

Sermon for Grace Cathedral
Delivered for Sunday June 7, 2020 service

Thank you, Dean Malcolm Clemens Young, for inviting me home to San Francisco and Grace Cathedral to deliver this sermon.

Genesis 4:9-10.

And the Lord said, “What have you done? Listen, your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground.”

The story of Cain and Abel. “What have you done? Listen, your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground.”

When I look at the stopped frame on the video of George Floyd’s head and neck pressed against the ground, and Derek Chauvin with his knee on Floyd’s neck and a dispassionate gaze, even grin, on Chauvin’s face, I am reminded of images of lynchings in the United States: lynchings of Native Americans, Latinx, and Asians as well as Blacks, though predominately Blacks.

In 1900, George Henry White, a Black Republican from North Carolina, introduced the first anti-lynching bill in Congress. It was defeated in committee. In 1918, the Dyer lynching bill was introduced. Dyer, a white republican from

Missouri, sponsored it. Its intention was to make lynching a federal crime. It passed in the house. A filibuster by Southern senators stopped its passage.

From 1882 to 1968, two hundred anti-lynching bills were introduced in Congress. Three passed in the house. Seven presidents asked Congress to pass the bill into federal law. One hundred years – the entire 20th century – and no bill was passed.

Senators Kamala Harris and Corey Booker have authored the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act, which passed in the house this February, by a vote of 410 to 4.

However, on June 4th, while the family of George Floyd and mourners from across the country gathered in Minneapolis for the first of three memorial services, funerals for George Floyd, while a throng of international media lined up outside – more media than at any funeral since Michael Jackson’s – Booker and Harris found themselves in a hot debate with the one Senator who is holding up passage of the bill in 2020 – Rand Paul. To date, we have no federal anti-lynching legislation in the United States.

The late Reverend James Cone, as many of you know, coined the phrase, “Black liberation theology” in the 1960s. When he was coming to the end of his life, he wrote the following, in the conclusion of his book, *Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody*: “As I come to the end of my theological journey, I can’t stop thinking about black bodies. The blood of black people is crying out to God and to white people from the ground in the United States of America... The blood of Sandra Bland in Texas and Tamir Rice in Ohio, the blood of the Emanuel Nine in Charleston, South Carolina and Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, the blood

of nearly 5,000 lynched Blacks and the blood of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Gabriel Prosser, and the many thousands gone, *millions* gone on the auction block, under the lash, and in the middle passage. Black blood calls out to God all over this land. Is anybody listening,” he writes, “to the cries of black blood?” That strange fruit that Billie Holiday sang about, “Blood on the leaves. Blood at the root.”

James Cone? To answer your question, people are listening all over the world. During a worldwide pandemic, people are coming out into the streets: London, Auckland. Amsterdam, Dublin, Nairobi, Berlin, chanting: “I Can’t Breathe,” “Black Lives Matter!” “The People United will never be defeated.” You’d be proud. Worldwide, calling out: THIS IS WRONG. Is the good news. The bad news is that most recently, what called citizens into the streets, is the blood of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd. Say their names.

Since I’m speaking in a church, I will ask, ‘What is the role of the church? What is the potential of the church?’ I’m not a church lady. I was blessed to have been invited to Grace Cathedral by former Dean Jane Shaw, as its first artist in residence in 2012. She and I talked a lot about the need for a moral imagination. It is a privilege to be a part of this community and to have been asked by Dean Young to deliver this sermon, in these very unsettled times.

After my residency, I returned with violinist Bobby McDuffie, to recite Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” We only performed a part of that text and I am not sure if I included this part, which is so important right now:

“There was a time when the church was very powerful -- in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man.”

What will it take to make this moment, sparked by yet more deaths of Blacks in the hands of police, into more than entertainment or a distraction during the pandemic, into more than a salve for anxieties about our unknown futures. What will it take to make this more than a shaking of heads, and saying – sometimes – more of the same words, over and over again? Legislation is essential. More human ideas about the economy are essential. Broadening opportunity is essential. Universal healthcare is essential. Attacking the social determinants of morbidity with new strategies and medicine and public health is essential. The rehabilitation of our public schools is essential. A thorough overhaul of the criminal justice system is essential. The list is long.

But let us not underestimate the potential of moral energy; it could spark us to DO what we need to do. What we see in the streets is, metaphorically, a grand opera not yet written. It is real. Is this a prologue to a tragedy; is it the first act of a tragedy, the second act of a tragedy, the dénouement of a tragedy? Is it the end of a tragedy, the conclusion of a dark, bloody, cautionary tale? Where are we? In this grand, dark drama? Will we move on or will we continue to watch this show, as if it were a long running television series?

Rabbi David Wolpe told me of the story of the person who said, “I’m only making a hole in my side of the boat.” “I’m only making a hole in my side of the boat.” There is no “your side” of the boat.

I can’t tell you what to do. But I believe you can do something. Your way. In the way how you do it. Imagine it. Think about it. Do it. Have courage.