



FIRST UNITED CHURCH
OF OAK PARK

EVOTIONAL

“They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks...”
-Isaiah 2

Beloved of First United,

Waking up today, I read the news that three people had been shot in Kenosha, two fatally. This deadly violence occurred against the backdrop of protests against yet another shooting of an unarmed black man by police. This time, Jacob Blake was the black man who was shot by police. It is always unacceptable when an unarmed person is shot, but the details of this were particularly wrenching. Jacob was shot many times, in the back, in full view of his children. This violent act will scar this family for decades. Jacob may not walk again, and his children will have to reckon with the psychological impact of a deeply traumatic event.

Far from an isolated incident in our country, police killings of unarmed black people happen with alarming frequency. The case of George Floyd is far from being brought to justice, to say nothing of the shooting of Breonna Taylor, and Sean Reed, and Ariane McCree and...and...and... It can feel like an endless chain of hashtags, a vicious and deadly cycle that cries out to be broken. There needs to be fundamental, real, deep change in the way that policing works in this country. Otherwise, it seems things will only continue to get worse in this country with black people suffering the worst of the impacts.

Since Jacob Blake’s shooting, protests have sprung up in Kenosha. Some of these protests have resulted in property damage which—though lamentable—can all be repaired. Windows can be re-paned, fire damage can be repaired, spray paint can be cleaned up. Brooms and dustpans and dollars can put to right what happened. That is, until last night, when a young man with an assault rifle shot three protestors, killing two of them.

The precise events that occurred are obscured by the chaos that follows the eruption of gunfire on public streets. The county sheriff described the presence in Kenosha of people who were “like a militia, they’re a vigilante group.” These vigilantes came heavily armed, intent on playing the role of self-appointed guardians against property damage. By carrying high-powered guns into protests, these vigilantes created a dangerous, volatile situation. No one has a right to do this, just as no one has a right to shout “fire!” in a crowded theater. And as much as these men seemed to believe they could control the outcome, they very obviously could not. And now two people have lost their lives.

Dollars cannot replace what has been lost, anymore. Brooms and dustpans and scalpels and stitches cannot put back together what has been torn apart.

I think back to the Chicago protests following the killing of George Floyd by police. At one such protest, I saw with my own eyes a man carrying a military style rifle, following the

protest group around. Looking back on it, I shudder to think what might have happened. It was only the discipline of the peaceful protestors—led by young Black Lives Matter activists—that prevented deadly violence from occurring that day.

I know that these problems are larger than our faith community can address on our own. But that doesn't make us powerless. There is so much that we can do. As a faith community, we can do deep spirit-work. As people of faith, we should always place prayer at the foundation of our lives. I urge you to pray for the heart broken and anguished people in this situation. Three families are now forever changed by violence. Hold them in your prayers and lift them up for the light of God to enfold. This is spirit-work, and it is important.

Spirit-work can also be a practice of introspection and examination. While we pray that events like those in Kenosha will not unfold here in Oak Park, it would be naïve to believe that they could not happen here. There is important work being done locally to address racial equity in the areas of policing, education, housing, and more. One need look no further than our own village board to find this work being taken up, including by First United's own Susan Buchanan.

There is also spirit-work that we can do inside our own church. Pastoral Associate Alicia Reese has recently completed training from the Presbyterian Church USA to lead church groups in anti-racism work. Although this is still under development, we are announcing at this time that First United will offer anti-racism classes led by Alicia Reese and others. We will publicize these classes widely inside of the church as soon as we can. We are rightly proud of our church's history of promoting racial diversity in the Village, and we have much to thank people like Sherlynn Reid, Lois Merrill, Bob Downs, Jim McClure, Sara Bode, Kris Ronnow, Stan Davis, and many more for doing. We have reason to be proud of what we have done, and we have reason to proudly continue that same work in this new decade in new ways as the circumstances of the world demand.

The work of justice is never done on this side of the vale of tears. Though the news of the day is discouraging, frightening, and heartbreaking, I offer you encouragement. We are struggling for a world where—as the Psalms tell us—justice and peace will kiss. God has promised through the Prophet Isaiah that—one day—no one shall hurt or destroy on all of God's holy mountain for the earth shall be covered with the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea.

Keep the faith, beloved. Take heart. Take up prayer. Take up the work. You are not in this alone. Your church is with you.

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