

To Serve and Protect: The Police, Race, and the Episcopal Church in the Black Lives Matter Era

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Black lives matter; they matter to God and they should matter to all Americans. However, as we continue to witness unjust and unconstitutional killing of black men by the police, we must ask: What is the role of the Episcopal Church in providing safe space for and mediating discussions of the role of policing in America as it continues to maintain racial attitudes and values that have negative effects on the life chances of blacks in America?⁹ How do we lead the way to bodily encompass our Baptismal Covenant, in which we promise to “strive for justice” and to “respect the dignity of every human being”?⁹ The Episcopal Church has directly profited from slavery, discrimination, and Jim Crow, and the police were in the forefront of maintaining those mechanisms that defaced God’s people. Through acts of confession and repentance led by the church, perhaps four hundred years of oppression can truly end.

The Issue

To serve and protect: we see the slogan emblazoned on the sides of police cars and recruit officers hear it from their instructors at the academy. It is also a mandate of the church. Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth and proclaims his mission is to serve and protect the vulnerable, the oppressed (Luke 4:16–21). As we embrace Presiding Bishop Michael Curry’s call to be part of the

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Jesus Movement, we are called to eliminate all barriers that keep God's people from being what God calls them to be. One of those barriers is the fractured relationship black Americans have long had with the law and those who enforce it, from laws that kept them indentured and then enslaved to laws that codified the belief that black Americans were only three-fifths of a human being, to laws that denied them basic human rights and encouraged mass incarceration and annihilation. These laws continue to have their impact on the life chances of black Americans to this day.

To serve and protect. Words have power. While words have the power to uplift, they can also be used to dehumanize and to justify the oppression, mass incarceration, and elimination of people. They have the power to affect one's worldview and values and actions. Shortly after the inauguration of President Donald Trump, the White House website identified "Standing Up For Our Law Enforcement Community" as one of its key issues, and declares: "The dangerous anti-police atmosphere in America is wrong. The Trump administration will end it."¹ While we would argue there is no "anti-police atmosphere" in American towns and cities today, there *is* a movement to hold the police accountable for their actions. For those who believe the police are being attacked, the Black Lives Matter movement will no doubt feed that perception. For those who want to hold the police accountable for upholding the U.S. Constitution, particularly the Bill of Rights, the "us-versus-them" mentality that has long been a part of the police culture will be reinforced. Rather than easing relations between the police and the community, *to serve and protect* can be heard as a declaration of war between police and people, with constitutional rights seen as hindering the mission of the police.²

The police are the people, and the people are the police—these are noble words. Every police recruit hears these words, introducing them to the profession they have chosen. Sir Robert Peel penned those words in 1829 to describe the Metropolitan Police Department of London. The police, he contended, were members of the community who were paid full-time to do what all members of the community

¹ "Standing Up For Our Law Enforcement Community," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/law-enforcement-community>.

² Sue Rahr and Stephen K. Rice, "From Warriors to Guardians: Recommitting American Police Culture to Democratic Ideals," in *New Perspectives in Policing*, National Institute of Justice, April 2015, 1–2; <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/248654.pdf>.

should have responsibility to do, but are either unwilling or unable to do so. In this country, the police are members of the community from which they are drawn; however, a chasm has developed through the years which has widened to the point where in all too many communities of color the police are not seen as neighbors but as invaders—an occupying force, an enemy. As veteran law enforcement officials Sue Rahr and Stephen K. Rice write, “As a profession, we have veered away from Sir Robert Peel’s ideal . . . toward a culture and mindset more like warriors at war with the people we are sworn to protect and serve.”³ We see police officers dressed in battle dress uniforms (BDUs), and federal monies have permitted police departments to purchase the armaments of war, with tanks and armored personnel carriers to be driven on the streets of America. As our police forces look and act more like “warriors at war,” we are left to deal with the reality that war is about sending people to kill other people.

This breach requires black parents to have “the conversation” with their children, not about how to respect authority, but how to survive an encounter with someone who has sworn to “serve and protect” them, because they may encounter police who subconsciously view the black and brown body as something less than human, and therefore an alien threat.⁴ There is a problem when yet another black life, in the words of Marc Lamont Hill, is rendered “nobody”—not a thing—nothing—by a jury’s failure to hold the police accountable for killing that body.⁵ There is a problem when white men who are clearly armed and dangerously violent can be taken alive by the police, while black men and women whose only violation is driving with a broken tail light end up dead.

