

**“Time for a Change”**

**Scripture – Amos 5:18-24 and Matthew 22:34-40**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, June 7, 2020**

Shawn Richardson, a 17 year old junior in high school, is fast. He is very fast. He’s a sprinter on his high school’s track team and has run the 100 in 10.71. Since Covid-19 shut down schools across the country, there have been no track meets this spring. His friend timed him on the school’s track, but if he can run that time in a meet, he will set the record for his school.

Shawn loves track and he also loves the freedom that comes with being 17. His mother has loosened the restraints a bit and he can go out with his friends.

His mom, a State Representative in Minnesota, says her son has a voracious appetite. Interviewed a few days ago on NPR’s Morning Edition, she said, “Sandwich after sandwich. It can be cereal bowl after cereal bowl. Whatever is in the house, it can be there one moment, and then you open the refrigerator and it’s gone.”

Shawn has always been a ball of energy. When he was a little boy, all he wanted to do was go outside and run. But one day his mother told him, “You can’t run in our neighborhood. If you’re going to run, you need to be in a track uniform, and you need to run with other people because even with that, you could be seen as a threat.”

Shawn is African American and he has both black and white friends. But afraid for her child’s safety, his mother laid it on the line for him. She said, “You cannot do the same things that your white friends do. It will be viewed in a totally different way.”

However, as we know, teenagers do not always follow parental advice. Sometimes when their parents aren’t around they defy their parents. I’m confident that those of you who are over 30 never defied your parents, but I’ve heard that some kids do.

One day when Shawn was 15, he pulled on his running shoes and headed out the door for a run in his neighborhood. While he was running a woman passed him in her car and then swerved over to block his path. She lowered her window and asked: “Did you just steal from that store? Is that why you're running?”

The interviewer, Noel King, asked Shawn, “Do your friends who are white have more freedom than you?”

Shawn replied, “For sure. But when I’m with them, I almost feel like I’m one of them. I just feel like I’m safer. I feel safer with more people around me than if I’m alone.”

Shawn is an easy going and remarkably optimistic young man. He said, “If I can’t run in the neighborhood, I can run on a track or something. It’s not the end of the world.”

His mother interjected, “It is the end of the world because if you can’t run in our own neighborhood, if you can’t walk out into the world and just be seen as a 17-year-old boy who loves to run, there’s something deeply wrong with that.”

She’s right of course. There is something wrong in our society if a junior in high school cannot simply go out for a run in his neighborhood without people thinking: What is that black kid up to?

His mother has every reason to worry about what might happen to her son. When she was 19, a police officer shot and killed her cousin. She has seen the police report that says he was shot in the chest. Her mother saw it happen. He was shot in the back when he was running for his life.1

At this time when we lament the many deaths caused by Covid-19, my soul also aches for the family of George Floyd. And for the family of Eric Garner. And for the family of Breonna Taylor. And the families of every person whose life was cut short by a dreadful decision by a police officer.

Being a police officer is surely one of the most dangerous and demanding jobs there is. They take an oath to uphold the U.S. Constitution and swear to protect and to serve. They must contend with bad characters who are hell bent on destroying people’s lives and spreading chaos in society. Police must possess the self-discipline to show restraint in the face of provocations. Few of us could walk in their shoes. I know that I could not. However, the onerous nature of their profession does not serve as an excuse for callous or deadly behavior. Like all of us, police are held accountable for their actions. Unfortunately, in every profession, there is a small percentage of bad actors. Just as in the public there is a small percentage of bad actors.

Justice is served when Officer Derek Chauvin is arrested and charged with murder. Watching him calmly suffocate George Floyd is like watching a horror film of a heartless killer. The inaction of the other three officers who allowed him to carry out his murder is also chilling. Two of them were in their first week on the force, but what about the third? When Floyd’s head was buried in the pavement and his oxygen was cut off, could he not have said, “Okay, Chauvin, we’ve made our point, let’s take him to jail?” Instead, he stood guard, blocking any bystander from interceding. He protected the executioner.

In the current atmosphere, it is easy to broad-brush the police as the problem. But, the great majority of police officers are decent and disciplined men and women who dedicate themselves to protecting people and property. They put their lives in harm’s way to serve the citizens of their community by opposing those who would inflict harm and damage. It is sad, but you know it is true, that a few bad characters can tarnish the reputation of the many. Police will tell you that removing officers who do not maintain high standards, benefits all those who do. It is the same with clergy, doctors, lawyers, teachers, counselors, and all those in helping professions.

And lest we forget, hundreds of police have been injured during the protests and at least two have been killed. A retired St. Louis police captain was shot to death by looters at a St. Louis pawn shop. A federal agent with Homeland Security was gunned down in Oakland.

