

Rev. Kennetha Bigham-Tsai
Prayer Vigil for Racial Justice, All of us Together
June 9, 2020

**A Letter to the American Church
(upon the death of George Floyd)**

Dear Church,

We have seen, over the last months, what racism and violent white supremacy in America looks like. It looks like Amy Cooper weaponizing white womanhood by calling the police on an African-American birdwatcher in Central Park. It looks like white men pursuing and murdering a young black man, Ahmaud Arbery, as he jogged in a suburban community in Georgia. It looks like police killing a young black woman, an EMT named Breonna Taylor, in her home in Louisville, Kentucky. It looks like white protesters carrying automatic weapons into the Michigan Statehouse to demand “liberation” from public health measures, even as Black deaths from Covid-19 in the state soar.

It looks like black bodies that are expendable. Black pleas for help, ignorable. The words “I can’t breathe,” repeated across the years from the lips of Eric Garner to the desperate pleas of George Floyd.

This is what white racism and violence in America looks like. And, our country has been trembling with the tumult of the pain and rage that have followed that violence. Early protests that began as expressions of communal grief and outrage soon turned to chaos. Journalists reported that some who engaged in violence were not acting on behalf of the Black community. Whatever the contours of this situation, it has gone beyond what any of us could have imagined. It will be weeks or months before we know the full landscape of this crisis.

But every black and brown American has long known, as I do, the landscape of the terrors of racism. The terror of being pulled over by police for spurious charges of traffic violations. The terror of having security details follow you in a store. The terror of wondering if our black or brown sons or daughters will come home from their prom or from a walk around the block.

Where is God in the midst of this terror? Where are we to find the voice of God in the pain of long terrorized black and brown communities? Psalm 46: 6-7 tells us,

The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
[God] utters his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.” Psalm 46: 6-7

God is always with the dispossessed and the suffering. God identifies with the oppressed. After all, God became in-fleshed in the person of Jesus Christ who was pursued and eventually crucified by authoritarian power.

Through the crucified Jesus, God identifies with Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Sean Monterossa, Nina Pop, George Floyd and yes, thousands of others. God came into the world, in Christ, to identify with those who have had their necks pinned to the ground under the knee of authoritarian terror.

Come, behold the works of the Lord...[the Psalm reads]
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire. Psalm 46: 8-9

The scriptures declare the ultimate victory of the righteousness of God over the oppression of God's people. But for the Black community, which has endured the evils of slavery, Jim Crow, racism, and state violence for the entirety of our history in this country, we struggle with the question of when. If God's identity is with the oppressed, then when will the oppression of black and brown people stop? When will being black or brown in America be safe?

I don't know the answer to these questions. But in my exasperation and grief, I turn to the Church. The Church is the body of Christ. The Christ who was raised from the dead and now sits at the right hand of God has made the Church his hands, his feet, his heart.

I long for the Church to fully acknowledge the scourge of racism in our country and fully commit to ending this scourge. It is up to us, as the Church, to break the bow and shatter the spears of white supremacy in our country. The Church must burn the shields that protect, from accountability, the exercise of white violence against black bodies. I cannot imagine any other way for the Church to be faithful to the witness of the liberating Christ.

Psalm 46 ends with the admonition to "Be still and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10

This does not mean that we are to be still, waiting passively for justice that has too long been denied. We should not be quiet, passively enduring the continued killing and maiming of black and brown people. Instead, the stillness to which we are called is the quiet stillness of prayerful resolve—resolve to channel the rage that is being expressed around the country into prophetic engagement that leads to justice and reconciliation—the resolve to be the pastoral and prophetic presence that addresses our national pain.

Dear Church, Please!