When interviewed in the aftermath of the death of Freddie Gray by members of the Baltimore Police Department, Kelly Brown Douglas said, “The black body has always been viewed as a suspicious, threatening, dangerous, criminalized body; . . . The black body was introduced into this country as a chattel body, a body that was

³ Rahr and Rice, “From Warriors to Guardians,” 1.

⁴ Wesley Lowery, *They Can’t Kill Us All: Ferguson, Baltimore, and a New Era in America’s Racial Justice Movement* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2016), 78.

⁵ Marc Lamont Hill, *Nobody: Casualties of America’s War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond* (New York: Atria Books, 2016).

never meant to be free.”⁶ Her powerful statement identifies for many how the black body is viewed by white society and handled by the police as an “internal enemy”⁷ that must be watched and controlled. In this view those black bodies have the potential to turn and destroy the myths of white superiority and “American equals whiteness.” The police, as a domestic army, is the arm of American society called to perform the task of controlling and eliminating the threat.

The Africans who were brought to these shores in 1619 knew freedom—a state of freedom that did not exist for them on these shores. Whites had to convince themselves that Africans were not capable of understanding freedom, that they did not have the intellect to understand the difference between freedom and enslavement. But those who have known freedom know when that freedom has been abridged, and it is human nature to attempt to return to a state of freedom. Whites knew this, despite their attempts to convince themselves otherwise, and that is why laws were enacted that punished Africans for attempting to secure their freedom *by any means necessary*. They were prohibited from learning how to read, lest they read and understand that the colonists used violence to overthrow their own oppressor. Africans might be able to read the document that claimed the colonists’ freedom, the Declaration of Independence, which states, “Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.” Africans might take those words to heart and violently overthrow their oppressors. They were prohibited from possessing firearms, the implements used by the colonists to secure their own freedom. They were prohibited from meeting together, just in case the Africans who had known freedom shared that information with the enslaved who were born in this country and had never known freedom.

⁶ Kelly Brown Douglas, “Expanding the Narrative of Race,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=fblH5AnMmAY&t=128s. See also Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 2015).

⁷ Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772–1832* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2015).

In the attempt to convince themselves that Africans were incapable of understanding freedom, whites used the language of oppression⁸ and a corrupted view of the Bible to convince themselves that Africans were less than human, and therefore incapable of understanding the rights of human beings that came from being created in the image of God. Yet they also knew “their exploitation and domination had bred an internal enemy who longed for freedom,”⁹ and this domestic enemy had to be controlled lest it turn on them and destroy them. Thomas Jefferson described slavery as holding a wolf by the ears. The wolf could not be freed because it would turn and destroy the holder, but it could not be held forever because it would struggle and win its freedom, and when it gained that freedom, it would turn and destroy the one who held it in bondage.¹⁰ This wolf, this internal enemy, had to be controlled by law and extra-legal means, including slave patrols.

With Emancipation, the wolf was finally released; however, freed slaves could not be permitted to mix with white society for fear of discovering that perhaps they were equally human after all, that Africans were actually created by and in the image of God. Ever stronger laws were enacted to ensure the separation of the two races. Vigilantes and the police now maintained this separation through domestic terrorism and a criminal justice system that criminalized the simple act of being black.

This internal enemy—the freed wolf—still exists in America. The Civil Rights Act of 1965 promised freedom; however, that black body, as Kelly Brown Douglas reminds us, is still not totally free. All too many black Americans continue to have their life chances limited because of skin color. They are kept out of the housing market through red-lining, they are trapped in under-performing and under-resourced schools, they suffer voter disenfranchisement. At any moment, with the slightest provocation, from looking a police officer in the eye, to walking too fast, to exhibiting so-called furtive moments or changing lanes without signaling, the black body in America can

⁸ Haig A. Bosmajian, *The Language of Oppression* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983).

⁹ Taylor, *The Internal Enemy*, 7.

¹⁰ John Chester Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 253.

find itself stopped and frisked, incarcerated on trumped up charges, or lying dead in the street. In *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*, Michael Eric Dyson writes:

They hide behind to state to justify killing us. They say we are scary, that they are afraid for their lives. They say this even when we have nothing in our hands but air. They say this even when they are armed with weapons meant to remove us from the face of the earth. They say this even when they must throw down guns to pretend that we intended to do them harm. They say this even when video proves they are lying through their teeth.¹¹

It is time to repair the breach and stop bandaging the wound before the police lose what legitimacy they have. How do we lift up Sir Robert Peel's description of the police and the community? Answering that question is important to the future of our nation. I am a retired police officer, a black woman, and the mother of a son. I should not have to live in fear that an encounter with a police officer could end with my son in a body bag. I also know that neither my education nor my clerical collar can save me from a possibly deadly encounter with the police.

