



Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church

Dear Friends in Christ,

These are anxious times. We fight a virulent disease. We face a historic economic downturn. And now, a series of terrible, truth-telling videos has forced our society to face once again the consequences of America's original sin—a vicious and violent racism that continues to infuse our culture.

The appalling footage of a white police officer kneeling on the neck of a black man, George Floyd, while three other officers watched, has shaken me. I know it has stirred up anger, despair and oceans of sadness in you, too. In our society, the murder of George Floyd has unleashed an outpouring of anguish the likes of which we have not seen since the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968.

This week, most of those protesting this hate crime have channeled their anger, sadness and pain into nonviolent appeals for justice. These demonstrations give voice to righteous demands, and speak hard truths, in a manner consistent with the Christian witness and the best of our democracy. Just two days ago, Amy and I watched a remarkably peaceful protest in St. Paul, Minnesota. Amidst all the suffering and turmoil, it made us proud to be Americans.

Tragically, though, some of the biggest protests in this country have erupted in violence. These dangerous and chaotic outbursts have destroyed property, taken lives and threatened the livelihoods of neighbors. On Sunday night, our own church was defaced with spray paint. (Do not worry. Before we could wring our hands, some of our gracious neighbors came by with a pressure washer and cleaned the brownstone.)

Courageous leaders are pushing back.

“What are you changing by tearing up a city?” Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms of Atlanta demanded to know. “This is not how we change America. This is not how we change the world.”

One “organizer” defended the violence and chaos as “organic”—a product of our social-media-driven culture. “We do not need,” he said, “black pastors coming in and telling us how to do it.”

These words made me wince. Because to tell you the truth, I feel that this is *exactly* what we need. We need people with deep moral convictions, people who care for the communities most affected by persistent racism, to guide us.



Over the past couple of days, I called four black pastors and asked them, “What should I do? What should Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church say and not say right now?”

All four of my friends spoke of their soul-shaking grief at watching these videos. All believe a time of reckoning for our society is long overdue in regard to systemic violence against African Americans, especially African American men. All worried that violent protests and looting could distract from this “Come-to-Jesus” moment and allow our society once again to avoid facing the scourge of police violence. All called for an end to

the looting, the wanton destruction of property, and the violent attacks.

All four spoke with great nuance about the police. They recognize that the majority of police officers are not bad people, but good individuals who pursue their incredibly difficult jobs with honor and dignity. And yet, together these clergy offered a painful lament for the many and persistent ways in which police departments and the courts protect bad cops who commit violence against black citizens. To witness these dreadful protections, they argued, is to stare at the most incontrovertible evidence of deep-seated structural racism in this country—a racism that must be rooted out.

These pastors all uttered a phrase that is equally at home in progressive and conservative political circles: "People must be held accountable for their actions." Without accountability, without equality before the law, without true protections for all citizens, and without empathy for one another, we are lost.

My friends, I am not going to lie to you. The events of this week have unnerved me.

Our country stands at a perilous crossroads. There are times when we do not seem up to the immense challenge before us. We are exhausted, angry, wounded, mistrustful, and as divided as I have ever seen us.

To make matters worse, national political leaders and forces in the media seek to exploit this moment. Moral leadership right now demands empathy, calm and the promise of justice. Instead, many have chosen to double down on the rhetoric of division. Those who would walk us down this disastrous path are complicit in fanning the flames of rage and in unspooling the fabric of our society.

What are people of faith to do?

Brian Blount, the president of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Virginia, expresses our challenge quite well: We are called to witness to God's abiding truth.

"Not just spiritually," says Blount. "Tangibly. Not just with well-intentioned prayer. With concrete action. Not just from the pulpit and in the sanctuary. Out in the world, on the streets of our cities, in the corridors of power. No, this evil of enduring American racism is not just a Christian problem. But for a people who claim to follow a Jesus who died on a cross for all people, and whom we claim reigns in heaven interceding with God for all people, it is an evil we must especially engage. We cannot claim to witness to this risen Christ and simultaneously allow our country's descent into this racial abyss."

The challenge before us is great. The work Christians must do in this time will test our mettle. It will try our patience. It will leave us, at the end of each day, exhausted. Still, we have no choice. This is the work to which God calls us. We must carry Christ's message of justice, love and peace to the world.

I know and love this community so much. Your commitments, my friends, give me faith that, in this incredibly challenging time, we will be guided not by fear or anger or hatred, but by our better angels. Together, we will figure out how to conduct ourselves according to the words of my favorite benediction:

Approach the world with Christ's peace in your heart.

Have courage!
Hold fast to what is good.
Return to no one evil for evil.
Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the suffering.
Honor all people.
Love and serve the Lord. Amen.

With great affection and hope,

A handwritten signature in black ink. It features a large, stylized loop at the top, followed by a diagonal stroke that descends to the left. Below this, the name "Scott" is written in a cursive, handwritten style.

The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston
Senior Pastor