The police are not only facing peaceful protestors which are certainly the majority. They are also contending with looters who want to break in and steal, and extremists who seek to destroy property and spread chaos.

Focusing attention on the four police officers responsible for the death of George Floyd is the right thing to do. Blaming police in general is a mistake because it shifts the focus from the sin of racism that permeates our society to the disdain of police. Ahmaud Arbery was not killed by someone in uniform. Seventeen year old Shawn Richardson was not stopped by someone with a badge for running in his neighborhood.

Some are advocating legislation. Reforms in policing and sentencing can help. However, creating a mountain of new laws will not solve the problem of discrimination toward people of color.

Many place the blame on some of our leaders. It greatly exacerbates the problem to play the hand of divisive politics or to threaten violence. Bad cops, bad political leaders, looters, and rioters all contribute to making the situation worse. But racism has existed in our nation since its inception. I believe that if we are to make real and lasting progress there has to be a change in people’s hearts, minds, and souls. People’s hearts need to be more compassionate, people’s minds need to be opened and stretched, and people need a transformation in their souls to embrace the belief that all people are children of God and deserve dignity and respect.

Rather than simply being thankful that we are not forced to navigate a society that throws obstacles in our way; rather than thanking God that we do not have to worry that our teenage son might be shot if he goes out for a run, we must be repulsed by prejudice. We must possess what the church used to call “righteous indignation” and what today we might call moral outrage toward racism and inequality. We must do something about the wealth and health disparities between whites and blacks, and we must do something about the threats of violence against people of color. I believe we must be honest and humble enough to do a self-inventory while simultaneously working for changes in society.

If you have been thinking you can’t wait until a vaccine is created, so we can get back to the way things were before this global pandemic struck, I hope you will reassess your notion about returning to the way things were. We can do far better than the way life was before Covid-19. This is an opportunity to hit the reset button.

Each of us can be one of many who recommit ourselves to embracing the ideals of the prophets “to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;” the ideals upon which our nation was founded: liberty and justice for all people; and the ideals of Jesus to love your neighbor as yourself.

We have heard those words of Jesus to love our neighbor so many times, I fear that they have been drained of their wallop. It is a radical notion and a stringent command to love your neighbor as yourself – especially when the color of your neighbor’s skin is different than your own.

Author Martha Nussbaum reminds us of the African concept of Ubuntu, which is this: I cannot be fully human without you being fully human. I cannot realize my humanity unless I permit you to realize your humanity. You cannot see my face until I truly see yours.

God beckons us to be agents of healing in a world gone mad. What will you do to fulfill your calling?

NOTE

1. Noel King, “Black Female Lawmaker in Minnesota Worries about Teenage Son’s Safety, *Morning Edition on NPR*, June 2, 2020.

**Prayers of the People ~ Sue Linderman**

Lord of all creation,

Surely you weep at the anger, hatred and turmoil that engulf the world you crafted with such love and care at the dawn of time.

You who create each human being in your image, who grant us the gift – and burden – of free will, who gave us the gift of your son, Jesus Christ, as an example for us to emulate, however imperfectly.

God of mercy,

We lament, with deep grief, the degree to which we have fallen short of your vision for us, your vision of us.

Centuries of poisonous history lie grievously unexamined, especially by those of us who benefit each day from the unearned privilege bestowed upon us by our society, simply because of the color of our skin, by the accident of our birth into families who have the wherewithal to care for us, support us, educate us, love us and keep us safe.

While people of all colors, all conditions, may encounter challenge and hardship, the overarching burden of racism adds a dimension of pain and struggle to the lives of so many.

God of wisdom,

There are those who say that a system of racism does not exist in our country, that a belief in white supremacy is limited to a fringe group on the edges of society.

Yet for those of us who see ourselves as white, we need only ask, “Who among us would trade places with someone who is black?”

God of our future,

Although this scourge of bigotry has been with us since our country’s founding – and even before – we seek a glimmer of hope even in these unsettled times.

We pray that you will use these current events in our country, the martyrdom of so many who have died for no good reason, to turn their deaths into good reason as they drive us to build new relationships and forge a path toward justice and peace for all.

God of justice,

Open our eyes to see the realities that surround us, open our ears to hear the stories of those who bear the burden of this injustice, open our hearts to take on the challenges of making our world right.

Strip from us the need to be right, the fear of admitting ignorance, the reluctance of those of us who hold it to recognize the privilege that is undeservedly ours.

Mighty God,

Kindle within us a flame of equity and justice and compassion, prod us to action, knowing that it is your will for us that we love our neighbors as ourselves.

And we pray all this in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, who gave us these words to pray together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,**

**Hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come,**

**Thy will be done,**

**On earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;**

**And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.**

**Lead us not into temptation,**

**But deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever.**

**Amen.**

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