Secular, governmental approaches to improving the relationship between African Americans and the police have not been successful. Police reform has been discussed and tried since the beginning of the twentieth century, and more than one hundred years later we are still having a half-hearted discussion. Courses on race relations and now implicit bias have been part of police training since the late 1960s, and the jury is still out on the effectiveness of community policing to positively affect the outcomes of interactions with the police and people of color. It is time to shift the focus of the discussion, toward a theological reflection on the issue of race in the context of police violence in the era of Black Lives Matter, and on the role of the Episcopal Church as a repairer of the breach. This discussion must be theological because it involves a call toward reconciliation. The so-called races in America, particularly black and white, have never been one—one race that was somehow fractured and now cries out

¹¹ Michael Eric Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017), 21.

to be whole again. If reconciliation is to occur, it must be on the theological basis that God created the entire human race and that through the human sin of racism human beings have been separated into a hierarchy of different races, with whites as superior and others inferior. There is also a need to assess the role of the Episcopal Church in repairing the breach, because just as the police have been called “to serve and protect,” so has the church, through the gospel of Jesus.

We began this discussion with an overview of the problem, and we now turn to an analysis of policing in America with a view toward identifying where and how the breach occurred. While the history of policing in America may begin with Sir Robert Peel’s Metropolitan Police Department of London, our story is complicated by the impact of slavery and slave patrols on the development of modern policing.

After this overview, we will engage in a theological reflection on, specifically, how can those created in the image of God do horrendous things to others created in the image of God, particularly under the alleged law of color? According to Beverly Eileen Mitchell, “human dignity and human defacement are *both* theological and political realities.”¹² We conclude with recommendations for repairing the breach, particularly for the Episcopal Church, as we lift up the Jesus Movement in the Black Lives Matter era. What role can and should the Episcopal Church play in providing safe and sacred space for the deep discussions that must be had in order to bring together the police and the community? How can the church use its voice in the public square?

Policing in America

When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?”
(John 18:22)

Police violence is nothing new. In the Gospel of John, Jesus has been arrested and taken before the high priest where he is interrogated. Apparently he did not answer in a manner that was deemed appropriate, and is struck for his response. Today, anyone can be charged with *contempt of cop* the police officer believes that she

¹² Beverly Eileen Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps: Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2009), vii.

or he is not being given proper respect. We live in a country where police violence is a daily fact of life, and for too long black bodies have been violated by police officers without public accountability or explanation. The availability of cell phones and video recordings shared on the internet has brought the issue of state-sanctioned police violence to the forefront of public awareness. Clearly, how police interact with people of color must be addressed. Failure to do so will lead to more protests and more deaths of police officers by those who feel their grievances are not being taken seriously. As with hundreds of thousands of people in America, Jesus was the victim of overzealous policing meant to keep persons who challenge the status quo in their place. In the review of the Baltimore Police Department in the aftermath of the police killing of Freddie Gray, the Department of Justice found that police officers believed they had the right to arrest people whom “they perceive to be disrespectful or insolent” and that these officers would retaliate for this lack of respect “through the use of excessive force.”¹³

No policy, procedure, special or general order, or consent decree will change policing until the cancer within the police subculture that is the result of white America’s attempt to control its internal enemy is acknowledged. Until there is confession, there can be no repentance, and there can be no reconciliation until white America’s strained relationship with black Americans is laid bare.

American policing is an aphrodisiac. It is a *bait and switch* in that it lures, it seduces, it radicalizes those who enter wanting to serve and protect through socialization and training. It holds unleashed power to affect the lives of America’s citizens, residents, and visitors. The strong force of police culture is able to overcome the natural empathy of human beings that makes it difficult to do violence to others. This culture dehumanizes as a protective factor for the officer, so that the principles of morality (“you shall not kill”) no longer apply and moral restraints are overcome. If others are not really human—*not like us*—but rather are criminals, perps, scum, trash, and dirtbags, then their bodies can be violated without moral reservations getting in the way.¹⁴ Their non-human status justifies violent treatment.

¹³ U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, “Investigation of the Baltimore Police Department,” August 10, 2016, 116; <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/3009376/BPD-Findings-Report-FINAL.pdf>.

¹⁴ David Livingstone Smith, *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011), 126, 129.

