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"I can't breathe": Bonhoeffer, the Bible, and the death of George Floyd

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Noreen Herzfeld on ““I Can’t Breathe”: Bonhoeffer, the Bible, and the Death of George Floyd”

JUNE 8, 2020



“I can’t breathe.” These were the last words of George Floyd, suffocated on the streets of Minneapolis with a policeman’s knee on his neck. Floyd’s death has sparked more than a week of protests, first in Minneapolis, and then spreading to cities across the nation, including Washington DC, protests both peaceful and violent.

Fearing protesters around the White House, President Trump retreated to a basement bunker. In a gesture meant to counter this unflattering image, he and his advisors decided on a photo op in front of St. John’s Episcopal Church, across from the White House on Lafayette Square, a church that had suffered minor damage from a fire in a prior demonstration. A half hour before curfew, the square was crowded with peaceful demonstrators (image, Rosa Pineda), among whom circulated clergy from St. John’s, giving aid and handing out bottles of water. Police were ordered to clear the square, which they did, using pepper spray and rubber bullets. Trump gave a brief

speech in the Rose Garden, then marched across the square, posed briefly in front of the boarded-up church, awkwardly holding a Bible as cameras clicked, then returned to the White House.



Episcopalians were outraged. The Reverend Gini Gerbasi, who had been in Lafayette Square when police cleared it, noted the violation of the demonstrators’ Fourth Amendment rights of peaceful assembly, [adding](#), “They turned holy ground into a battleground.” Episcopal Bishop of Washington DC, The Reverend Mariann Budde, [told CNN](#), “Let me be clear, the president just used a Bible, the most sacred text of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and one of the churches of my diocese, without permission, as a backdrop for a message antithetical to the teachings of Jesus. . . We need moral leadership, and he’s done everything to divide us.”

Many Evangelical Christians, however, hailed the symbolism of the moment. Franklin Graham [wrote on Facebook](#): “President Donald J. Trump made a statement by walking through Lafayette Park to St. John’s Episcopal Church that had been vandalized and partially burned Sunday night. He surprised those following him by holding up a Bible in front of the church. Thank you, President Trump. God and His Word are the only hope for our nation.” Ralph Reed, chairman of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, [praised](#) Trump’s visit: “His presence sent the twin message that our streets and cities do not belong to rioters and domestic terrorists, and that the ultimate answer to what ails our country can be found in the repentance, redemption, and forgiveness of the Christian faith.”

Other conservative Christians were less impressed. Many noticed that Trump never opened the Bible, nor offered words of either prayer or comfort. Dr. Russell Moore of the Southern Baptist Convention regretfully [noted](#), “More important than politics and optics is that all of us should be listening to what the Bible says — about the preciousness of human life, about the sins of racism and injustice, about the need for safety and calm and justice in the civil arena, all of it.” The American Bible Society issued [a statement](#) on the Bible being “more than a symbol.”

Clearly, Christian responses are divided, and not merely on denominational or right-left lines. Was Trump’s walk to St. John’s a pious or a self-serving act? To get some perspective on this, I turn to the words of pastor and theologian Dietrich



Bonhoeffer, who, like George Floyd, died as a young man at the hands of his government. Bonhoeffer would tell us that judging Trump and his motives is asking the wrong question. He would have us turn our eyes back to George Floyd. In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer writes, “While we distinguish between pious and godless, good and evil, noble and base, God loves real people without distinction.” For Bonhoeffer, “[an] attack even on the least of men is an attack on Christ, who took the form of man, and in his own Person restored the image of God in all that bears a human form. Through fellowship and communion with the incarnate Lord, we recover our true humanity, and at the same time we are delivered from that individualism which is the consequence of sin, and retrieve our solidarity with the whole human race.” While Trump told governors “if you don’t dominate you’re wasting your time,” Bonhoeffer, writing from his cell in Tegel prison, called on both Church and government to exist “for others...not dominating, but helping and serving.”

Christianity tells us we cannot put our individual selves first. Jesus, according to Bonhoeffer, calls us to follow him in espousing a solidarity in which we “see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer.” From the perspective of George Floyd.



“I can’t breathe.” These words are not among the seven last words of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels. Yet they could have been, for this is precisely how one dies when crucified. The stretched-out arms hyper-extend the chest, making inhalation difficult. The victim needs to pull himself up, using either his arms or pushing up with his legs, at each breath. Exhaustion

eventually occurs, followed quickly by asphyxiation. This is the death Jesus died. The grace we are all given by virtue of this death is, and was, for Bonhoeffer, costly: “Costly grace . . . is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. . . Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him

up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.” Incarnated in George Floyd, and in each of us when we suffer and stand in solidarity with the suffering.

Noreen Herzfeld

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