

## **An Accounting of the Hope that is in You**

John 14:15-21, (1 Peter 3:13-17)

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church in Camden UCC, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020

You've probably heard this story: On February 23<sup>rd</sup> of this year, 25 year-old Ahmaud Arbery was doing what he loved to do – going for a long run through several neighborhoods. Suddenly, he was accosted and eventually shot and killed by two white men, Gregory and Travis McMichael. Gregory and Travis assumed, so they said, that Ahmaud was a burglar running away from the scene of a crime. Apparently, the notion that a young African American man might just like to jog did not fit into the realm of their imagination - or we might say “narrative” - of the world. He was a threat and a suspect by virtue of his race and gender. Travis and Gregory portrayed themselves as acting in self-defense and doing a citizen's arrest without even having seen a crime taking place, making their actions illegal from the get go. They had connections. Various officials recused themselves and nothing happened for weeks until the public started sharing the shocking video of the incident. Ahmaud's assailants were arrested two and half months later. This terrible incident has laid bare once again the deep and infected wound of racism and the lingering presumption of white supremacy still alive in our country.

What are we to say, do and believe in the face of such realities, especially at a time when the social fiber of our society is already getting stretched to its limits during this Pandemic? I heard a powerful speech that spoke to this and more by Brian Stevenson who was the commencement speaker at Emory University in Atlanta this past Monday. (My niece Noemi received her PH.D. from Emory that day, and I joined the livestream to participate with her). Brian Stevenson is an African American lawyer, teacher and social justice activist practicing in Montgomery, Alabama. He founded the *Equal Justice Initiative* and also initiated the *National Memorial for Peace and Justice* in Montgomery which honors the lives of the thousands of African Americans who have been lynched.

Stevenson put forth four salient challenges to the graduates which really also apply to all of us as we are all always “commencing” – stepping into the newness of life each moment! His first point was the need to get “proximate” to people who are suffering, marginalized and neglected. How else can we begin to understand what their lives are truly like? People who are suffering need to know

that others actually care enough to understand their experience so that the solutions are reflective of people's dignity, their actual need and the root causes of the problem being faced with. This is the opposite of approaching others through false and debilitating narratives as the McMichaels' did – more on that in a minute.

Stevenson's grandmother taught him important aspects of the need for proximity in a lasting way. She was the true matriarch of his family. She worried about him as a young black man in our society. Grandma always hugged him as a teenager and young man in a way that was almost painful. A little after the hug she would ask if he could still feel her hugging him. When he came home from college he would sometimes even try to circumvent the next hard squeeze by saying, "Grandma, I can still feel you hugging me!" When his grandmother was dying, Brian came to see her for what he knew would be their last visit. He wasn't sure what she could still take in as she lay there quietly. He just proceeded to pour his heart out to her. Then he squeezed her hand to say good-bye. His grandma surprisingly squeezed right back and said in a faint voice: "Brian, do you still feel me hugging you? You need to trust that I will always be hugging you." It was the last thing she said to him before she passed on. Her witness has become a guiding image for him about the need to "proximate", to be close enough to embrace another in their true humanity and dignity to assure them they are not alone and that we belong to each other. I think the need to restrict this kind of contact is making life particularly difficult for us right now. Prayer shawls and care packages are a beautiful way to still show such care.<sup>1</sup>

When I listened to Stevenson, I was reminded of what it means to live an incarnate faith. We believe in a God who is proximate, who enters the human embodied experience to be with us, in us and to sustain us in our lives and beyond, come what may. Stevenson's grandmother offered this incarnated love to him which is central in the Gospel of John. God is not "out there", Jesus says. Jesus knew himself to be so intimately part of God that he could say to his friends that they, too, are absolutely at one with him in God. He assured them that the Holy Spirit would dwell in

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<sup>1</sup> Our "Won't You Be My Neighbor" initiative of our Care team and Membership committee is now sending hundreds of care packages to local caregivers and people in nursing homes. Our prayer shawl knitters are working extra hard to create more shawls.

them to continually reconnect them in each moment with this belonging in love in God. It is a oneness that nothing can break, not even people who in their own delusion cannot see the truth for what it is (John 14:16) - like Gregory and Travis McMichael. And in all humility, let us remember that we are all prone to deluding ourselves and participating in harm in our judgment of each other.

Brian Stevenson's second appeal in his speech that also reflects our scripture readings was the need to stay hopeful despite the suffering and injustices that persevere. He called hopelessness "the enemy of justice" because "injustice persists where hopelessness prevails." For me, his words also echoed words from John and from the Epistle/letter 1 Peter. Peter writes to his community that they need not be paralyzed by fear but to be ready to give "an accounting for the hope that is in [them/us]." Hope is a powerful energy that is the work of the Holy Spirit. You may recall that the Greek word for the Spirit here in John is *paracletos* which is taken from the legal context and means advocate or defender. This Spirit is the advocate who defends us against accusing and shaming voices and drives us at times to stand up where others tell us to sit down or to speak when some would have us be silent (John 14:16). While Stevenson did not use the language of the Holy Spirit, he named its force acting in every person as we are all filled with the potential to make a difference.