Continued studies of the police will lead us to conclude that policing reflects “the society that gave it birth,” and that the police are both a product of society and heavily dependent on the values and laws of those in control.¹⁵ We must also remember that the police are not change agents; that is why it is difficult for community policing to take hold in communities of color. Rather, the police are to maintain the status quo of society, and a society that holds negative beliefs and opinions about people of color will see those values played out in how the police relate to people of color. Historical negative feelings and stereotypes of, in particular, black males as dangerous, suspicious, criminal, worthless, in need of being controlled, and guilty until proven innocent tend to be the rule in American society rather than the exception. It is a culture that views black people in “white” communities as “out of place.” In a YouTube interview of retired NYPD officers, one former detective states, “Would I stop four or five black guys who are in a white neighborhood? Yeah, if they are not supposed to be there.”¹⁶ What constitutes anyone “not supposed” to be in any given neighborhood in America? Being “out of place,” what David Delaney calls the “geopolitics of race,”¹⁷ can be justification enough to take the lives of black people in America. In another video, several NYPD officers confess: “We are the predator, they are the prey.” They offered, as they crossed the thin blue line to confess, that when police need arrests to meet quotas that are said not to exist, they “go to the most vulnerable”—the blacks, the LGBT community, the poor.¹⁸

All this is known and has been known about American policing for some time, and still there is hesitancy to acknowledge its underpinnings and the deleterious effect that foundation has on police–community relations. In 2006 Jack Green wrote: “Local law enforcement agencies must be more creative and aggressive in their attempts to repair the damage done by slavery, discrimination, and past and current

¹⁵ Herbert A. Johnson, *History of Criminal Justice* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Anderson Publishing, 1988), 188–189.

¹⁶ *The New York Times*, “A Conversation with Police on Race,” November 12, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Funraox29U.

¹⁷ David Delaney, *Race, Place and the Law, 1836–1948* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1998), 10.

¹⁸ “Good NYPD Cops Reveal their Department Have Arrest Quotas Targeting Blacks, Latinos, and Gays,” *The Advice Show TV*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=oK35y9-dTuw.

police practices supporting systems of racially and/or ethnically based oppression and exploitation.”¹⁹ Don Santarelli, the author of the federal no-knock raid, has described this broken relationship as almost beyond repair: “When you speak to a police officer today, you’re terrified that you’re going to offend him, and that he’s going to arrest you and take you off to jail. . . . There’s just no accountability for excessive force.”²⁰

The development of the modern police force was tied to the economic interests of America, and as the economic structures of the country developed in the 1800s the informal law enforcement structures in place prior to that time developed into centralized municipal police departments by the mid-1800s. Boston was the first to establish a modern police force in 1838, followed by New York City in 1845 and Charleston, South Carolina, in 1846, and Albany, Chicago, New Orleans, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Newark, and Baltimore in the 1850s. The Charleston police department was formed when its city guard, which had been formed to control its enslaved population, was changed to “city police.”²¹

When we project a twenty-first century understanding on the police, it would be easy to assume that the police of the nineteenth century were formed to prevent crime, and to serve and protect American citizenry. However, as the historian and professor Sam Mitrani reminds us, they were not in fact created to serve and protect, nor were they created to stop or prevent crime or to promote justice.²² Rather, they were created to serve the needs of the wealthy elite by protecting their property and business interests. For this reason the development of police forces took similar but slightly different directions in the North and the South.

In the North, the movement toward centralized policing was necessitated by urbanization, as people left farms and rural areas to reside in cities and seek employment there. The increase in the

¹⁹ Jack Green, *The Encyclopedia of Police Science*, volume 1, third revised edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 801.

²⁰ Quoted in Radley Balko, *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014), 125.

²¹ Johnson, *History of Criminal Justice*, 184.

²² Sam Mitrani, “Stop Kidding Yourself: The Police Were Created to Control Working Class and Poor People,” December 29, 2014, *LaborOnline*; <https://lawcah.org/wordpress/2014/12/29/stop-kidding-police-created-control-workingclass-poor-people/>.

number of people living in cities required a more formal way of keeping order, and the traditional forms of control—watches, constables, and sheriffs—proved inadequate. To maintain the profitability and insure that the workforce would not undermine capitalist interests, an organized system of social control was needed; the threat to social order was now the wage earner who worked in dangerous and exploitative conditions, and the capitalists wanted to stem the tide of discontent. There was also white mob violence against the new immigrants (especially Roman Catholics) and freed blacks. Conflicts between the haves and the have-nots resulted in major strikes and riots in cities such as Chicago, where the police attacked strikers with extreme violence. Unionization was also seen as a threat, and the modern police department “provided an organized, centralized body of men . . . legally authorized to use force to maintain order.”²³

In the aftermath of these clashes, where the police were on the side of the political and economic elites, the police presented themselves as the thin blue line protecting civilization—the interests of the wealthy elite—from the disorder of the so-called dangerous class, the working class and minorities. The underclass needed to be watched and controlled, lest they cause havoc to business interests, and brutal and deadly force provided by the police was used to maintain that order.

