

*“We have come over a way that with tears has been watered;
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered”*
James Weldon Johnson, “Lift Every Voice and Sing”

“I am weary, O God; I am weary, O God, and worn out.”
Proverbs 30:1

“...that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word...”
Isaiah 50:4

The year was 1967. A few years prior, the last remaining historically Black college and seminary dedicated to training Black Lutheran clergy was closed by the Synod. The nation was in unrest. Racial injustice was being protested in a nation that had long denied its existence. Black men and women were being killed by those who had sworn to protect them. Lynn Blanding. Carl Cooper. Aubrey Pollard. Fred Temple. Racial tensions flared into riots in Detroit. As time would testify, Black Lutheran pastors knew that “Detroit was not an isolated case,” so an isolated response would not suffice. As the late Rev. Dr. Richard Dickinson, former Executive Director of Black Ministry, describes, “Every city in this nation... was seething with unrest, with the potential to explode into a race riot at any moment. If such a crisis should arise in Chicago, Los Angeles, Milwaukee or some other city, where could our black congregations turn for help?” (*This I Remember*, 27). “They had absolutely no confidence in the District office... to even understand the nature and scope of the crisis, and absolutely no commitment to try to resolve it.” There was a lack of representation. There were no Black Lutherans on the Synod Board of Directors. The Seminary Boards of Regents lacked Black clergy. To date, there had been no Synod President or District President who was Black. “There was no black person in any influential position in the District or the Synodical administration. Detroit was burning down, and black ministry in that city had nowhere to turn for some official who could understand and bring hope or comfort.” (*This I Remember*, 28)

Fast forward 53 years after the formation of the Black Clergy Caucus of the Lutheran Church.

The year is 2020. A few years prior, the last remaining Historically Black College and University dedicated to training Black Lutheran teachers was closed by the Synod. The nation is in unrest. Racial injustice is being protested in a nation that has long denied its existence. Black men and women are being killed by those who have sworn to protect them. Breonna Taylor. George Floyd. Ahmaud Arbery. David McAtee. Racial tensions flared into riots in Minneapolis. Black Lutheran pastors knew Minneapolis would not be an isolated case, so an isolated response would not suffice. “If such a crisis should arise in Chicago, Los Angeles, Milwaukee or some other city, where could our black congregations turn for help?” Can we turn to District or Synod? Do they “understand the nature and scope of the crisis [and have a] commitment to try to resolve it?” That is our genuine hope. Yet there are no Black Lutherans on the Synod Board of Directors. The Seminary Boards of Regents lack Black clergy. To date, there still has been no Synod President or District President who is Black. To paraphrase Dr. Dickinson, when our cities are burning down, does Black ministry have anywhere to turn for some official who is able to understand and bring hope or comfort?

Amid the riots of 1967, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said “A riot is the language of the unheard. What is it that America has failed to hear?” It is time for the Black Clergy Caucus to speak again.

George Floyd was known as a ‘person of peace’ (Luke 10:6) by his pastor. Anchored in his baptismal identity, George would lug a baptismal font to a basketball court located a few blocks from a Black Lutheran church. Like the Ethiopian Eunuch who said, “Look, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” George prepared the way for local clergy to preach the gospel. George later moved to Minneapolis due to a church work program. He was a product of the church. He was also a Black man. The son of a Black man. The father of a Black man. I too am the son of a Black man. When I have children, my son will be Black. But will his baptismal identity in Christ be asphyxiated by the world because of the color of his skin? Will he be another statistic to a world that does not even know the number of hairs on his head? For many, the thought is overwhelming, born of centuries of racism. In the words of Fannie Lou Hamer, we are, “sick and tired of being sick and tired.” Thank God, we are not alone in our suffering. For the first interaction between God and man was when God breathed life into Adam. The last interaction (before the resurrection) was when man suffocated Jesus, taking the Son of God’s final breath. Jesus died of asphyxiation on the cross. “Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last” (Mark 15:37). We must learn to see how our sin took the breath of Jesus; then we must learn to see how our sin took the breath of George.

When we see life taken, we remember the Fifth Commandment, which states, “Thou shalt not kill.” Yet we minimize our responsibility. Luther’s Large Catechism gives two important insights. First, “we should not use our tongue to advocate or advise harming anyone.” If we advocate violence, on social media or otherwise, then we have broken the commandment. Second, we have broken it, “not only when we do evil, but also when we have the opportunity to... prevent, protect, and save [our neighbor] from suffering bodily harm or injury, but fail to do so.” We all bear responsibility *in* this moment, for we all have the ability to respond *to* this moment. “If you see anyone who is condemned to death or in similar peril and do not save him although you have means or ways to do so, you have killed him. It will be of no help to use the excuse that you did not assist their deaths by word or deed, for you have... robbed them of the kindness by means of which their lives might have been saved.” If we have the opportunity to prevent more lives from being lost, let us seize it.

