

On Weariness: A Reflection on the George Floyd Trial

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For the Gathering of the Clergy & Lay Leaders of the Diocese of Maryland

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Matthew 11:25-30 – Feast of Anselm of Canterbury

Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

On May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, George Floyd, an unemployed black man was arrested on suspicion of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill for a pack of cigarettes at a corner market. He panicked, pleaded that he was claustrophobic and struggled with police when they tried to put him in a squad car. They put him on the ground instead. There, a white police officer kneeled on the neck of the handcuffed Floyd, pinning him to the ground while he begged for his life up until his last breath. “They gonna kill me. They gonna kill me, man,” he said when the officers tried to get him into the car.

For the last nine minutes of his life, George Floyd cried out 27 times, “I can’t breathe,” and eventually said, “My neck. I’m through. I’m through.”

“My stomach hurt. My neck hurts. Everything hurts,” Floyd cried out, his face pushed against the pavement. “Give me some water or something, please.”

The policeman was Derek Chauvin, whom Floyd referred to respectfully as “Mr. Officer.” Floyd said to him and to anyone who could help him: “Can’t believe this, man. Mom, love you. Love you.” And his final words were “Tell my kids I love them. I’m dead.” All the while, the officer still pressed his knee on George Floyd’s neck until he died.

Yesterday, a jury convicted Derek Chauvin on three counts of murder. Many were celebrating that verdict as a triumph of justice; but I could not. Although I and perhaps – perhaps – most other Americans were relieved that those jurors trusted what they saw and heard when presented with the evidence, we still could not burst out into an exuberant celebration.

Why? Quite simply, because we're tired.

When it comes to the killing of unarmed black people by the very ones who are supposed to protect and serve, we've been down this road too many times. Out of the thousands of deadly police shootings in the U.S. since 2005, fewer than 140 officers have been charged with murder or manslaughter, according to data found by Prof. Phil Stinson, a criminologist at Bowling Green State University. Before yesterday, only seven were convicted of murder.

We're tired of black persons being treated as if our lives mattered less. We've been down that road too many times, in too many situations to be thought of as isolated incidents, or that somehow these human beings "deserved" their destiny with violent death.

Shall we say their names? How much time do you have? Among the thousands of unarmed black men and women who were killed by the police in the past decade – including dozens since the George Floyd trial began on March 29 – we remember Daunte Wright, Adam Toledo, Ahmaud Arbery, David McAtee, Dreasjon Reed, Michael Ramos, Breonna Taylor, Manuel Ellis, Atatiana Jefferson, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Betty "Boo" Jones, Sandra Bland, Walter Scott, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and here in Baltimore City, Freddie Gray.

Even when the indignities don't result in death, we're tired of constantly having to be on our guard against the possibility of unwarranted arrests and incarceration. We weren't surprised at all when the woman in Central Park in New York City, after being challenged by a male birdwatcher to "follow the rules" of the park and contain her dog, instead called the police and said, "A black man is threatening me in the park." She knew what she was doing; she knew the code.

The phrase “a black man” was the signal that she, a white woman, was in immediate danger, and that the police would come and arrest him, taking her word against his that he should be considered a threat, and thus removed from society. Yes, she, who was shown by the man’s video on his cell phone to be the aggressor in that situation, would be considered innocent, and another black life would end up in jail. Or in the morgue.

We know that we need good policing in our communities. We honor and respect those police officers and other first responders who put their lives on the line every day to serve and protect us. The overwhelming majority of them are good people, and we pray for their safety and the courage to perform their duties for the common good. But we need them also to have the courage to call out and challenge the racist language and practices of the few that mar the good name of the many faithful servants – much like so many did in the George Floyd trial, including the Minneapolis Police Chief and several other officers.

Meanwhile, black and brown people are tired. People of goodwill everywhere, all over the world, of every race and ethnic group who have an ounce of compassion and a sense of justice, are tired of this. We’ve grown weary.

If the George Floyd murder were an isolated incident, we could chalk it up to “it’s just a bad cop, Bishop Sutton. Get over it.” But no, we know the script. We know the pattern in America that’s been woven into the fabric of our society for 400 years. We know the insidious and evil hold that white supremacy has over the minds of all of us – all of us – and it makes us sick. We are just bone tired; most certainly in the black community, and increasingly that’s true for all of us.

Do black lives matter as much as white lives in our nation? You tell me...but before you do, do your homework. Come to that discussion with some evidence that as a good, responsible citizen you’ve actually studied our history, and you’ve come with facts about where we are today in terms of housing, education, the justice system, health care, employment equity and wealth.

Do Asian lives matter as much as white lives in our nation? You tell me, but come with some facts about the levels of bigotry and violence directed against Asians and Pacific Islanders in our land.

Do Latino, Native American, darker-skinned immigrants and refugee lives matter in our nation as much as white lives? You tell me...but speak to me not just how you want it to be, but how it actually is.

In other words, I'm weary of the lies, self-deception and blindness to how life really is for the "least, the last and the left" out in America. I'm 67 years old, and the weariness of still having to convince far too many of my white brothers and sisters that we have a real problem here with implicit bias and blindness to their own white privilege just gets to me sometimes.

So yesterday, although relieved at the verdict in this one case, I could not celebrate. Just as several Floyd family members said last night, I can breathe now more easily, but I cannot dance in free flowing exuberance. Emotionally, I can't afford the luxury of believing that everything's going to be alright now, that everyone is "woke", and that there are only bright days ahead of us. Instead, last night I wept – going to bed fatigued and exhausted.

But this morning, I'm still faced with today's gospel reading: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." ([Matthew 11:28-30](#))

My friends, if you, like me are just plain tired of it all, then maybe these words of our Lord will find a special place in your souls today. For it's true: Americans have been carrying a heavy burden of racist ideology and behaviors for far too long. It's weighing us down. The heaviness of the sin of racism prevents us from fully entering into God's vision for how we ought to be within ourselves, and with each other. We need to get out from under that yoke; it's literally making us crazy. We need to learn from Jesus a new way of being; we need some gentleness and humility, we need some rest for our souls.

But to achieve that rest, we need to be willing to take on the yoke that Christ places on us. Most people know that a yoke is that wooden bar or frame by which two animals (such as oxen) are joined at the heads or necks so that they can move together, go forward together, work together.

The yoke that Jesus places on us isn't burdensome; it's the allegorical reminder that we can't do the work we're given to do alone. It's easier when we are yoked together.

In many versions of the Bible Jesus calls his yoke "easy", but that's an unfortunate translation. It makes it sound like everything's light and clear-cut, that very little effort or energy is required to do the work. But that's just not true. The [New English Bible's translation](#) is better, it has Jesus saying "My yoke is good to bear."

The point is not that the Lord's yoke asks nothing of us. Rather the point is that it fits, it's the right size, so it works. It leads to getting the job done without falling down in weariness and exhaustion. It's good to bear. It leads to life. It's what led the Diocese of Maryland to do the good hard work of anti-racism, racial reconciliation and reparations for at least the last twenty years. The yoke of Christ enables us to labor together in God's vineyard to bear the fruit of the Spirit's harvest: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." ([Galatians 5:22-23](#))

So our prayer this day after the George Floyd trial is:

Come, Lord Jesus. Don't abandon us in this time of our collective weariness. Put your yoke upon our collective shoulders - the yoke of justice, of mercy, of compassion and love for all. Give us the same burden for all our brothers and sisters that you have. Cause us to work together to do the work you've given us to do. And then, Lord Jesus, grant us your rest.

Amen.