In the South, the police enforced white supremacy and hegemony and before emancipation maintained order by hunting down and returning escaped slaves and insuring insurrections and other violence toward the white planter class was tamped down. After emancipation, the police arrested black people on largely trumped-up charges, such as vagrancy, unemployment, preaching the gospel without a license, and other alleged misdemeanors and felonies to feed into the convict lease system. The emancipation of the enslaved did not eliminate the need for free labor and the police were the means to feed a steady supply of black bodies into an economic system that had been built on the backs of enslaved blacks.

What began in the 1800s as a means of control and maintaining order among the enslaved and free blacks in the South and a way to protect capitalist interests from the “dangerous classes” in the North ultimately created a “focus in crime control that persists to today, the

²³ Gary Potter, “The History of Policing in the United States,” <http://plsonline.eku.edu/insidelook/history-policing-united-states-part-2>.

idea that policing should be directed toward ‘bad’ individuals,” rather than addressing the social and economic conditions that encourage and allow crime to flourish.²⁴ The vestiges of discriminatory and unconstitutional policing continue today with black and brown bodies disproportionately affected and subjected to heightened surveillance for an alleged criminal act. More than one hundred fifty years after Emancipation, a young black man making eye contact with police can still be regarded as a sign of guilt, an act of disrespect, and an affront to state power.²⁵ According to Marc Lamont Hill, this “presumption of guilt” described by Harvard law professor Charles Ogletree “has always been the governing logic for White officers engaging Black men and women in America.”²⁶

In the Image of God

*God spoke: “Let us make human beings in our image. . . .
God created human beings;
he created them godlike,
Reflecting God’s nature.
(Genesis 1:27–28, The Message)*

Every day, someone in America is killed or abused by the police, often by officers who profess to believe in God.²⁷ How is it that people called to serve and protect can also torture and violate the human body without remorse? It would be too easy to attribute it to sin (which it is), or to what Philip Zimbardo calls the “Lucifer effect”—that “while most people are good most of the time, they can be readily seduced into engaging in what would normally qualify as ego-alien deeds, as antisocial, as destructive of others.”²⁸ For police to engage in heinous acts that are “antisocial” and “destructive of others,” two

²⁴ Potter, “The History of Policing in the United States,” 3.

²⁵ Hill, *Nobody*, 69.

²⁶ Hill, *Nobody*, 26.

²⁷ As in the well-known case of the torture and rape of Abner Louima by New York City police officer Justin Volpe in August 1997. See, for example, Maria Hinojosa, “NYC Officer Arrested in Alleged Sexual Attack on Suspect,” August 14, 1997 www.cnn.com/US/9708/14/police.torture/.

²⁸ Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2007), vii.

factors must intersect: failure to recognize God's image in the other person, and the use of the language of oppression.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us, "You cannot love God without first honouring the universal dignity of humanity as the image and likeness of the universal God."²⁹ Apparently, with the level of violence we witness here and around the world against human beings, the love of God is in short supply, regardless of what people profess. We say we believe in God, yet believing in God and acting in accordance with God's commands can be two different things. While the Bible does not specifically define what "in the image of God" looks like, "humanity's existence in God's image is particularly important for understanding who people are," as John F. Kilner observes, for "being created in the image of God is the first and foremost descriptor" of what it means to be human.³⁰ Beverly Eileen Mitchell writes, "The human creature *belongs* to God, for without God the creature cannot exist. This existence is a gift of God, an instance of profound grace. Such a grounding, in which humans are understood as creatures *coram Deo* (before God), is the first line of defense against the denial of the intrinsic value and worth of every human being."³¹ Mitchell goes on to note that "this grounding also reinforces the notion of our interconnection not only to God but to one another and the rest of the created order."³² Human beings are only able to abuse, torture, and kill another when they disregard "the protective view that all human beings are in God's image."³³ There is a certain sanctity attached to human beings that comes from the hands of God; it is something that only God confers, and therefore no other human being can destroy it.³⁴ The sacredness of this image means that no human is to be abused or cause abuse. When this mandate is disregarded, as we see time and time again, humanity is in jeopardy because no one is safe from dehumanization, including the potential abuser.³⁵

²⁹ Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015), 200.

³⁰ John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 5, 147.

³¹ Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps*, 41.

³² Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps*, 41.

³³ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 7.

³⁴ Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps*, 43.

³⁵ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 148.

