

June 5

Taking in the news is almost unbearable these days. The horrifying, stomach-churning video of George Floyd being put to death by asphyxiation brings reality into our homes with much the same power as the same-day coverage of the Viet-Nam war and 9/11 did. The shooting death of Breonna Taylor by police who broke into her house by mistake in pursuit of another person chills us as few other things can. People of color can't even sleep in peace. The list goes on.

One mournful thought frequently expressed is that racism is broad and deep and so entrenched that what we see is just a repeat of the 1960's. I won't use the words better or worse, but I will say that there is support for the protests I did not see 50 odd years ago. The black and brown commentators are reporters, executives, business owners, who were far fewer fifty years ago. White people—ordinary folks, not just clergy, etc.—are more in evidence. This is partly due, I think, to broader social change and increased diversity we've seen in that time period. That is something tangible; something we can work with, and be grateful for.

I think technology plays a huge part. We get to see what happened on the street in Minnesota. We watch a man be put to death. If you haven't seen the video of the police stop, gird your loins and watch it. The local security cameras (machines that have no agenda or politics) record events—not “present” or re-enact or dramatize the story—but passively make a record of events for history. Among the things we see is a small crowd of people getting more agitated as George Floyd slowly asphyxiates. Three other cops aid and abet what the “neck-kneeler” was doing. So, 4 armed and trained police officers watch agitated civilians record their actions, seemingly without concern. Still close-ups of the cop on Floyd's neck show a face that looks to me full of the attitude of “come at me and I'll have plenty of this for you, too.”

The agitation, the simultaneous feelings of anger and helplessness, is what we experience along with the people on the sidewalk. This is what pushes people into the streets.

But there's more, much more, to see in the video. We see Floyd taken into custody, handcuffed and taken away from his vehicle and two passengers taken out. Floyd is led to stand by a building where he sits quietly. He's a

big guy, but he has been compliant, no signs of shouting or struggling or resisting. In time, he's gotten up, taken along by an officer (presumably to go to the station house), and then he's down and he's put to death. Had he been read his rights, had the charge for arrest been given to him? It is possible he never knew why he was being killed.

We know from interviews that the police were called because it was suspected that he was trying to use a counterfeit \$20 bill in a store. Doubtless, we will get more information about the situation. But we can start asking now, does any of this sound like something that happens to white people? No, it doesn't—and that's an operating definition of racism on a structural and cultural level.

An important thing for us now is to sit with how the video makes us feel. I think this is vital because it gives us a way to experience the invidious reality of our national sin of racism, which I will say more about in a minute.

I mentioned before the water-on-the-griddle, droplets popping in place energy that courses through us, but we feel cut off from acting on it. We're like the sidewalk crowd—angry, appalled, but afraid of armed men of the law doing violence to them—or us—over this situation. We can't stand it and we can't stop it. In short, we feel like people of color feel all the time. It is just one more of so many manifestations of what Marvin Gaye sang about in his great song from 1971, Inner City Blues (Make me wanna holler): "Look how they do my life".

Would you have tried to push the cop off of George Floyd? Well, you might have tried. I have imagined doing it. You might have won Mr. Floyd one deep breath if you were quick and lucky. But you'd be bleeding in the street yourself if not dead already ten seconds later. That feeling, of being crushed in your soul and torn apart in your spirit in the same moment, that feeling is real, and it is what we need not to lose if we're going to have a better future.

Now, what to do. First, I would counsel you to search your own self and find a time and a place—or a series of such—where you felt trapped, restrained, constrained, cut out, cut off, discounted, used and discarded, abused and exploited, and you could see no way out. Maybe you know what it is to be trapped by men, raped and beaten day after day for no

reason other than the guy feels like it—that kind of trapped. Or maybe you've escaped drowning or fire or being run over through some quirk of nature—a twist of cloth, a breeze that blew, a patch of ice that the car slewed on—not by your own efforts because you were trapped and helpless.

Got that feeling? Ok. Do you want anyone else to have that feeling? Assuming you say no, then we've got a starting place. That momentary circumstance of fear and horror and helplessness for you is a touchstone for what our national original sin creates in the souls of people of color. It is not felt the same every day by every one, but it is a haunting companion and predator. We have to enlarge our narrow mis-understanding of what racism is. Racism on the interpersonal feelings, level we get stuck on so easily is real, but it is only part of the issue. We get fixated on ourselves, ("I'm not racist, I don't see color, I'm not kneeling on anyone's neck, and I won't let you say that about me!") and that's not what's at stake here.

What is at stake is what we Christians know very well how to talk about, and this is where we can contribute, I think. The issue is everyone of us born here was born into a racist society built to exploit people of color for white privilege. It is the stain of original sin to be Christian about it. Being born and raised here in the USA affects all of us white, black, red, brown, etc. in different ways, and it burdens, warps, and blights us all—but white people don't have to see it unless they want to because we get the benefits and the cost gets hidden (another topic for another time).

St. Paul writes in Romans that he feels the warfare within himself, the negative power that draws him from Christ and his own preaching about the equality of men and women, Jew and Gentile, and even from his ability to accept himself as a flawed, imperfect, sinful human being like everyone else, and works to disconnect him from the holy, hopeful, new person in Christ who is the apostle of the heart set free, willing to give up privileges and rights associated with his birth and upbringing, and to give himself to a life graced by the spirit of Christ. Winning that struggle requires choosing living like Jesus. That can be the story of us, of St. Giles, of the Episcopal Church in these days.

Recognizing that this is an on-going struggle in our society and in our souls is critical. We will have to fight the battle to our dying breath. In our time, for the white people (I am among this group), the work is the labor of love in

Christ called being “anti-racist”. Remember what I said about original sin—we are born into it here in America and we swim in it as fish do in water, not aware until we wake up—being anti-racist is doing the work of learning the systemic realities and then taking on the bit of the work we can do to make it better in company with people of color.

I am stopping here for today, hoping you will find something that anchors you and help you grapple with what we are facing. God bless us, every one.