

America's History of Using Excessive Force in Policing the Poor and People Color
When Granting Justice is not Preferred
Faith, Civic Responsibility, and the Soul of the Christian Church in America Today

Introduction:

This pastoral letter is intended to help as we live in the intersection of the crisis of police brutality, racism, COVID-19, and economic collapse in 2020. We are all overwhelmed by the pandemic and the related justice issues. The resources utilized in researching the issues herein include reporting from major news outlets, studies conducted by universities, and reports from US government offices. I appreciate your willingness to engage the difficult and complicated issues which require a longer written presentation to unpack. I hope you will be blessed by spending the time to engage the letter, the biblical reflection, and one another.

My Story:

I will never forget what it was like when the police car came speeding around the corner as officers with guns drawn pointed spotlights in my face. They jumped out of the car and started yelling for me to lay on the ground, face down, and to spread out my legs and arms. I was forced to the ground, and my friend was forced to step away at gunpoint as one of them searched the bushes behind me for a gun.

The Taco restaurant just up the block had been robbed at gunpoint by a Black man in a white jacket. I was standing on the sidewalk waiting for a bus while wearing a white jacket. I ended up being cuffed, forced into the car, and driven up the street to the restaurant. The officers asked the woman working the cash register to come out and see if I was the man who held her up. She came out to the car and they pointed a flashlight in my face. I thank God she could tell that I was not the person who robbed the store. She said--in what I understood to be outrage--"No, that's not him. I said he had on a nylon jacket; that's not a white nylon jacket!"

After my "I told you so," the officers gruffly handed me a business card with a number on it that people were to call if they felt that the police had done anything wrong. Can you guess what would have happened if I were not completely compliant? I am glad that my father taught us how to respond to the police. I experienced the disregard for my humanity that is reserved for the poor and people of color in this nation. Of similar ilk was the time spent in jury duty in Media PA when at the end of the day the clerk happily announced the number of trials conducted and the success of the nearly 100% conviction rate to the remaining jury pool members. The group broke into spontaneous applause and cheers, much to my surprise, curiosity, and dismay.

Our History of Using Excessive Force to Shut Down Protest:

I believe modern policing in America has at its primal root in the cruel genocide of Native Americans and the violent controlling of Black bodies from slavery forward. In fact, policing kills far more people in America than in any nation of similar wealth around the world. It is the poor of all racial groups who are killed by our police in the main. More white people living in poverty (in urban and rural settings) are killed by police than any other race or class in the US. When the statistical reports are based on the percentage of people in the US population, even though the number of deaths is small, Native Americans are most likely to be killed by police followed by African Americans (at a rate that is more than twice that of whites). The mentally ill are killed by police in staggering numbers in America, in fact, at the highest rate of all citizens.

Reportedly, factors related to poverty, vulnerability, race, and the proliferation of guns drive death at the hands of the police to a rate that is three times that of other nations of similar wealth. We can add to that policing actuality, the history of internment camps for Asian Americans and the sorted history chronicling America's mistreatment of all poor immigrants from around the world. Some immigrants were able to escape decades of chronic discrimination and brutality perpetrated on the newcomers by assimilating into the culture over time. For others it was a physical impossibility, evidenced by many decades of discrimination, segregation and Jim Crow of African Americans in particular, and people of color in general. People of color continue to live within a society that shows blatant indifference to their humanity. It is as if their lives do not matter, they are constantly the least, last, and the brutalized.

Recently we have seen “caged” Mexican children cruelly traumatized by forced separation from their parents and a photo of the father and daughter who died in the river in a desperate attempt to seek asylum. The stripping of the support from refugee communities in America today is abhorrent abandonment. What ever happened to, “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore?”

Meanwhile police keep shooting Black men in the back--killing them as they move away from police--posing no threat or harm to the officers. Black women are killed by the police, Breonna Taylor even while sleeping. Recently reported, a Latino man was killed while begging the policemen for mercy while he was on his knees. On video tape we see unarmed Black men accused of misdemeanors or minor non-violent crimes crying out, “I can’t breathe!” as the police apply deadly force to the victims' necks, maliciously taking their lives. Black children are killed by police too, a boy in Cleveland Ohio was killed for playing with a toy gun in the public square. The police rolled up and shot him dead.

The Current Racial Justice Movement:

Is it any wonder that we are in the midst of the largest protest movement for racial justice in the history of our nation? This protest movement engages people of diverse backgrounds and has lasted for months. Lately, America seems to focus on the violence of the angry rioters and “outside” agitators far more than the plea for justice and the unheeded causes and catalysts of this predominantly peaceful protest movement. In more than 93% of all demonstrations connected to the Black Lives Matter movement, demonstrators have not engaged in violence or destructive activity (The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project).

