

Deep Calls to Deep

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent

The Community Church of Sebastopol, United Church of Christ
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Scriptures

The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Out of slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

- Exodus 2: 23 – 24

Deep calls to deep...

- Psalm 42: 7

The Spirit helps us in our weakness.

We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

- Romans 8: 26

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...

- Matthew 28: 19

I.

"I can't breathe," he said.

He even called him "sir."

"I can't breathe."

The final moments of George Floyd's life are now indelibly etched on the American conscience.

Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin acted out the latest in an unbroken centuries-long stream of white violence toward black persons.

He placed his knee on George Floyd's neck and he didn't remove it until 3 minutes after Floyd lost conscience.

"I can't breathe" echoed the cry of Eric Garner on Staten Island in 2014. "I can't breathe" echoed the cry of Manuel Ellis in Tacoma in March of this year.

"I can't breathe" echoes the shared experience of people of color in our country who for generations have felt the knee of white supremacy, and the full weight of whiteness, on their necks.

"I can't breathe" is the cry waiting to be heard and heeded by those of us who are white and who have remained passively hopeful that things will eventually work out for the better.

Racism is not waning. It is constantly reasserting and reinforcing itself. Racism is built into the systems of our society and ingrained in our ways of thinking, ingrained so deeply we can convince ourselves it's not there.

"I can't breathe" is the anguished cry exposing the truth whiteness is a social construct that continues to consolidate power for all of us who are white.

"I can't breathe" is the cry that shatters the illusion will eventually work themselves out.

It strikes this preacher as prescient that last Sunday was Pentecost, the festival of the Spirit, the banquet of divine breath.

Meanwhile, over 100,000 fellow citizens have breathed their last because of Covid-19 and our federal government's failed and callous response.

Meanwhile, tear gas, pepper spray, and other chemicals fill the air where peaceful protestors gather and march and chant.

Meanwhile, more black lives have been taken - Tony McDade, James Scurlock, and David McAtee.

"I can't breathe" becomes a collective cry for breath, for spirit, for justice, for long-overdue response.

II.

Community Church, I would not fault you for thinking that the oldest story in the Bible coincided with the first book in the Bible.

But many scholars are confident that the story of Exodus precedes that of Genesis.

The God of Israel shows up on the scene in response to a cry for help. It is a guttural cry, a primal scream, voiced in chapter 2.

There we read: "The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God."

(You might imagine a pause here. We wait, wondering if God will respond, and then...)

"God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

In this earliest memory of Israel, God is revealed as the one who responds with decisive compassion to the groaning of Israel.

At the sound of the cry, God's guts are turned upside down.

And God remembers the covenant, the promise, the commitment to preserve life and to intercede on behalf of the oppressed who are suffering.

Following last week's Pentecost, today is Trinity Sunday.

The Trinity remains for many a heady, obtuse, and irrelevant idea with little to no grounding in everyday life.

But I would like to propose today that, in the presence of "I can't breathe," the Trinity becomes the very means by which we are caught up in the divine response to suffering.

The model of Trinity I'd like to disavow is the orderly and linear that is male-centric and Euro-centric and that creates hierarchies within Godself, within the church, within humanity, and within creation itself.

An alternative model of Trinity is an inclusive one which presents a view of God as open, abundant, compassionate, generous and committed.

This view is not linear but circular. It is the image of God evoked in Psalm 42 where a mighty waterfall cascading into a crevasse is described as "deep calling to deep."

Can you hear the deep calling to deep in these troubled days?

Can you hear anguish calling to anguish?

Can you hear the groans of bodies that have languished under the weight of white violence beginning with the Arawak and Taino people? Can you hear the groaning of bodies that suffered what Otis Moss III has called Covid-1619?

Can you hear the groaning of people of color who have suffered not only police violence, but housing discrimination, environmental racism, crushing poverty, disparities in health care, and mass incarceration, not to mention a daily barrage of microaggressions?

Human bodies are vulnerable and yet, if we are Christian, we believe that it is with these bodies that God identifies intimately.

III.

