

A Letter to White Christians on the Anniversary of Trayvon Martin's Death

On the anniversary of Trayvon Martin's death and in the wake of continued calls for justice in Ferguson, Cleveland and other cities across America, white Americans are again asked to confront the fact that our history of racism is very much present, continuing to destroy families and communities. Many white Christians have reacted to protests around racism and police brutality defensively. Yet our faith calls us to listen and act with compassion.



We all have personal stories that inform how we view race. I am a native Atlantan and product of a newly integrated school system that gave me the privilege of growing up believing that a half black student body and all black teachers were the norm. I remember awakening to the uniqueness of my elementary school experience in fourth grade when I invited black friends home from school and felt white neighbors peering nervously through their curtains. My naiveté vanished. It had never occurred to me to wonder why my neighborhood was all white. My eyes and ears were suddenly opened: from that point on I had ears to hear relatives and neighbors using terms I thought were long ago history. While in graduate school at Princeton Seminary my black colleagues taught me about the crime of "driving while black" and I witnessed first hand how they got pulled over for no cause. The list could go on.

I was fortunate to have such experiences. Not everyone gets to see both the good—the experience of a successful, integrated public school—and the ugly—the racism that continues despite the polite, pristine veneer of our social lives. Even so there was much I did not see. I did not learn until my college years that white families had fled my elementary school when black kids were bussed into our all white school district to integrate schools. The Civil Rights movement inspired me yet with my rudimentary child's understanding of time I pictured it as "long ago"—such violence had to be long ago, for who could think that way, act that way? Sheltered as I was I could not fathom the experiences that my classmates and peers were still experiencing. I had no idea and never thought to ask.

While it is now fashionable to embrace Civil Rights movement or at least a romanticized version of it, most remain unaware of the number of [lynchings](#) that occurred, the organizing it took to move a nation, or the legacy Jim Crow continues to have on communities that never recovered from segregation. Those who see the movie Selma will no doubt be reminded by the brutality, yet white America would benefit from working harder to look squarely at the black experience: 250 years of slavery; 90 years of Jim

Crow, and now the New Jim Crow– a criminal justice system whose scales are tilted against young black men.

Not only do whites lack eyes to see this history and current day experience of African Americans, we often fall into blaming the victim. We refuse to see the cycle of violence that brought us all to this place. We focus on weaknesses of black communities as though there is no social or historical context for these struggling communities and families. We harden our hearts, refusing to see our role in the cycle and ways we as whites have benefited even if we did not directly create this system.

Instead of being consumed by fear, blame or defensiveness we need to work to undo the damage done by policies and practices that continue to destroy communities and families. To give one example of what this can look like, the multi-racial evangelical anti-poverty movement called the Christian Community Development Association is not only leading conversations on structural racism, they are tackling the problem of mass incarceration head on. Their campaign, Locked in Solidarity, draws attention to a broken and biased criminal justice system that puts too many innocent people behind bars, disproportionately imprisons African Americans and Latinos for non-violent drug-related offenses, and fails to rehabilitate people suffering from drug addiction and mental illness.

Our first step as white Christians is to listen deeply to the experiences of black Americans with hearts open. Once we have ears to hear, may we be inspired to act on what we have heard. Theologians often describe compassion as the ability to live in someone else's skin. Compassion requires us to resist defensiveness, question stereotypes and look past our pain and fear to walk in someone else's shoes. Compassion requires disciplining our own reactions in order to open our heart and ears to another person's pain. This is why scripture coaches us that perfect love casts out fear. Only through that act of suspending fear and exercising disciplined compassion can God work in us to heal communities as well as our own painful experiences. Only then can we draw nearer to a compassionate God.



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