

An Open Letter to My Fellow White Christians

Our sins are grievous, but we are not yet beyond redemption.



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NASHVILLE — Since long before it was a country, our country has been in flames. When we arrived on our big ships and decimated this land’s original peoples with our viruses and our guns, when we used our Christian faith as a justification for killing both “heretic” and “heathen,” we founded this country in flames. And every month, every week, every day, for the last 400 years, we have been setting new fires.

White Christians who came before us captured human beings and beat them and raped them and stole their babies from them and stole their parents from them and stole their husbands and their wives from them and locked them in chains and made them work in inhuman conditions. Our spiritual ancestors went to church and listened to their pastors argue that these human beings weren’t human at all.

Our pastors don’t tell us that anymore, but we are still setting fires.

Christians set a fire every time we allow our leaders to weaponize our fears against us. We set a fire every time our faith in good police officers prevents us from seeing the bad ones. Christian voters preserve a system that permits police violence, unjust prosecutions and hellhole prisons filled with people who should have received the same addiction treatment we give our own troubled kids.

We set a fire every time we fail to scrutinize a police culture that allows an officer’s own fear and hatred to justify the most casual brutality against another human being. It would be almost unbelievable to match an adjective like “casual” with a noun like “brutality,” but we have seen the videos. Watch the faces of justice shove an old man aside and leave him bleeding on the ground. Watch them drive their vehicles into protesters protected by the United States Constitution. Watch them fire rubber bullets directly at journalists doing work that is also protected by the United States Constitution. In video after video, note their unconcern with people who are bleeding or screaming in pain.

Make yourself look. Study the air of perfect nonchalance on Derek Chauvin’s face as he kneels on the neck of George Floyd. Register the blithe indifference in his posture, the way he puts his hand in his pocket as though he were just walking along the street on a sunny summer day. Nothing in his whole body suggests concern. He is not the least bit troubled by taking another human life.

We created Derek Chauvin.

Every single aspect of our criminal justice system is permeated by racism, but too many Christians continue to vote for “law and order” candidates anyway, failing to notice that more cops and more weapons and more prisons have done exactly nothing to make us safer. Failing to notice that they have instead endangered all Americans, but black people most of all.

We should know better by now. There are so many resources to help us know better, yet too many Christians ignore the history books that document the terrible legacy of slavery. We ignore the novelists who tell us why the caged bird sings. We ignore the poets who teach us the cruel cost of a dream deferred. In our carefully preserved

ignorance, we pile all their books up in a great pyre, and we set them on fire.

We set the fire when we heard a peaceful crowd singing, “We shall overcome someday,” and understood that *someday* would never be today, that *someday* was at best still decades and decades away. We set the fire when we heard a peaceful crowd singing, “Lean on me when you’re not strong,” and believed it was time to call in the military. We set the fire when our “Christian” president cleared a peaceful crowd by spraying them with tear gas as though they were enemy combatants, marched to a nearby church for a photo-op and held up a Bible to imply that God is on his side.

We have to stop letting this president turn our faith into a travesty. Love is the only way to put out this fire, love and listening and the hard work of changing, but this “Christian” president doesn’t want to put out the fire. Fire is his homeplace. Fire is his native land.

Perhaps it is ours, as well.

“Blessed are the merciful,” Jesus taught us, but we built prison after prison. “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also,” Jesus taught us, but we did not turn our cheek. We turned instead our billy stick. We turned instead our pepper spray. We turned instead our rubber bullets and our tear gas and our riot gear. To George Floyd, and so many others, we turned instead our knee.

There are positive models for what Christian faith in the public sphere can look like. Think of John Alexander, a Baptist philosophy teacher who published a journal designed to convert white evangelicals to the cause of civil rights. Think of the Rev. Daniel J. Berrigan, a Jesuit priest who opposed the Vietnam War. Think of the Rev. Jennifer Butler, a Presbyterian minister who founded the activist group Faith in Public Life. Here in Nashville we have the Rev. Stacy Rector, the Presbyterian executive director of Tennesseans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, and the Rev. Becca Stevens, an Episcopal priest and founder of a nonprofit group that works to “rise up against systems that commoditize, criminalize and abuse women,” as the Thistle Farms website puts it. There are many, many others, all across the country.

Our sins are grievous, but these Christians remind us that we are not yet beyond redemption. It is time to act on what we say we believe. We need to remember the words of the prophet Isaiah: “And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” We need to remember the words of Jesus — “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’s sake” — and join the righteous cause of the protesters. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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