

# Our Sin, Lament and Shared Work



## *A Couple of Thoughts on Last Week*

*+Bishop Jon V. Anderson*

I have been thinking a lot about sin. I have been reflecting on the kind of sins we commit (sin of commission) and the kind that happen when we fail to say or do things (sin of omission). I know as I try to speak into the current moment I can not and will not get it all right. But to stay silent would also not be right.

I know we often focus on the sins of individuals. We are less comfortable talking about the kinds of sin we participate in as part of a community. One way to look at the past week's news is through the lens of sin.

In our Confession and Forgiveness liturgy we say,

“Most merciful God, we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves...”

Sin is deep, pervasive, complicated and multi-faceted. It is personal and communal. It takes the form of action and inaction. It has a voice and it also happens in silence. When you seek to squeeze it out of one dimension of your life, it often squeezes out in new forms. It is insidious and systemic.

I keep thinking part of what we will need in these days ahead to find our way forward is to be mindful of sin and turn around as God calls us to do. It is not enough to be aware of someone else's sin. That is easy. We are more

importantly called to focus on our own – personally and what we share communally. I will be asking God to forgive me and guide me/us through this tender and difficult time.

The current violence toward people of African American descent is not new. I lament the deaths of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling and others who died in encounters with law enforcement officers. Their deaths affect more than their families and communities. They are all our brothers and sisters.

Thirty years ago, I remember walking over to talk to my next door African American neighbors in Houston after a particularly terrible event where a policeman shot a young man nine times– first in his car and then as he crawled out of the passenger side of the vehicle and up the hillside under a bridge. I was so disturbed I had to talk to Peggie and Ronnie about this. Reggie was their youngest son. He helped me in the garden. I kept an eye on him when his parents were busy. As we talked the incident over, I finally said, “I feel a need to apologize for this violence and behavior that impacts you so deeply. It is wrong.”

I think of Reggie my neighbor every time a young black man is shot and killed. I often think of that day. I have been more disturbed and troubled all week. I am guessing most of you have been as well.

But I have not engaged in the work of resisting racism the way I might have since that visit, I confess. After the shooting of nine black people in Charleston, I have begun to read and deepen my understanding of what is happening in our church, in our society and in the relationship between police officers and black people. As I plow through books on this subject and about being a black person in our society, I am starting to better understand. As I am reading **The New Jim Crow – Mass Incarceration in a Time of Colorblindness**, I have found myself face to face with things I have not understood or wanted to see in the past 30 years. You might also find it helpful. For church leaders, the most helpful book I have read is **Bridging the Diversity Gap: Leading Toward God’s Multi-Ethnic Kingdom** by Alvin Saunders.

Racism looks different in different parts of our country. In my internship town in Texas thirty years ago you could easily see some of what it is. Almost everyone living north of the main drag was black and their homes were smaller and in poorer shape. Everyone south of the main drag was mostly white and middle class to upper middle class. You could see the intersection of race and class every day. The KKK library trucks were in town a couple times a week selling their ideas.

In our synod depending on where we live communities are doing better or worse with the issue of racism. It is harder to see below the level of personal forms of racism like racist language or overt behavior to see the structures of racism. We believe racism is a sin. Most of our people work hard not to behave in racist ways, but we all live in a system where race is part of history and its remains impact lives today when we don’t see the subtle work of this sin.

I want to affirm all of you who have and will work on your own journey of understanding the issues of racism in our time, our culture, our congregations, community and our country. I want to give thanks to God for the persistent love and hard work of so many in business, law enforcement, social work, education, health care, agriculture and every sector of life who have been doing important work to love neighbors and people of all colors and work to bring the consequences of racialization toward an end.

In a funeral home 25 years ago, I also stood with law enforcement people and a family after the death of a policeman at a traffic stop. I also have been thinking of what I learned in that moment and in the years that followed. I have watched the survivors’ lives at a distance as the decades pass and remember Brian, who I played softball with back when I was young. Through that experience I know the families of all those shot, maimed and killed will never be the same.

The hearts and minds of people who serve in law enforcement will not be the same after this past week. We remember Brent Thompson, Lorne Ahrens, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, and Michael Smith and their families. Law enforcement officers and their families are living under all kinds of pressure and are suffering in this time. May God strengthen them and guide us all.

People have the right and need to express their frustration and to express their deep lament in person, in worship, in public demonstrations. We are called to work for a better future. In these demonstrations many things have gone right and people have grown in understanding and wisdom. Political leaders have learned and grown. Yet, I reject the violence of the demonstrators in recent days as well.

Just like pastors get things wrong, police do as well. People get things wrong. We all do, we are all in bondage to sin.

“It is easier to cross the sea than to cross the street.” Those are the words of Pr./Dr. Phil Knutson that keep ringing in my ears. So as we think about the work to do, let’s begin with our own reflection, lament and commitment to live in a way that makes for light. Let’s love our families and gently teach what makes for life and the power of persistent love to transform our lives. Let’s love all our neighbors, even the ones who are difficult to love. Let’s reclaim our faith practices, confident God will guide us toward a better future. Let’s bring a calm, reasoned and curious voice to the current conversations in our work places and communities in the aftermath of this difficult week. Let us do the hard work of making a better future where all people feel safe and the remaining realities of racism are steadily starved of energy and power.

In Jesus, who God sent to bring healing and who pronounced forgiveness, we find hope and new life. Our gracious God both agitates us to change for the better and also comforts us when we are anxious and exhausted by the events of our life. We trust our resurrecting God will work to turn our society and each of us toward God’s preferred future. God loves us and God loves all people.

The Confession continues...

**For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways to the glory of your holy name. Amen.**

God’s absolution sets us free to live and to love.

**I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins in the name of the Father, the son and the Holy Spirit.**

Amen.