Juxtapose all this with police calmly arresting a white man in South Carolina, a mass murderer, and then treating him to a hamburger on the way to the precinct because he was hungry. Remember the hate groups in Charlottesville VA chanting antisemitic tropes and killing a woman by driving a car into a crowd. Or consider the 17-year-old white male with a long gun walking through the streets of Kenosha, Wisconsin after killing people and being allowed to wave his hands like a hero as several police drive by unphased by his presence.

Again, contrast peaceful DC protesters being tear-gassed to heavily armed white militia who can storm the steps of State Capital buildings, and yet be seen as nonviolent. They were urged to stand up for their rights to not wear a mask or quarantine themselves to fight COVID-19. Home grown white supremacy groups, QAnon, and Neo Nazis, self-report as feeling empowered in recent years. Whether you are in a synagogue in Pittsburgh PA, a nightclub in Orlando Florida, an outdoor concert in Las Vegas, the number one threat for Homeland Security is that of domestic terrorism. The American flag is carried by extremist movements during demonstrations nationally and internationally. Our president is seen as a kind of Messiah to these groups. As the demographic shift continues and whites become the minority and people of color the majority (2045) America must continuously choose democracy and not supremacy as our organizing principle. The intersection of the current pandemic, justice movement, economic collapse, and the disenfranchisement of our citizens is:

- COVID- 19 taking the lives of 200,000 Americans.
- Communities of color being disproportionately impacted due to chronic healthcare disparities and their employment as essential workers in public-facing jobs.
- The federal government never providing a much-needed comprehensive plan for adequate testing, contact tracing, effective treatment, quarantine, and the wearing of masks to mitigate against COVID-19.
- The mandate for returning students, teachers, and staff to school/college with high community transmission rates is outrageous.
- Millions of citizens are unemployed and losing the federal support needed to survive in this pandemic.
- 87 million Americans or 1 in 8 families are food insecure today.
- Social Security and Medicare are threatened by increasing debt and cutting tax revenue favoring the top 1%.
- Global warming goes largely unaddressed and the health of the planet remains in crisis. We ride out the storms and fight the raging fires during the pandemic while ignoring the science for both.
- Our healthcare may be taken away in Supreme Court cases initiated by our government leaders mid-pandemic.

- The loss of small businesses and the impact of employment and the economy.
- The collapse of major corporations and the impact of employment and the economy.
- The callous disregard for lives Senior Citizens and those most vulnerable to the Coronavirus.
- Domestic Terrorism is on the rise.

In Conclusion:

The full picture is that indeed we are changing as a nation—over the years real progress has taken place in racial justice and we celebrate the same. Life itself has a way of humbling everyone and surely victimization is not limited to certain racial ethnic groups or economic class. Policing in America is not limited to citizens being killed. Law enforcement also saves lives! Even so, we are at a critical juncture, together.

This is an all-consuming and all of America dilemma. Each of us must search our conscious to determine our own responses. It will take all of us in an intentional effort to change course. We pray that the church helps to make a difference in the days ahead. The justice movement in our midst will be around for a while and history will record our participation. Scripture speaks to Christ's church in America today in the story of the unjust Judge.

Luke 18:1-9 (NRSV)

[Jesus] said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says."

I will remind you of the ancient context. Jesus and his disciples were people living in poverty under the domination of the Roman government. Rome utilized crucifixion as a policing practice, a public demonstration of what happens to people who protest and challenge their rule. This unjust judge was one of the paid magistrates appointed either by Herod or by Rome. Unless a plaintiff had influence and money to bribe her way to a verdict, she had no hope of ever getting the case settled. These judges were said to have perverted justice for a dish of meat (Barclay). The widow in the lesson represents those that we would term, the most vulnerable, the powerless living in deep level poverty. After reading the passage above, please consider these questions as they relate to the current issues of racism, inequality and police brutality.

- Will we ignore the plight and the plea for justice from the most vulnerable in our society or will we help to bind the wounds?
- In what ways are we able to identify and confront unjust leaders among us who are self-centered and demonstrate a lack compassion and empathy for the people?
- Why do we respond to people who are aggrieved only after feeling threatened by the free-floating anger unleashed by oppression and hate speech?
- In what ways are we complicit by allowing brutal policing practices that crush the powerless whose repeated calls for justice are ignored?
- Will there remain a remnant of the faithful among us who will seek justice for all people, even today?
- Do we trust that God is at the side of the oppressed?

I encourage you to use this letter and the scripture lesson as a conversation starter for your discussions of faith and civic responsibility. Talk with one another as you examine policing practices and other pressing issues of the challenging times in which we live. How will you respond? What sacrifice might you be called to make to stand for justice?

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Association September 17, 2020