Now is the time. As a Christian, if you do not help end a system of injustice that takes the lives of brothers and sisters in Christ like George Floyd but “use the excuse that you did not assist their deaths by word or deed,” then “you have killed him.” “For although you have not actually committed all these crimes, as far as you are concerned, you have nevertheless permitted your neighbors to languish and perish in their misfortune. It is just as if I saw someone who was struggling in deep water... and I could stretch out my hand to pull him out and save him, and yet I did not do so. How would I appear before all the world except as a murderer...?” (LC, V, 189-190).

This is not ‘black radical thought’. This is the Lutheran Catechism from your time in Confirmation, when you affirmed your baptismal vows, marking you as one claimed by God – and not the world. Friends and colleagues have reached out to me, asking as those by the river asked John the Baptist, “What then shall we do?” (Luke 3:10). From the womb to the tomb, we are called to protect life. Life is not a multiple-choice test. It is all of the above. You either affirm all of it – or none of it. “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them,” Scripture exhorts, and “look on victims of abuse as if what happened to them had happened to you.” (Hebrews 13:3). When we do not seek to end the institution of racism, this nation’s original sin, or worse deny it, we not only fail to recognize the humanity of our black and brown brothers and sisters in Christ, we also fail to recognize the God in them, the Spirit of God Who has given them life and breath.

We have not been the most hospitable. Since closing Concordia Selma, the last Lutheran HBCU, Synod reduced Black Ministry's budget and divested from the Black Ministry Family Convocation – a triennial gathering to study God's Word and celebrate the perseverance of Black Lutherans. With no HBCU to support Black Lutherans, no Black Lutherans are entering seminary this year. We do not need Synod to offer us thoughts and prayers. Prayer is an essential spiritual discipline; platitudes are not. St. John reminds us that in love, it is not enough to say the right thing, we must also do the right thing: "Let us love, not in word or speech, but with action and in truth" (1 John 3:18). Scripture warns us that talk without action is meaningless, or worse, hypocrisy: "Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed', but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2:15-16). As for fasting, God says, "You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves?" Ceremonial humility will not do if we want our voice to be heard on high. Instead, God says, "Is not this the fasting that I choose: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and remove every load from their neck?" (Is. 58:4-6). As brothers and sisters, now is the time to be joined in true prayer. True fasting. True lament. True com-*passion*. True love.

The Black Clergy Caucus does not speak for all Black Lutheran clergy; we advocate for them. They have their own voice, their own thoughts, their own ministry. We are not a monolithic group. Within the Lutheran Church, we have an amazing diversity of Black Lutheran churches, pastors, deaconesses, and teachers. Get to know one. Listen to him or her. The first act of love is to listen.

"As love of God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening.... This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end, there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point.... Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*).

I encourage you to read more, to learn more, to listen more. To Black Lutheran pastors and laity. To Black authors. To Black musicians. To Black business owners. To people you normally do not. With a heart that listens to understand. So often what divides us is a defensive heart born of fear, anger, or pride. But as brothers and sisters in Christ, God says, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (Ez. 36:26). This world is unable to solve the problems that vex us, but God is able. This world may seek to tear us apart, but God is able to "knit [us] together in love" (Col. 2:2). This world may test our patience, but God is able to give us a peace "that surpasses all understanding" (Phil 4:7).

To our Black Lutheran churches, this I say to you: Thank you. Thank you for being the Body of Christ in the world. Thank you for showing hospitality even when hospitality is not shown to you. Thank you for your endurance, for we know that, "endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Romans 5:4-5). Thank you for loving our sons and daughters. Thank you for reminding them of who and whose they are – that they are of ultimate worth to God. I encourage you to talk with your pastor or deacon. To listen to them. To pray for them. To work with them. To let the church be the church, particularly in times like these. And to let God be God.

And to the Black clergy of the Lutheran Church, this I say to you: “Your labor is not in vain.” Continue to care for your local church. Pray for it. Lament with it. Love it. You are the pastor that your church needs. Not another. You are the pastor this Synod needs. Your presence and dedication to keep on keeping on is what we need right now. “You are important to me; I need you to survive.” Let us come together, now more than ever, as we remember the origins of the Black Clergy Caucus and continue to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” Know that no matter what this world may do or bring, your “soul has been anchored in the Lord.”

*“There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

*Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work’s in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.”*
African-American Spiritual

Your brother in Christ,

Rev. Warren Lattimore, Jr.

Pastor: St. Paul’s Lutheran Church – New Orleans, LA

President: Black Clergy Caucus of the Lutheran Church, Inc.