

A Luther Pastor's Reflection

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I am grateful for the opportunity to greet this faith filled community. I write as a beloved child of God, a Lutheran pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and a disciple of Jesus Christ who daily remembers my baptismal promises that include working for justice and peace.

I met Rev. George Gilbert Sr., Pastor of Holy Trinity United Baptist Church in Ward 7 of D.C., when he phoned me after our church was attacked by a white supremacist group, on 12/12/20. That night, a column of men advanced on our church grounds, intimidated congregational leaders and took our Black Lives Matter sign.

The congregation I serve in Washington, D.C., was built in 1873, and is located 7 blocks north of the White House and Black Lives Matter Plaza. The founding pastor of Luther Place Church, The Rev. Dr. John Butler, served as Chaplain of the House and Senate. He was an honorary pallbearer at the funeral of Frederick Douglass held in 1895, at our neighbor church, Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church. The Rev. Dr. Butler was known as an abolitionist — a rare Lutheran orientation.

Ministries of mercy, justice and peace have always been part of Luther Place, and since its inception, the congregation has been navigating issues of race and racism as a white led institution.

Our Lutheran liturgical tradition begins Sunday worship with a confession of sin, a practice that has us confessing sin as individuals and as people who are part of systems and structures that are sinful. This regular repentance has us turning again and again to a God of grace and mercy.

And we humbly acknowledge the temptations of “cheap grace.” That’s the grace you give to yourself, in part because the other” costly grace,” happens on a journey of discipleship that can be very demanding.

On Saturday 12/12/20 we had been in prayer all day with a collective of DC congregations. As houses of worship attentive to our context, we knew 12/12/20 was a day that required a web of care in the midst of planned White supremacist gatherings with the strong potential of violence.

We were hoping to conclude our collective prayer time with a 9pm praying of the nighttime hour, or Compline, outside Luther Place Church in front of the Martin Luther Statue. We had been praying outdoors on Saturday nights at a social distance and with masks since the beginning of the pandemic.

That night, our leaders who were outside noticed the white supremacists, in their matching garb, advancing on the church from the South. Our leaders rushed into the building for safety. In the sanctuary, we sat looking up at stained glass windows of Martin Luther, Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Harriet Tubman. In the presence of holy agitators, we gathered ourselves and we prayed in community. We were safe.

When Rev. Gilbert called, after expressing his care and support, he referenced German Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We briefly talked about Bonhoeffer's witness and resistance to Hitler in Nazi Germany in the 1930's and 1940's.

Part of Bonhoeffer's activism was ignited in New York City when he studied at Union Seminary from 1930-1931. In New York, The Harlem Renaissance and the Black Church cultivated an awakening in Bonhoeffer around religion and race. He was taken under the wing of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, where The Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Sr. served as the pastor. At Abyssinian, the music and preaching brought a joy and thrill in worship that was unlike anything Bonhoeffer had ever experienced in Germany, or at Union Seminary. The collective community taught him about Jesus who walked with people in various ways all along their tedious journey.

Transformation is a hope of good religion, yet its arrival is not predicative; however, in stories from Bonhoeffer's friend and classmate Myles Horton, there are observations about how Bonhoeffer changed during his time in New York.

Horton would go on to become one of the founders of the Highlander Folk School, which began with a focus on labor organizing in the 1930's. In the 1950's the Highlander Folk School would shift it's direction to Civil Rights. In time, Horton would get to know Rosa Parks, Ella Baker and Martin Luther King, Jr.

While still students in NYC, Horton listened to Bonhoeffer as he enthusiastically explained learning about real religion in NYC, not at Union Seminary, but at Abyssinian Baptist Church. And reportedly, one day when Horton asked the stodgy and proper Bonhoeffer how he was, Bonhoeffer exclaimed, "I'm Blessed!"

During his time in the United States, Bonhoeffer traveled to the south which further woke him up to the significance of racism encoded in Jim Crow Laws.

When Rev. Gilbert brought up Bonhoeffer as a Lutheran witness, I tried to brush him off. Maybe because I sensed he was offering a holy agitation and a reminder of "costly grace."

American amnesia around history is real, and we can gloss over the cost of over 6 million Jews and more who were exterminated by Hitler and the Nazi regime. We must not forget the machines of death that were legal because of genocidal policies.

Since Trump's election, I have agitated the congregation I serve as well as Lutheran Church leaders around organized injustice and cruelty. I have preached on the overt racism and white supremacist ideals operationalized in violence towards children ripped from their parents and locked in cages and the cycle of ongoing police brutally murdering Black and brown people.

And none of those stories are new.

During the Trump presidency, when I've brought up to Lutheran leaders about how I thought we were in a "Bonhoeffer," like moment, and that meant it was to time openly call out and resist the evil before us, I was dismissed as being too dramatic and untimely. I was reminded that pointed comments "cost," too much.

A stance of active resistance to Hitler and the Third Reich, cost Bonhoeffer his life. He was executed by hanging on April 9, 1945 at the Flossenbug Concentration Camp.

I write this reflection a few days after January 27th, which is designated International Holocaust Remembrance Day. In 1945, 76 years ago, the Auschwitz Concentration camp was liberated by allied troops.

During Trump's presidency, who we are as a nation has been in full view. We can name the events, policies and people that make this real.

As a white woman pastoring a white led church, part of my call is to dig into what repentance looks like in our day. This work includes having us release any image of a white God whose white son Jesus rationalizes a cycle of racial violence in graphic and subtle ways.

Unlearning is part of repentance. Going deeper in faith formation is part of repentance too.

Rev. Gilbert called me after our church was attacked by White Supremacists and he invited me into community for support, and now he has given me a space to write. This path to finding words and wisdoms to address the lingering and devastating residues of white supremacy culture is not a path any of us can travel alone. Solidarity is required. Can we be in solidarity with Black liberation movements?

In our Night Prayer Compline service we offer a call and response chant to God:

*Hear my prayer O Lord; listen to my cry.
Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.
In hope I shall see you; when I awake, your presence will give me joy.*

After Trump, and with the reality of ongoing Trumpism, what can a movement of faith filled solidarity look like?

May that be a question that some of us live together, now.

The Rev. Karen Brau
Sr. Pastor Luther Place Church
Washington, DC

Rev. Karen Brau serves as the co-Chair with Rev. Franklin Morales of the Metro DC Synod Racial Equity Team.