African Americans have struggled to be considered full human beings throughout the history of this country, and the belief that we reflect the image of God enables and supports our demands for equality. To commit violence against the black body (or any body) is to commit violence against God.³⁶ Since all human beings belong to God, life and death belong to God, and no human being or group of humans can morally usurp that province: “No human being or group of human beings has legitimate ‘jurisdiction’ over these matters. To usurp divine authority on these matters is to invite divine judgment.”³⁷ Yet, as it relates to the black body in America, divine judgment has not seemed to be an issue for whites who have participated in legal (albeit unjust) and extra-legal violation and destruction of the black body. Mitchell observes, “The indestructibility of that dignity becomes most clear when attempts are made to degrade or dehumanize a human being,”³⁸ and yet, in the words of Maya Angelou, “still I rise.”³⁹

People who want to convince themselves that blacks are not created in the image of God can look to the church for support because the church at times has been on both sides of this issue of who has the stamp of the divine. Negative images cannot help but affect how some American Christians interpret the meaning of *imago Dei* in relationship to people of color.

At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, Charles Carroll’s influential book, “*The Negro a Beast*” or “*In the Image of God*,” argued that the Negro was “a beast, but created with articulate speech, and hands, that he may be of service to his master—the White man.” Carroll wrote, “If the white was created in the image of God, then the Negro was made after some other model.” He also asserted that the serpent in Eden was actually a black man who had evolved from an ape.⁴⁰ Carroll’s book was widely read, discussed, and republished throughout the twentieth century and is still referenced on websites today. It was beliefs like these that fueled the continued

³⁶ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 314.

³⁷ Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps*, 42.

³⁸ Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps*, 47.

³⁹ Maya Angelou, “Still I Rise,” in *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems* (New York: Random House, 1978).

⁴⁰ Charles Carroll, “*The Negro a Beast*” or “*In the Image of God*” (St. Louis, Mo.: American Book and Bible House, 1900).

violence directed to African Americans throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, from lynchings to police brutality.⁴¹

For the language of oppression to work, there must be a comparison made between one group and another. One group must be lifted up as the perfect standard—and in America, that perfect standard is the white body. If white bodies are more god-like and are closer to God, the black body (and other non-white bodies) can be viewed as being closer to animals, not reflecting the *imago Dei*. Once whites deny the humanity of non-whites, they can be viewed as a different species, as savages and likened to apes. When defined as animals, it is not difficult to treat and transport them as animals.⁴² Thomas Jefferson's idea that blacks were closer to orangutans than humans has survived for centuries.⁴³ Throughout his presidency, President Obama and his wife were often referred to as apes. In 2016, Pamela Ramsey Taylor, a local official in Clay, West Virginia, was removed from her position (although later reinstated) because she referred on Facebook to Mrs. Obama as an "ape in heels."⁴⁴ The ability to dehumanize through the language of oppression weakens inhibitions against behaving cruelly toward other human beings and allows the moral disengagement⁴⁵ necessary to shield whites from the moral failure of not viewing all humans as made in the image of God. When describing the police officers who patrolled his community, Carl Union, a twenty-seven-year old man from Ferguson, Missouri, said, "It's like we're not even human to them."⁴⁶

The police too have been drawn into using of the language of oppression. By imagining African Americans as animals, and even predators, a feeling of horror is evoked that can only subside when the threat is eliminated.⁴⁷ In 1995, the political scientist John DiIulio,

⁴¹ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 25–27. Kilner discusses similarities to the treatment of Native Americans on p. 22.

⁴² Bosmajian, *The Language of Oppression*, 36, 114.

⁴³ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 138.

⁴⁴ Kristine Phillips, "The Nonprofit Director Who Called Michelle Obama an 'Ape in Heels' Has Lost Her Job—For Good," *The Washington Post*, December 27, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/12/27/the-nonprofit-director-who-called-michelle-obama-an-ape-in-heels-has-lost-her-job-for-good/?utm_term=.fbc6d99bb3a1.

⁴⁵ Smith, *Less Than Human*, 8.

⁴⁶ Lowery, *They Can't Kill Us All*, 25.

⁴⁷ Smith, *Less Than Human*, 253.

Jr., warned of a coming epidemic of “juvenile ‘super-predators’—radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters . . . who murder, assault, rape, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun-toting gangs and create serious communal disorder.” These “fatherless, Godless, and jobless children,” DiIulio explained, could mostly be found in minority and urban communities.⁴⁸ Throughout this country, as workshops on community policing were being delivered during the 1990s, DiIulio’s prediction was offered up as fact. When these murderous black hoards failed to materialize, DiIulio came to regret his predictions.⁴⁹ Still, the damage had been done and it was all too easy for many white Americans to believe this depiction of black males. As animals, as predators who prey on white America, blacks are considered disposable,⁵⁰ and they must be destroyed to secure the safety of white America. Having grown up in a society that viewed blacks as less than human, not reflecting the *imago Dei*, coupled with the police culture that traditionally has viewed blacks as innately guilty, it could be offered that white police officers who torture and kill the black bodies they are called to serve and protect are as much victims of a racialized American culture as the people they abuse.