I was at a protest at the crossroads in Sebastopol last Wednesday. Led by teenagers, the crowd gathered with signs that said Black Lives Matter, Justice for George Floyd, I Can't Breathe, and No Justice, No Peace.

As the protest was beginning, a white man with no sign was waiting to cross the street.

He looked annoyed, put out.

Just before the light changed, he turned and looked at a group of us and said, disdainfully, "White guilt."

Then he shook his head and crossed.

The meanness of his tone shocked us for a moment before someone yelled after him, "We should feel guilty."

I was thinking about that interaction later.

It is natural for white people to feel guilty, but it's not necessarily helpful. Like when guilt becomes an end in itself.

White guilt often does that: "I just feel so bad about it, but what can I do?"

This kind of guilt, while understandable is ultimately inexcusable because it is self-indulgent, and insidiously serves to let white people off the hook. If we feel bad enough about it, we figure, then we can think of ourselves as good again.

But there's an alternative. What if the shared guilt and anguish and compassion of this moment is a prompting of the Holy Spirit, a movement of the Holy Spirit in the life of our communities, a collective stirring in our conscience?

What if this is a guilt that doesn't let us off the hook, but puts us on it?

What if this guilt demands accountability and honesty?

What if this guilt reaches into our complacency and sense of helplessness, demanding that we lean into this moment and find resources to join the work of dismantling the white supremacy that has been the air we've been breathing since birth?

That just might be, I want to suggest, the Trinity at work.

As the apostle Paul put it, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans."

God's Spirit, in this inclusive view, is not only something outside of us but speaks in and through our conscience.

God isn't other than our hearts and minds and bodies and souls crying out and groaning for a more just world.

That work, that energy, that anger, that grief, that motivation that you feel within you, *that* is God the Spirit prompting you from within to embody outwardly the ministry of Jesus in relationship to God who responds to the groaning of the oppressed.

IV.

The prescribed reading for Trinity Sunday this year includes the final verses of Matthew's Gospel.

There Jesus commissions and sends his apostles, telling them to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

My question is: "How do we hear this commission today in light of George Floyd's 'I can't breathe'?"

If we think it means we need to go out and make other people become Christians just like us, I think we will have missed it.

If we think it means we need make sure we drum up some baptisms this year because there haven't been too many lately and that would help with church growth, I think we will have missed it.

If we think it means let's get back to way things were before Covid-19 and before the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, we will most certainly have missed it.

We will have missed it because "the way things were" means a church not yet prompted by the Spirit to do the hard, sustained work of dismantling white supremacy.

The truth is we are Christ's apostles now, which means we are sent, we are meant to be a people on the move, on the way, on a journey to embody Jesus' ministry of radical justice and equality.

That is what our baptism means, that we worship God who reveals Godself as the one who responds to the cries of the oppressed.

We share the love of Jesus, which is love willing to sacrifice what is comfortable for what is transformative.

We teach the message of Jesus to all ages, that message being that God's kingdom, which is really a kin-dom, places the most vulnerable at its center.

And we put our faith into action in every time and place, but especially in a time such as this.

I close with 3 ways to follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit to put our faith into action:

1. Do the work. Read books and articles. Listen to podcasts like 1619 and watch documentaries like "When They See Us." There's no excuse not to know. It's up to you to educate yourself about whiteness and the way it is used to segregate, demean, and control.
2. Show up, put your body on the line. Put your money in play. Join an organization that is doing the work to dismantle white supremacy. There are tons of organizations doing the work including the NAACP, The Bail Project, and SURJ. If you want recommendations, ask someone including one of your pastors.

3. Speak up, especially among those who are closest to you, your friends and family members. Talk about whiteness, talk about privilege, talk about systemic racism. Learn to listen but also learn how to speak new truths into old relationships. Our own denomination, the United Church of Christ, created a resource for transformational dialogue called "Let's Talk about White Privilege." It's free at ucc.org.

"I can't breathe." These words cry out for response from those who still have life and breath.

Deep is calling to deep.

God is calling to God, through us, to do something for the ones God so loves.

When we do, we will be fulfilling our baptism in the name of God the creator, the redeemer, and the sustainer of the world.

Amen.