



CHRISTIAN CHURCH (Disciples of Christ) CAPITAL AREA

Capital Area Regional Minister Response To The Recent Violence

July 9, 2016

Rev. Allen V. Harris

It is Friday, July 8, 2016 about 9:00 a.m. I still believe, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” It is Friday, July 8, 2016 about 9:01 a.m. I still believe, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” It is Friday, July 8, 2016 about 9:02 a.m. I still believe, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

This week, yet again, the world weeps as children of God are killed and human divisions are deepened. Buffeted by recent news stories of mass murders in Orlando, Istanbul, Dhaka, and Baghdad and the one-year anniversary of the massacre in the AME Church in Charleston, we turn on our televisions and reel at the news of the shooting of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Philando Castile in St. Paul, and this morning the five police officers and seven others wounded in Dallas. Clearly, there is no better time to be in touch with the essence of God and the way of Jesus than now... no better place than here... no better people than us.

A lot is being said, particularly via the media and social media, that both shows the pain and the pathos of this moment in history. I know as your Regional Minister that I need to respond, but I don't want to simply add to the static on the airwaves but to offer something that moves the conversation – and our actions for peace, justice, and love – forward. This is hard to do as the pastoral leader of a Region with such diverse clergy, congregations, institutions, and church members. This is particularly difficult when one serves a Region that includes such vastly different contexts as Washington, DC, Baltimore City, the seashores of Delaware and the Eastern Shore, the rolling hills of western Maryland and eastern West Virginia, and the patchwork quilt known simply as the DMV. It would be an easy choice to simply not say anything, or to offer something so bland as to be more pabulum than comforting presence or prophetic witness.

But you did not call me to simplistic reassurances or meaningless pronouncements. You, Capital Area, called me, Allen V. Harris, for such a time as this. Let me offer what I feel God is calling me to share. I pray it is of help.

First, we must acknowledge that in our society violence has become pervasive and the resolution of conflict through violence the norm. Those of us who have dedicated our lives to the one who said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives,” must

rededicate ourselves to the ways of peace, which involve the challenging, time-consuming, counter-cultural disciplines of:

1. Listening deeply, to our own heart and to the hearts of others, away from the chatter of the world;
2. Being open to the reality and experience of persons while suspending our preconceived notions about them and in doing so finding our common humanity;
3. Developing an awareness of, familiarity with, and appreciation for our neighbors, especially those different from ourselves;
4. Negotiating, compromising, staying at the table, and communicating in ways that address power imbalances, such as through Eric Law's "Mutual Invitation."

Second, we simply have to address in a more substantial way the deep racism of our world and, in particular, the racism that is imbedded inextricably in the history of this country. Those of us who believe what the Apostle Paul preached, "From one ancestor God made all the nations to inhabit the whole earth," must remain completely engaged in the struggle. We who are white, most especially, have got to stop being frustrated that "racism is talked about too much," because until we adequately, completely, whole-heartedly confront and address racism and what is called "white privilege" or "white fragility," the violence will not get better but worse! This must necessarily require:

1. For those of us who are white, to listen far, far, far more than we talk, and to refrain from trying to be the one to frame any and all conversations with persons of color. We cannot speak for others' feelings or life experiences any more than we would want them to speak for ours!
2. For those of us who are white, to receive the anger, pain, frustration and fears of persons of color without knee-jerk disclaimers, repudiations, distancing, nor seeking to explain away the feelings, but to simply listen and to learn.
3. For those us who are white to look deeply into our souls and seek to understand the underlying fear which causes some to react so violently in word and deed and causes others to feel paralyzed or helpless.
4. We must all expand our network of close acquaintances – meaning those persons whose tables around which we gather, whose homes we visit, whose family members we know, whose names we can pronounce correctly, and whose commitments we can respect and trust – to include persons of different ethnicities, colors, and life experiences than our own.

Third, we must once and for all stop trying to engage in the conversations about violence and racism by focusing exclusively on one individual's particular life-experiences and possible motivations, even if it is our own, and fail to see that such issues which have evoked such deep and intense emotions do so precisely because of the patterns and persistence of these problems. Racism is built on but is not the same as personal prejudice and must be addressed in different ways. Violence in the form of words or actions directed toward individuals is to be condemned, but patterns of violence requires different solutions. Systemic violence and systemic racism demand systemic solutions.

What I've been hearing from voices of African American kinfolk is that the tragic deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile are yet two more instances of deep and systemic racism in our country, the consequence of which end in death, and are too often at the hands of our police. When we witness the response of our criminal justice system, serious questions arise about whether justice is in fact served. What I've been hearing from kinfolk who are Police Officers and their families is that the tragic deaths of the five officers in Dallas are yet another example of how those who are charged with the hazardous vocation of enforcing our laws and protecting our freedoms are disrespected to the point of death. Both

are true. Neither require us to “take sides” nor dismiss, ridicule, or ignore the other. As people committed to God’s Beloved Community, both must be addressed, as should other profoundly systemic and deeply divisive issues in our society.

I commit myself to staying in the conversation, to listening more than I talk, to being in prayerful discernment for the guidance of the Holy Spirit both personally and in community, and to finding ways for this Region to work towards solutions and systemic changes in our church and our world.

Your thoughtful and faithful responses will not only be welcomed, but also eagerly sought out. And let us all live out the words of St Paul who wrote, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” As people of faith, ever hopeful, we must remain committed to such transformation of ourselves and of the world.

Abundantly, Humbly, Prayerfully Yours,
Allen

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