Stepping into the Breach

*Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons,
loving your neighbor as yourself?²
Will you strive for justice and peace among all people,
and respect the dignity of every human being?²⁵¹*

Police brutality, excessive use of force, and the unlawful and unjust killing of God’s people is an issue for the church. Regardless of the faith or non-faith of the police officer or victim, every person, regardless of the alleged crime or offense committed, is created in the

⁴⁸ William J. Bennett, John J. DiIulio, Jr., and John P. Walters, *Body Count: Moral Poverty . . . And How to Win American’s War Against Crime and Drugs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 27, 79.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Becker, “As Ex-Theorist on Young ‘Superpredators,’ Bush Aide Has Regrets,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 2001; <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/09/us/as-ex-theorist-on-young-superpredators-bush-aide-has-regrets.html>.

⁵⁰ Hill, *Nobody*, xviii.

⁵¹ “The Baptismal Covenant,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1979), 305.

image of God. As Episcopalians, we are called in baptism to “respect the dignity of every human being.” There is no “proviso,” there are no exceptions. Perhaps, just perhaps, the Episcopal Church—my church—using its moniker of the *via media*, could be a voice of reconciliation, bringing together the police and the community. Perhaps we could find ways to include the faith community in the work of deconstructing the police culture, recognizing that the police officers who have sworn to serve and protect are as much victims of the culture of policing as those whose lives have been cut short.

How do we free the oppressed from the fear that any encounter with the police might end with unlawful arrest or death? How do we assist those who fail to see the humanity in all those created in God’s image to become free from their own oppression of racism? We gather around Christ’s table to share communion where we engage in dangerous *anamnesis*⁵²—dangerous remembrance—where we actually remember that a marginalized person of color who was profiled as someone who challenged the status quo and needed to be eliminated, who was falsely arrested and imprisoned, who was unjustly convicted for a crime he did not commit and executed as an enemy of the state challenges us to turn the world right side up. Here we remember that all God’s children are worthy of respect. At the eucharist we gather around a table, hosted by Christ himself, and our remembrance challenges us to change a system that continues to marginalize and negate the humanity of those created in the image of God. According to Johann Baptist Metz, for Christians “to ‘stand close’ to the oppressed in a ‘practical way’ is a kenotic praxis,” a “self-emptying” that enables Christians to join “in solidarity with both those who presently suffer injustice and those who have already died.”⁵³ Christian love requires that attention be paid to systemic conditions of oppression.⁵⁴ The remembrance of Christ’s “passion, death, and resurrection reveals God’s identification with and promise of redemption for all victims of humanity’s inhumanity.”⁵⁵

However, the ability of the church to engage in deep conversations of healing will require us to “stretch into new postures and gestures

⁵² Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000).

⁵³ Quoted in Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory*, 38.

⁵⁴ Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory*, 129.

⁵⁵ Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory*, 140.

of truth-telling and connection.”⁵⁶ To begin repairing the breach, the church must lead those in policing in confession. Police leaders must admit to the fact that the profession to which they have devoted their lives is complicit in the state-sanctioned violence and murder of black bodies. The church, which has also been complicit in devaluing black bodies, can serve as a sanctuary and create safe space for the conversations to occur that permit the police to first confess and then repent; to acknowledge their sin of racism and disrespect for black bodies; to de-construct the police culture; and then begin to create a culture that *should* exist in America, as opposed to that which has existed since the first slave patrols.

During the 2015 General Convention in July, the Episcopal Church discussed how slavery built and enriched the denomination, and earmarked \$2 million for racial reconciliation. Since the police maintained the racialized society in which the church benefited, perhaps part of this funding could support the truth and reconciliation commission proposed by Nicholas Kristof at Trinity Wall Street’s 2016 “Listen for a Change: Sacred Conversations for Racial Justice.”⁵⁷ The Episcopal Church could begin to “make us uncomfortable” and enable us to do something meaningful in changing the police culture.

