was eight or so years old…. It was 1960 or 1961, and I was eight or nine…. I attended for only one day because the camp was cancelled after threats of violence, lest black and white boys and girls swim in the same pool on a hot summer day.

Dyson was a philosophy major and after two years transferred to the dominantly white Carson Newman College 30 miles away, having exhausted the departmental offerings very quickly. He was suspended from Carson Newman after his first year there for refusing to attend mandatory Chapel where he objected to the lack of sufficient speakers from among the black students, who admittedly were few in number. He also admits that a prayer he did offer at one chapel – beseeching God “to end” racism at the school (“in our midst”) – had alienated the administration. (51)

After a year’s absence when he pastored a small black Baptist church, he went back to Carson Newman for his senior year, put up with the chapel services, and earned all the credits he needed for graduation – with all A’s in his major. He received admission to a Ph.D. program at Princeton University, yet was denied his final transcript until he could complete payment of his tuition. The President of the University recommended he get a job and pay the tuition bill, rather than to pursue an Ivy League graduate degree.

I suppose it is settling a score, and why not? Dyson reveals his anger, writing,

“Sir, you must know that for me to take a job and give up a world-class education would be extremely short-sighted,” I said frostily. “You’ve got to know the value of such a degree. But then, I suppose you have no way of knowing since you never earned a Ph.D.”

[The college President] … turned beet red, sensing my contempt. My defiance didn’t defeat whiteness, but I took pride in giving it a body blow that day. (48)

Again, his book is addressed to white Americans, asking, inviting, summoning the best from within us and

- to learn American history with its pungent, horrid racism,
- to be knowledgeable about black history (e.g., learning about those like Frederick Douglass specifically – apparently little known to our President),
- to reject social constructs of race,
- to quit killing blacks, or making excuses for systems of oppression and death, and
- to understand the terror that accompanies black lives in our nation…

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He appeals to those of us who are white:

Beloved, you must not be defensive when you hear our hurt. We who proclaim the terror of cops do not hate all cops. We hate what cops have been made to be…. We hate that cops don’t treat us the way they treat you.

He adds, “You’d be beside yourselves if your children were being slaughtered.” (192)

And, he concludes near the end,

We do not hate you, white America. We hate that you terrorize us and then lie about it and then make us feel crazy for having to explain to you how crazy it makes us feel. We cannot hate you, not really, not most of us; that is our gift to you. We cannot halt you; that is our curse. (193)

Along the way, as part of the lamentation and condemnation of racist realities, Dyson includes good news and hope, such as the efforts of white student to be an ally. Dyson welcomes that effort and comments that becoming an ally is “tough but not impossible.” (70)

Learning to listen is a virtue that whiteness has often avoided. I asked… [that student] to engage, to adopt the vocabulary of empathy, to develop fluidity in the dialect of hope and the language of racial understanding.

And Dyson briefly reflects on our President’s lack of empathy, ignorance, and lies about President Obama. Rather than calling his election a nightmare, he says that it is “more accurately, a whitemare.” (219)

“Whether he wishes to be or not, Donald Trump is the epitome, not only of white innocence and white privilege, but of white power, white rage, and yes, even of white supremacy.” (222) Big league, some would add. He truly doesn’t see it.

Michael Eric Dyson offers a program of RESPONSIVE action worthy of discussion, and I will get this on our calendar. Quickly, R-E-S-P-O-N-S-I-V-E, as an acronym:

R – Reparation … with concrete steps each can take.
E – Educate yourself about black life and culture, and be racially literate.
S – School yourself, family and friends about the white elephant in the room – white privilege.
P – Participation in protests, rallies, community meetings, and elections.
O – Other… refuse to identify blacks as the other, or anyone.
N – New – make new black friends; they aren’t here to save those of us who are “white” or to fix us, but we can help grow our souls, our depth and breadth, should we be open to new relationships.
S – Speak up.
I – for Immigrant… don’t confuse the immigrant experience with that of Black Americans, though there may be overlap.
V – Visit … expand your horizons and empathy by visiting hospital, jails…
E – Empathy is what blesses each of us…. That’s the goal!

Theologically, spiritually his sermon – his book – incarnates a faith in salvation by character; deeds not creeds; spiritually that we can change and overcome our own prejudices and conditioning with each other’s help; that we are truly sisters and brothers, inescapably linked; that when evil flourishes because we at times ignore our better selves, we can do better; that differences enrich us, and people are precious, a mirror of the sacred. Love saves us, and Justice is Love’s calling. A Baptist minister sounding like a Universalist!

All this we know… sometimes a challenge… always awaiting the work of our hands and hearts. Becoming an ally is “tough but not impossible.”

Among the sources for hope that I have long shared, and Dyson includes, and with which I conclude, is the story told by Fannie Lou Hamer, voting rights and civil rights leader, organizer with SNCC, and an activist in the 1960s who led the efforts of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party:

I would like to tell you in closing a story of an old man. This old man was very wise, and he could answer questions that was almost impossible for people to answer. So some people went to him one day, two young people, and said, "We're going to trick this guy today. We're going to catch a bird, and we're going to carry it to this old man. And we're going to ask him, 'This that we hold in our hands today, is it alive or is it dead?' If he says 'Dead,' we're going to turn it loose and let it fly. But if he says, 'Alive,' we're going to crush it." So they walked up to this old man, and they said, "This that we hold in our hands today, is it alive or is it dead?" He looked at the young people and he smiled. And he said, "It's in your hands." (196)

MEDITATION/PRAYER – W. E. B. DuBois

Save us World Spirit, from our lesser selves!
Grant us that war and hatred cease,
Reveal our souls in every race and hue!
Help us o human God, in this Thy Truce,
To Make Humanity Divine.

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