

Pastoral letter on the death of George Floyd

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Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia

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I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies....Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

We cannot continue to be silent. Too long we have refused to receive the breath of the Holy Spirit. Martin Luther King, Jr. said “There comes a time when silence is betrayal.” In our silence we have dismissed the the indiscriminate killing and violence levied on people of color, and especially African-Americans. Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd are just the latest of a long list of people of color, known and unknown who have died because of our silence.

In that great hymn of the church, “Breathe on me, Breath of God” we ask God to Fill us with life anew that we may love as God loves and do what God would do. And yet our Black brothers and sisters cannot breathe. The breath of life is being choked out of them. The knees which bear down on their necks are our knees of White privilege, institutional and systemic racism. “I can’t breathe!” is something they have been trying to tell us for a long time. Our brothers and sisters can’t breathe. But we CAN breathe! And because we can breathe, it is time for us to stand up, give voice to their lament and outrage and voice to our lament and outrage. They can’t breathe, but we can; and we must breathe and speak so that our breath can send out the word that what we have seen and heard IS UNACCEPTABLE.

If we remain silent, we will have betrayed our community. This is not a call to polarization. This is not about pitting the police as villains and the people they are trying to arrest as the good guys. We are all beloved children of the God in whose image we all are created. But we are all pre-disposed toward actions of evil; and it is toward those actions that we can no longer be silent. The cry for justice must be sounded out by all to whom the breath of life has been given.

Many will say that words are not enough; and indeed they are not. They must be coupled with action that is constructive and supportive of all life. The words

that go out on our breath must be matched with actions that support our Baptismal promises to persevere and resist evil, to repent of sin, to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve all persons loving our neighbors as ourselves, and to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. If we abandon these promises, we have walked away from God.

But what can we do? We can begin to look at ourselves and to root out every trace of our own racism. And it exists within all of us. This idea distresses us, because we want to be good people, and the idea of racism is abhorrent to us. But it exists. And the sooner we begin to shine the light on it, the sooner we will be freed from its oppression; and then, maybe then, our brothers and sisters of color will also be freed. The Episcopal Church, in its efforts towards “Becoming Beloved Community,” has developed a curriculum called Sacred Ground. Many churches are beginning to offer opportunities to participate in this curriculum. If your church is one of them, please let the Diocesan office know. If you would like to find a group, please contact us, and we can help connect you. Our group on racial reconciliation, *Repairers of the Breach*, is working to update resources and action steps. Stay tuned through the Diocesan website, diosova.org.

I invite you to recall the Parable of the Good Samaritan. That wounded person is currently on the side of the road. That person cannot breathe. Are we going to stop and take action, or are we going to keep walking? What will we do so that one day everyone will be able to breathe.

Yours faithfully in Christ,

+Susan