

Pastoral Prayer

Holy Spirit; Breath of God, we can't breathe!

We are suffocating under wave after wave of senseless shootings and mass shootings and retaliations and counter retaliations that end up in violence and destruction. We can't breathe!

We grieve today for our brothers and sister:* George, and Ahmaud, and Breonna, and Christian and Freddie and Philando and Alton and Jamar and Jeremy and William and Walter and Eric and Tamir and Michael and Eric, to name but a few? Even as we grieve, we stand under the condemnation of generations of silence, panting from the stifling weight of our collective inaction. We can't breathe!

We are choking on our own acceptance of violence as normal; smothered by our desensitized sense of outrage at injustice flaunted; stifled by our overwhelming sense of helplessness and powerlessness. We can't breathe!

We seek the safety and relative tranquility of our White privilege, even as we gasp in our denial of who we are—who we have become. We can't breathe!

Holy Spirit, maybe worst of all is the endless repetition. We've been here before - Watts in 1965, the whole nation after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., while George Wallace kept calling for "Law and Order," Kent State in 1970, Los Angeles after the Rodney King verdict in 1992...

Holy Spirit, Wind of God, refresh our anesthetized awareness of what is right, and just. Send us breezes of awareness; re-sensitize our deadened capacity for empathy.

Holy Spirit, Fire of God, burn within us again. Burn away all that obstructs our passion for justice; burn away all the divisive arrogance that hardens our sectarian human understandings of your purpose, and ignite within us all a new realization of power: power to be; power to speak; power to do your will, so we can breathe again, and so we never again need to grieve for our brothers and sisters.

Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, three and yet mysteriously One, unite us in our awareness of our common need of your grace. Amen.

*Scroll full names on screen: George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Christian, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Jamar Clark, Jeremy McDole, William Chapman II, Walter Scott, Eric Harris, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Garner.

We Can't Breathe!

Five-year-old Timmy has a new game and he's eager to find someone to play it with him. He goes to big sister, Sarah and asks, "Will you play my new game with me?" But Sarah is busy with homework, so Timmy goes to Daddy, who's night it is to prepare dinner, and doesn't have time to play. Timmy tries Mommy, who's just home from work, exhausted, and just wants to enjoy her martini and veg out. Big brother Johnny is on the phone with his girlfriend, so he's not available...

Suddenly, two-year-old Bobby screams bloody murder. Timmy has picked up a Whiffle bat and conked Bobby on the head. Now, Timmy gets the attention he so deeply wanted. Of course, it's negative attention; but in this particular five-year-old's perspective it's better than being ignored.

Dr. Terri Hord Owens, General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada writes, "We are haunted and outraged by the anguished cries of George Floyd, the gasp of 'I can't breathe' as a police officer knelt on his neck until the breath was completely taken from him. Floyd's murder, like that of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Aubery in recent weeks, is just the latest in a long history of violence against Black and Brown people in our country. The protests that are happening in big cities and small towns across the nation are an outpouring of grief and anger born of centuries of pain and injustice."

Grief is an accurate word to describe my own reaction. I grieve that it's increasing common to justify inhuman behavior on the basis of ideological absolutism. The controversy over where to stand in relation to George Floyd's death appears to line up consistently with every other recent controversy in America: conservatives line up against liberals.

The possibility is shrinking rapidly that we ever will see an issue about which both liberals and conservatives agree. And there seems less and less possibility that ever again those disagreements will be pursued with respect and integrity. I see less and less indication that anyone on either side wants to resolve any of the issues that divide us. Most just want to win the fight.

And so, I grieve. And the tears come more often and more easily.

The problem, as I see it, is not the riots. Those are but the symptoms of a deeper problem—a spiritual problem that must be resolved before there is any hope of eliminating or even reducing the riots. That spiritual problem is silence, and it is a two-headed demon. The one head is the silence that is chosen—either by intention or by default. The other head is the silence that is inflicted by some use of power upon an oppressed people.

Expatriated Brazilian educator Paulo Freire says being fully human is "being a subject who (is) capable of looking critically at his world in a dialogical encounter with others."¹ Dialogical. That implies equality and mutuality; it implies that every person's word has value.

The exercise of dialogue implies that each person's Word "...is a means by which people discover themselves and their potential by giving names to things around them. ...each person owns the right to say his (or her) own word, to name the world."²

When the right and ability to say one's own word is taken away, a state of oppression exists. Young people are oppressed, even in affluent cultures, says Freire, for they perceive their right to say their own word has been taken away, and few things are more important than the struggle to win it back.³ Nowhere is this more clearly validated than in their music, and the music of our ethnic populations. In a real sense, their music is the only word that's theirs alone!

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "A riot is the voice of the unheard."

We live in a binary world in which everything is like an on/off switch. Everything is black/white, light/dark, good/evil, and there are only two choices.

In this binary environment it's difficult to speak in support of police without being heard by some as condoning the despicable behavior of a half-dozen police officers who participated in the murder of George Floyd. And it's equally difficult to speak against the murder of black men and women by white police without being heard by others as condoning lawlessness and looting and the destruction of private property. To speak of unequal justice and racism and white privilege, is to be met with senseless denial and a hostile, "quit playing the racist card".

To speak against gerrymandering and other strategies of voter suppression is to be heard by some as promoting voter fraud. To speak in support of the right to gather for peaceful protest is to be heard as condoning violence and vandalism and the destruction of private property. To speak against that same violence and vandalism and destruction of private property is to be heard as opposing the right of peaceful protest. If I say, "Black lives matter," some will hear me saying other lives aren't important. If I say "All lives matter," I'm a racist in the eyes of others.

But, what's the alternative? In a binary world there is no third option;

¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968), p. 12.

² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

there are no shades of gray. It's simply you agree with me, or you're wrong. There's no dialogue between equal voices; as binary thinkers we cancel each other's voice! Yet, speak we must!

Former President, Jimmy Carter, said, "silence can be as deadly as violence." G. K. Chesterton said, "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."

"A riot is the language of the unheard." What people rarely recall is the rest of Dr. King's statement: "And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and status quo than about justice and humanity."

The controversial Rev. Al Sharpton, who delivered George Floyd's eulogy Friday, said, "There is a difference between those calling for peace and those calling for quiet. Some of y'all don't want peace, you just want quiet. You just want us to shut up and suffer in silence."

The human voice is the source of identity and purpose, and is the medium of transferring value. When one's voice is taken away or ignored—or when we as a people cancel each other's voices, or when we remain silent by our own choice, we render ourselves powerless and impotent; and the stage is set for injustice.

So, speak we must. Speak I must. Listen to these words from Holy Scripture: (Dean Williams)

Proverbs 31:8-9 (NRSV)

Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.

⁹ Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.

There is one voice - a united voice in which all God's people can share. It's not the whole solution; but it's the first step, and there won't be a solution until that first step is taken. Until then we'll just continue to be a people without a voice—a people oppressed by our own hard-headedness and our own rigid unwillingness to consider any viewpoint but our own.

Here is that voice from II CHRONICLES 7:14 (NRSV) ... *if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkwP1JTIQBs> (Used by Permission)

Just one voice, singing in the darkness
All it takes is one voice
Singing so they hear what's on your mind
And when you look around you'll find

There's more than one voice
Singing in the darkness
Joining with your one voice
Each and every note another octave
Hands are joined and fears unlocked

If only, one voice, would start it on its own
We need just one voice facing the unknown
And then that one voice would never be alone
It takes that one voice

It takes that one voice
Just one voice, singing in the darkness
All it takes is one voice
Shout it out and let it ring
Just one voice, it takes that one voice
And everyone will sing