But Stevenson also stressed as his third point that in order to make that difference, we need to change the narratives by which we live, a theme at the heart of the *Black Lives Matter* movement. The violent and tragic death of Ahmaud mirrors that narrative back to us that has been around for several hundred years in this country: that Black people or people of color in general are somehow lesser human beings, not to be trusted, not deserving of the same dignity or access to resources from access to health care to quality education. This also comes through in the far higher prison sentencing of minorities. We have also heard this in relation to the COVID 19 outbreak which has caused a far higher per capita death rate among African Americans, Native Americans and Latinos. Native Americans in particular were decimated by nothing short of a genocide when this country was settled. Under the guise of a narrative that derided them as "savages", they were betrayed in treaty after treaty, stripped of access to the kind of land that would permit most of

them to continue their way of life, sometimes even stripped of access to the nutritious foods they had always grown – something that is directly tied to the now generational legacy of diabetes within their communities. We still often prefer to point a finger of blame at the people who are suffering than to be willing to take a structural systemic look at what sets people up for and sustains suffering. We have to change the narrative that allows such inequalities and abuse in our society and in our world, including the narrative of “might makes right” and that the pursuit of happiness can ignore the needs and dignity of others.

In order to move forward, we have to be willing to face uncomfortable realities and dare risk stepping out of our comfort zone into our actual interconnectedness. This is Stevenson’s fourth point and I see it directly reflected in the all-encompassing call of Jesus to keep love front and center of all that we do. It is the central commandment of his teaching, not to whip us into shape but to ground us in the abiding reality of God’s sustaining love. I would like to tell you a story shared by Stevenson that brought home what it means to risk stepping out of your comfort zone driven by hope and love.

As I mentioned, Stevenson was involved in starting a museum that honors victims of lynchings. The museum encourages volunteers to go to places where such lynchings took place and to collect some soil from that sight. The soil is displayed in the museum along with the story of the person who was so brutally murdered. One of the volunteers, a middle-aged black woman, was very nervous about collecting soil from a site but she went anyway. She drove far and eventually had to turn down a dirt road in a rural area in the south. When she had located the spot, she knelt down and started to work the soil. Then she noticed a big pick-up truck driving by and slowing down. The truck returned after a short while and seemed to keep going back and forth. The driver kept slowing down to watch her. The woman became more and more fearful. Finally, the truck stopped and an older white man stepped out. He began approaching her and finally asked: “What are you doing here?”

The woman was terrified and knew she was allowed to make up a story to protect herself but something, some advocate, took hold of her, she said. She came straight out by saying: “I am

digging in this location because I am going to honor the black man who was lynched here in the 1930's." Then she started digging really fast. She was willing to suffer for doing what was right out of love (1 Peter 3:16). To her surprise, the man did not challenge her. He saw the memo paper describing the location and the person who had died lying next to her and asked if he could read it. After he had finished, he asked: "Would it be OK if I helped you?" She was taken aback at first but then motioned for him to kneel down. She offered him her digging tool but he said he felt a need to work with his hands. The two of them worked the soil together and carefully placed some of it, bit by bit, ritually into the jar. The intensity of it all moved her to tears and she noticed that the man had started to weep as well. When they made eye contact he said, "I am so afraid that my own grandfather might have participated in lynching this man." Sometime later, the two volunteers brought the jar of soil to the museum in Montgomery together. She introduced him as her new friend. She was "in him" and he was "in her" and together, may I say, they were in Christ, powered by the Holy Spirit, connected also with the one who had been killed and those who had done the killing. They created a new story of what is possible because they were willing to do an uncomfortable thing. It is in such ways of connecting that mercy, grace and love can prevail, leading, hopefully, to more just living according to a new narrative in the future.

They also took part in first naming and touching the truth of violence and murder, delusions and destructive narratives. Such acknowledgments are needed to help us move forward. We do have choices to challenge destructive narratives that discriminate and perpetuate violence and injustice. This pandemic is bringing problems ever more to the surface. May we not be blind to them but strengthen our commitment to address them together. Ahmaud was so much more than all the projections that led to his death. Even his killers, Gregory and Travis, are more than the ugliness of their hate and delusion. If we are truly to be hopeful, then we must learn to risk loving in a way that is inclusive enough to seek healing for all of us and to give hugs that can still be felt long after the embrace. God loves us in this way and models for us in Christ God's capacity to overcome even the world's greatest blindness and destructiveness. This love grounds all hope for which we can give an account with our own lives. All thanks and praise be to God. Amen.