

## What Does a White Guy Do About Racism?

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*“How can I know all the sins lurking in my heart? Cleanse me from these hidden faults. Keep your servant from deliberate sins! Don’t let them control me. Then I will be free of guilt and innocent of great sin. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” Amen. Psalms 19:12-14 NLT*

A little over a week ago The Washington Post published a report about its database documenting fatal shootings by police officers in the line of duty in the United States since January 1, 2015. The names you just heard are but a few of those who have succumbed. The database tracks more than a dozen details of officer-involved shooting deaths including race of the deceased and other circumstances such as whether the victim was armed or was suffering some form of mental crisis, just to name a few. 1004 people were killed in 2019 alone, up from 992 in 2018 and a steady increase since 2015. In Washington state last year there were 36 police shooting deaths; an average of 3 per month! Of those 2/3rds were between the ages of 18 and 45. 10 were white, while at least 19 were not. 1/3<sup>rd</sup> were in a mental health crisis at the time. And it is known that the victim had a weapon (gun, knife, vehicle or toy gun) in all but 4 cases in this state. That pattern has been rising even though shootings of unarmed people has fluctuated. Easy explanations have not been forthcoming: is it related to a steady rate of police interactions or societal attitudes about violent behavior or what? But what about the glaring disproportionality of minority representation in the statistics?

I am here because of one of those people mentioned in the performance piece you just witnessed. Her name is mentioned in the 2017 Washington Post database as well: Charleena Lyles, a young woman from Seattle. The list of personal challenges she faced was long: a single mother of 4 minor children, having just passed her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday ... and pregnant. A victim of numerous events of domestic violence by fathers of her children. A history of mental health issues, unemployment, poverty, homelessness. And..... she was Black. In early June, 2017 she called 911 to report another incident of domestic violence. During her interaction with Seattle Police Department that day she reportedly brandished a pair of metal shears while making some very unusual statements. The police drew their weapons but, with deescalating measures, Charleena dropped the shears. She was arrested, charged with harassment and released after about a week in jail. The conditions of her release included no possession of weapons, periodically calling into a court reporting line and submitting to random drug and alcohol testing (although she was found “nontoxic” at a medical examination while in jail). Four days after her release, the morning of Father’s Day, 2017, she called 911 again this time to report that an Xbox was missing from her home. Two officers responded to the non-emergent call. During their otherwise routine interaction, and with her children present, Charleena’s demeanor changed. She was reportedly holding a knife whereupon the officers pulled their weapons, ordered her to “get back” and, when she didn’t comply, they shot her seven times killing her outright. That event became the subject of a wrongful death lawsuit filed against the officers and the City of Seattle. After the trial court dismissed that case an appeals was taken that is now pending. While there are more details and theories of the case I’m not mentioning today, that is the thread of this tragic story. I have a role in that matter which brings me here today.

Now, I clearly present to you as an aging, white male. I have no core history of civil rights activism. I've led a pretty normal professional and personal life devoid of personal events that might compare to anything experienced by Charleena. But I was thrust into this story just the same. I've continually asked for God's guidance often asking: "show me the way, order my steps, have thine own way Lord." My guiding hymn is "Be Though My Vision, O Lord of my heart." My involvement here is an unexpected answer to that prayer. I come from a family line that values service in Christ to help the hungry, homeless, powerless. My father was a Lutheran minister who championed the powerless and demonstrated a conviction against racism in Portland where I grew up. My mother (of 7 children) worked in higher education, other family members before them were pastors, educators, nurses, lawyers, a founder of Lutheran churches and Christian schools including a University – all in response to their calling as Christians to serve God through service to others. Me: a family law lawyer married to a life-long educator. Due to the disqualification of Charleena's father as her probate personal representative, I was appointed by the court in that role. Mr. Lyles was the natural choice as the closest family member but he had a criminal record; I was a recently retired King County Superior Court Commissioner.

Carolanne and I like to make a pilgrimage now and then back to San Francisco to attend Glide Memorial United Methodist Church dating back to an epic Easter Sunday service in 1971. On our last trip "Say Their Names" was performed live by the Glide choir and a guest soloist. After the service I went up to Tarl Arial who presented it to thank him on behalf of Charleena. For some reason I asked him, since he appeared to be white as well: what does a white person do about racism? His answer: I don't know. That's bothered me ever since. My approach to this question up to now has been sympathetic to the cause of Blacks but, in deference to allowing those victimized to have their own voices, I have taken a back seat. I've reasoned that this problem is not "my cross to bear;" the voice of protest belongs to the oppressed and victimized. They should be supported but not replaced by me. Unfortunately, that does not result in any meaningful change; it is hollow to me. But most of all it comes to me that those voices will always be devalued. Then nothing changes. We've heard references to Dr. Martin Luther King's line about the "moral arc" but, unfortunately, the "immoral arc" is our collective reality: Slavery, Jim Crow, Mass Incarceration and now Deportation. This past month I read Rev. Dr. King's letter to his fellow clergymen from Birmingham jail speaking to white indifference. It struck a judgmental chord in me. Here, he famously said:

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

He discussed his own decision to take direct action in response to racism showing us that an unjust law is one that is not rooted in eternal and natural law: "Any law that degrades human personality is unjust" requiring that it be confronted and, if need be, violated through nonviolent action. Most importantly for this moment, however, Dr. King calls out the apathy of the white moderate Christian who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action." This is the core issue that has caused me considerable personal consternation. I stand here convicted of my own failure to take action just as whites stood by in Birmingham. As he said then, "Shallow understanding from people of good will is

more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

Our American civil and legal focus has been on improving civil rights, affirmative action, addressing climate change, homelessness, poverty, mental health and justice reform. But despite these efforts, in her book entitled *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander graphically documents the debacle of mass incarceration of black men. She notes that, even though U.S. crime rates between 1960 and 1990 were closely identical with Finland and Germany, U.S. incarceration rates quadrupled providing a system of social control unparalleled in world history. (Page 9). She links that to a “law and order” response to civil rights activism and related progressive legislation (Page 50) conflating nonviolent resistance with other criminal behaviors. And she shows how a “War on Drugs,” primarily crack, was used to target urban black communities in an effective effort at social control. Since 1980 the population in the U.S. federal prison system increased more than 700 percent, disproportionately impacting minority communities. Why? Well, that, in Ms. Alexander’s view, is obvious.

National politicians have recently touted much needed criminal justice reform through the *The First Step Act*, Congress’ bipartisan criminal justice reform legislation enacted in 2018. According to a report by the Brennan Center for Justice, that law was designed to shorten mandatory minimum sentences for some drug offenses and improve conditions of those in prison including providing education, vocational training and drug treatment aimed at reducing recidivism. But these are simply efforts to push back at injustice. Unfortunately, these responses are not a cure. A person with a criminal record will still be denied voting rights, the ability to rent an apartment, get any job she might otherwise qualify for, travel internationally or be denied many other benefits, like a father’s court appointment as his deceased daughter’s probate personal representative.

Here the Washington State Institute for Public Policy was commissioned by our legislature to conduct a study of Racial Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System. The 2008 study, reviewing data from 2004 through 2007, found that, compared with white children, Native American children were three times as likely to be referred to Child Protective Services while Black children were twice as likely and Latinx children 1.3 times as likely. Tracking outcomes for those children for the next two years, the study concluded that, again as compared to white children, Native children were twice as likely to remain in foster care and black children 1.5 times as likely. The question, not answered in this study, is what impact does this have on the self-view of the child experiencing the child welfare system and how does that translate into later social failures.

A focus on racial disproportionality is a good idea but it only serves to document reality. Calling out the sin of our racism and applying legislative adjustments are necessary but those only amount to playing “whack-a-mole.” Likewise a civil lawsuit for wrongful death is a legitimate response to an injustice, but it will not stem racism just like it will never bring Charleena back to life or provide her with the redemption she deserved. White supremacy remains the issue. As Michelle Alexander repeats often in her book: “Everything has changed; and yet nothing has changed.”

So what to do about it? My choice is to change my consciousness about racism. And....

My action items include of the following:

First, Purifying myself through prayer, bible study and meditation, reading and education in keeping with the prophet’s charge in Isaiah 56.5 to remember their names:

I will give, in my house and within my walls,  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
that shall not be cut off.

Also, I Choose an individual action – daily. This frankly is all one person can do

When Carolanne and I aren't in the pew here, we are usually at our place on Willapa Bay in Southwest Washington. Our home abuts a county park that also holds the offices of the Willapa Band of Chinook Indians. That tribe signed the Tansey Point Treaty in the 1800s but it was never ratified by Congress, thereby denying tribal members any benefits of formal recognition: right to government benefits and the right to hunt and fish as Native Americans just to name two important ones. Their chairman, Tony Johnson, remarked recently that "500 years is nothing to us/we've lost every battle-that doesn't deter us." Human suffering abounds; it always has and it always will. It is our human nature. But that is not a reason to do nothing. In fact, the tribe recently won an important Federal court decision that opens the door to possible recognition. Every act helps.

A third action is to Be with those who need strength: support organizations here just like we do in SW Washington like the Pacific County Immigration Network which enables clergy, advocates and legal assistants there to assist with immigration issues.

Isaiah 35.3-6  
3 Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
'Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
God will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
God will come and save you.'  
5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
6 then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Another action of mine is to Share with others - meet and discuss

I'm offering here and now to work together, to partner with any of you, not as any one with expertise but rather as a seeker of expertise in combating racism. There are opportunities here at Seattle First Baptist Church. Would you make time for this?

And Finally, Confrontation: If you and I dare: call out racial injustice in the moment and invite us to support you.

Mahandas Gandhi said: It's the action, not the fruit of the action, that's important. You have to do the right thing. It may not be in your power, may not be in your time, that there'll be any fruit. But that doesn't mean you stop doing the right thing. You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do nothing, there will be no result.