

SPEAKING TRUTH AND JUSTICE

I come before you as a witness to racism in our midst. While watching 60 Minutes recently, I was reminded by David Attenborough that a witness statement is given when a crime has been committed. Well, racism is a crime and it runs rampant through our world, through our society, through our communities, and in our own lives.

In the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd, I heard our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, preach a sermon as part of a service from our National Cathedral. In that sermon he talked about his own boyhood in the 1960s and being told, as a black teenager, that if he were ever stopped by the police he should offer no resistance, obey, and never talk back. It was heart-breaking to hear him recall that painful memory. I am of the same generation as Michael Curry and, as white teens, my friends were never told that. Oh, they might have had a reason to be afraid of the police because of things they were actually doing, but not because of the color of their skin.

In the 1980s I had a wonderful friend from church, a black woman who was a principal at one of the grade schools in North Chicago. As a professional educator and a woman of faith, Arminta mentored and supported me in my ministry with our Christian education program.

At the time, Arminta was raising her nephew, an “a” student and a good young man, and yet she felt the need to give him this same advice that Bishop Curry had received 20 years earlier. One evening as we had dinner together, Arminta shared with me her anxiety about letting her nephew go out with his friends because they could be doing absolutely nothing wrong, but if they were in the wrong place at the wrong time

they would automatically be guilty. My sons were teens at this time, too, and of course, I worried about them when they went out, but not for the same reasons. My concern had nothing to do with the color of their skin.

This was my first experience with seeing how racism impacted the life of someone I respected and cared for. It was one of those “aha” moments of insight to a world I had not experienced. I realized that racism was something Arminta and her family lived with everyday of their lives. It didn't require a dramatic or catastrophic event. No, it permeated their day-to-day lives. Racism was no longer abstract for me; it was personal.

Sadly, as Linda pointed out in her sermon, conditions are not much better today. In 2019 my granddaughter, Camie, asked me to be her reading partner for a school project. We were part of a group who read a book by Nic Stone called Dear Martin. Although the book is fiction, it is based on a series of recent true events. It is about a bright black teenage boy named Justyce who lives in a poor, rough neighborhood and is given a scholarship to a white prep school. His friend, Manny, who comes from a well-to-do black family, is the only other black student in the school. Justyce turns to the teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr. to help him sort out the struggles he faces as he juggles the contrasting worlds of his poor black neighborhood and his rich white school. Writing in his journal, he addresses his thoughts and feelings to “Dear Martin.” One day Justyce and Manny are driving around town in Manny's car, minding their own business, when Manny is shot, killed, by a white off-duty policeman because they are playing the radio too loud and it angered him. Through the eyes of Justyce, I came face-to-face with the injustice of the legal system and the discrimination of the media that confronted

him at every turn as he came up against racism and white supremacy.

Like most of you, I entered into a covenant with God at baptism and I will continue to renew that covenant throughout my life. As part of that covenant I promise over and over again to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.” Further, at baptism I was asked to “renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.” I cannot think of a more powerful evil in this world than racism. Sometimes it's overt and aggressive and violent, but other times it's subtle and insidious and manipulative, but always it is dehumanizing and destructive.

In one of our prayers of confession, we ask for forgiveness for “the evil done on our behalf.” As a person who benefits from white privilege, this prayer resonates with me. I am part of a legal system, an economic system, a cultural system, and an ideological system that promotes the false narrative that white is more valued and is the standard for what is normal and acceptable. This comes at a great cost and with much pain to those who are not white. Whether I want to be or not, whether I am aware of it or not, I am part of these systems and stand in need of forgiveness on a daily basis.

I don't have all of the answers, but I do know that thoughts and prayers are not enough. I know that I have lots of work to do to understand my part in perpetuating the sins of racism and white supremacy and their hold on our nation. I know these are systemic problems and require changes to the very systems that I find to be quite comfortable. I know that to be silent is to be complicit so I know that I must, to the best of my ability, speak out and speak up against injustice and inequality. I know that I have a responsibility to express my views to congressional leaders and others in power, and

to support organizations committed to racial healing and reconciliation. I know that together we can accomplish more than I can accomplish on my own. Change begins in the heart of each and every one of us and then together we can change the world into God's reign of justice and mercy, and love for all people.

In the words of a song by Joan Baez, "Deep in my heart I do believe we shall overcome."