A Discipleship Response to Racism and Injustice

My God! Not again! And again! This was my sickening reaction when I heard the news and saw social media video recordings of the killings of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd.

The horrifying videos of these two Black men — one shot and killed by two white men and the other asphyxiated by a white police officer — reveal an individual and a deeper systemic and historical contempt for the human worth and life of persons of color in the United States.

The death of these two men did not happen within the last week or months, they have been happening in the United States for hundreds of years. The indelible image of the knee of authority on the neck of a helpless Black man pressed face down on the pavement gasping for breath and life is callously dehumanizing, historically repetitive, and symbolic of the experience of people of color in the U.S.

Members of the Black community, and those who stand with them, are understandably angry.

People are afraid.

As a nation we are weary of these recurring incidents of violence against people of color. We are exhausted of turning in and against each other.

The protests against police violence and systemic racism have grudgingly sustained our attention and awareness for nine days and nights, leaving many of us with a sense of dread for what tomorrow will bring.

Demonstrators in the U.S. are expressing unrest, calling for change, and marching in solidarity with the Black community to denounce racism, injustice, and oppression. Protesters in cities large and small across the United States — including here in the Great Plains Conference states of Kansas and Nebraska — have taken to the streets as people have exercised their First Amendment rights to assemble and speak out.

Some of these assemblies have turned violent. People have been reprehensibly harmed, even killed by beatings and shootings. Businesses and personal properties have been vandalized, looted, and burned, amplifying fears and causing more job loss.

The images I have seen in news reports and social media the past week are harrowing. My heart and mind are incensed, heavy and filled with sorrow. I am pressed with the work of prayerfully discerning how to constructively respond as a person of color in the U.S. that has experienced hideous racism and as a bishop in a way that makes a difference and brings about transformative change and healing to a wounded world.
I see the pain in the faces of people gathered in protest — often with signs urging us to remember George Floyd by name — so we will not forget.

But I also find hope when I see more than black faces on the screen. I see a lot of white people and young diverse people — Latinos, Native Americans, Asian, racially ambiguous, and African — standing in solidarity with their black brothers and sisters.

I have seen images of black protesters guarding white officers when others looked to harm them, recognizing that while much of the anger stems from the historic harm white police officers have committed against minorities, many of our police officers risk their lives to protect all people and to preserve the peace, including within communities of color.

I’ve also seen some officers put down batons and weapons to kneel with protesters or walk in solidarity with them, joining the members of the community they defend as they speak out.

The reality of our world today is that news cycles shift quickly. Just two weeks ago, the news was dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our focus was on social distancing to stop the spread of the coronavirus, the COVID-19 death clock, reopening economies and church buildings, and the search for a vaccine.

That discussion almost evaporated completely with the death of George Floyd and the convulsive reaction the nation has had to his murder.

My question over the past few days has been: How do we, as disciples of Jesus Christ and United Methodists, respond to ensure that this dehumanizing and deadly racism pandemic does not disappear from our focus in two weeks, two months, or two years? How do we respond as disciples of Jesus Christ to “speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute” (Proverbs 31:8) when the racism pandemic continues to infect our world with violence, driven by divisive fear and hatred?

Through dialogue with clergy, reflection, and prayer I have discerned that my response as bishop will be to focus in the years to come on helping our conference to grow in our understanding and practice of our Christian witness in the Wesleyan tradition to “do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.” (Micah 6:8).

Our annual conference’s theme this year is “Therefore Go: Seek Justice.” Sisters and brothers in Christ, that is what I intend for us to do. We will respond by growing in our baptismal vows to “accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.” (The United Methodist Book of Worship: The Baptismal Covenant 1)

My hope is that we will be intentional to grow and stretch into this vital aspect of our discipleship formation. The aim is to move us beyond trite prayers, Bible studies, reading books, and debates about the topic of racism, to experimenting a way forward that involves opening up our conversation, listening, and taking new steps. This is the only way we are going to change our ingrained expressions, attitudes of superiority and behaviors to build bridges toward people we were culturally conditioned to fear, suspect, condescend, and even hold in contempt.

The plan is in the early stages, but here is my most recent thinking about the discipleship response ahead of us:
1. I will mobilize staff and our appointive cabinet to provide resources and their support for people in our churches.

2. We will undertake a truth-and-reconciliation process that will engage our clergy and congregations to address race-based attitudes and injustices against people of color that limit equal and equitable opportunities in employment and promotion; to education and training of the highest quality; voting, access to public accommodations, and housing purchase or rental; to credit, financial loans, venture capital, and insurance policies; to positions of leadership and power in all elements of our life together; and to full participation in the Church and society.

3. We will conduct a holistic assessment of the racial climates and established social pattern in our communities. Strategic interventions will be developed by our networks in consultation with the district superintendent aimed at challenging racist behaviors and unjust structures in our region that press people of color down on the ground leaving them to gasp for breath and life.

4. We will educate and equip ourselves by speaking openly in our congregations about white privilege to demonstrate commitment to these processes because racism, manifested as sin, plagues and hinders our relationship with Christ, it breeds discrimination, and is antithetical to the gospel itself. (2016 BOD, ¶ 162. III. THE SOCIAL COMMUNITY: Rights of Racial and Ethnic Persons). The goal of education and equipping is to heighten our awareness of the problem to be better used by God to heal our world of the sin of racism and injustice.

Please continue to keep our nation in prayer in these difficult days ahead. Pray for the grace to allow the Holy Spirit to transform our collective and individual expressions, attitudes, and/or behaviors so that all people are embraced as true equals, with thoughts and feelings just as valid as our own. Pray for the grace to affirm the ultimate and temporal worth of all persons to God and to us and for the grace to rejoice in the gifts that particular ethnic histories and cultures bring to our total life.

The plan I shared above will be explored, discussed and expanded in the weeks ahead, so please stand ready to assist in your mission field as these plans are perfected going forward.

It’s humbling to think that God can use ordinary people like us to be peacemakers, bridgebuilders, and ambassadors of reconciliation between people and between people and God. Jesus rarely asked, “Do you agree?” He more typically asked, “Will you follow me into an exciting future where nations are healed, and the Lord God will be our light?” (Rev. 22:1-5).

I know the Great Plains Conference will respond with a resounding, “Here I am!”

Peace,

[- Signature -]

Ruben Saenz Jr.