

## “When There Are No Words”

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June 3, 2020

Dear Students, Faculty, Staff, Trustees, and Friends of Austin Seminary,

It has been more than a week since the horrifying murder on May 25, 2020, of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. I am still struggling for words with which to respond to this moment. The words do not come easily, in part, perhaps, because of the fatigue we are all feeling in this COVID-19 season of exhaustion, when it seems that the world is so upside-down that finding the words is just harder. Moreover, the visceral explosion of anger throughout the country across this last week unsettles us when we tremble as our screens chronicle a world that seems ever more broken and unhinged. Protests in the wake of this killing have often turned into riots in cities across the country, including Austin. And I have had no words.

Our president has had words. “These THUGS,” he tweeted on May 29<sup>th</sup>, “are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd and I won’t let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the Military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control, but *when the looting starts, the shooting starts*. Thank you!”

His predecessor has had more restrained words in a tweeted statement calling for a “new normal” and for the end of institutional racism.

Chief Art Acevedo, head of the MCCA (Major Cities Chiefs Association) and Austin’s former police chief, said these words: “The death of Mr. Floyd is deeply disturbing and should be of concern to all Americans. The officer’s actions are inconsistent with the training and protocols of our profession and MCCA commends Minneapolis Police Chief Medaria Arradondo for his swift and decisive action to terminate the employment of the officers involved.”

There has been an outpouring of words across this last week—words, for the most part, trying to express the grief and anger and helplessness we feel in this national moment.

And, to be sure, we are haunted by Mr. Floyd’s own dying words: “Please, I can’t breathe.” “They’re going to kill me.” “My stomach hurts...my neck hurts...everything hurts.” “Mama.” These particular words haunt me. And I have no words.

Is it possible, in this national moment after so many police killings—after Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Tony McDade, Sean Reed, Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Ahmaud Arbery, Mike Ramos, and on and on and on...and George Floyd—is it possible that we are out of words?

That maybe we, too, are out of breath? Will more words do? Or does the absence of words put us into the frame of something that goes deeper than words?

In a locked room on that first Easter evening, a resurrected Jesus appeared to disciples and, though there were a few words, the thing that seems more profound is that he breathed on them.

The absence of many words can sometimes put us into the frame of that which goes deeper than words. A profound chant at countless protests across this past week has been this antiphonal one: “Say his name!” “George Floyd!” “Say his name!” “George Floyd!” People—people who, by the grace of God, are still able to breathe—are using their breath to give a name to something, to remember that name. “George Floyd!” That chant enables them not to use words to explain it away, not to form a response, not to loose the dogs of war, but to lift up a name that must not be forgotten.

Maybe it is time for us to stop saying so many words, and to start saying one another’s names. For to say a name is to remember a person and to call that person back into being for the sake of striving for a justice that is not yet realized. To say the aggrieved name of that person is in fact to become ourselves more of a person, in recognition of others now fallen. To say that name, and to keep saying it, is to breathe life into such times as these in which it is so hard to breathe.

A few days ago, as I was reading a national newspaper, I saw a photograph I will not soon forget. A uniformed policeman, standing on one side of an imposing iron fence—it could have been a state capitol building or a governor’s mansion or the White House—has reached his hand out to a protester, a person of color, on the other side of the fence. These two men are shaking hands. The caption explains that the policeman, in the midst of a developing riot, has been listening to the heartfelt grievances of the other man; and, when their conversation has ended, they are both moved to grasp one another’s hands and to look at one another with what seems like a reverence, a surprising gratitude.

As Christians, let us pray for and celebrate moments like that, especially in these impossible times. Certainly in our communities, let us not unfairly demonize those officers whose job it is to keep the peace; but let us also hold them accountable for indeed *keeping* that peace rather than destroying its possibility. As Christians, let us listen carefully and reverently to the words of those aggrieved, and let us also witness boldly to their tormentors. When it is as if we cannot breathe, let us endeavor to say—and hear—one another’s names, for God’s sake, and for the sake of the world.

Faithfully yours,

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President, Austin Seminary