In working to eliminate this aspect of life that keeps black Americans from being all that God wants for them, the church can assist the police in changing their culture by recommitting to democratic ideas. “Political processes in a democracy move toward enabling full participation in all aspects of life, including the decision-making processes that benefit all of society and that recognize and lift up the full employment of individual capacities and abilities by all of its members.”⁵⁸ Racism, America’s original sin, is also political in that it seeks to exclude people from full participation in society based on skin color.⁵⁹

As we look at the role of the Episcopal Church in providing safe space for repairing the breach between black people and the police

⁵⁶ Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Marcia W. Mount Shoop, *A Body Broken, A Body Betrayed: Race, Memory, and Eucharist in White-Dominant Churches* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2015), 17.

⁵⁷ G. Jeffrey MacDonald, “Kristof Endorses Commission,” *The Living Church* (February 21, 2016): 5.

⁵⁸ Edward P. Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care and Counseling: The Politics of Oppression and Empowerment* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 22–23.

⁵⁹ Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 56.

in a world crying out for reconciliation, we hear the words of our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry:

Now is our time to go. To go into the world to share the good news of God and Jesus Christ. To go into the world and help to be agents and instruments of God's reconciliation. To go into the world, let the world know that there is a God who loves us, a God who will not let us go, and that that love can set us all free.⁶⁰

Knowing the history of policing and the history of the Anglican and Episcopal churches, knowing their role in slavery and segregation and recognizing their impact on race relations today, the church is poised to live out the mission of Christ as outlined in Luke 4:16–21: to free the oppressed, to lift up those who live under a racialized society and justice system, to reconcile those who are oppressed by their need to debase and denigrate people of color. There is also a need to help the spiritually blind see how a system that denigrates any of God's people is a sinful system. One role of the church is to be a support system and refuge to address the needs of those who find themselves oppressed by the police.⁶¹ There is a need not only for reconciliation, but also for racial solidarity, “in which appreciation of the diversity of God's purposes for humanity in God's image is the norm.”⁶²

The church must also heed the call of the Black Lives Matter movement, which says that black lives are important to God because they reflect the *imago Dei*. “Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise,” Alicia Garza wrote of the movement's founding. The movement's rallying cry “is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”⁶³ It celebrates the human ability to survive and thrive against overwhelming odds. To say that “Black Lives Matter” is not anti-police rhetoric. There was a need to bear witness to the experience of dehumanization and death at the

⁶⁰ Michael B. Curry, “A Word to the Church,” November 2, 2015; <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-michael-curry-jesus-movement-and-we-are-episcopal-church>.

⁶¹ Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 135.

⁶² Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 321.

⁶³ Quoted in Lowery, *They Can't Kill Us All*, 86.

hands of the state, and the leaders of Black Lives Matter had no doubt that “their maltreatment was a violation of their dignity that they could not bear in complete silence.”⁶⁴ And neither can the Episcopal Church.

In the words of Kelly Brown Douglas, this is a *kairos* moment for the Episcopal Church, in that the church can reach out to an agency of control that is hurting the people of God and assist in bringing about healing and reconciliation. In this way the church can also do penance for its role in creating a system where God’s people of color have been viewed as property, as opposed to human beings created in the image of God.

In this important work, we cannot afford replications of corporate diversity programs that encourage respect, inclusion, and fair treatment without a concomitant desire to tackle the more difficult conversations about the roots of racial conflict and injustice. It is the church’s responsibility to challenge its members to think beyond worldly perspectives and divisions.⁶⁵ And the Episcopal Church has been called to do just that. The 2015 General Convention passed Resolution C019, with its “extraordinary mandate” for accountability in the work of racial justice and reconciliation focusing on “systemic racial injustice”: “Resolution C019 acknowledges that racism continues to plague society and the church despite repeated efforts at anti-racism training and other racial justice and reconciliation initiatives, including more than thirty General Convention resolutions dating back to 1952. It calls on the church to begin anew.”⁶⁶

This work has already begun with the publication of the guide “Becoming Beloved Community: The Episcopal Church’s Long-Term Commitment to Racial Healing, Reconciliation and Justice.” As Presiding Bishop Curry has explained, the challenge will be to find a “path” in which we can truly incarnate the “loving, liberating, life-giving way of Jesus in our relationships with each other.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps*, 36.

⁶⁵ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 161–163.

⁶⁶ Mary Frances Schjonberg, “Making Reconciliation and Evangelism the Church’s New Normal,” *Episcopal News Service*, March 11, 2016; <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2016/03/11/making-reconciliation-and-evangelism-the-churchs-new-normal/>.

⁶⁷ “Episcopal Church Releases ‘Becoming Beloved Community’ Guide for Racial Reconciliation Efforts,” May 3, 2017, <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2017/05/>

The Rev. Charles Wynder, Jr., missionary for social justice and advocacy of engagement for the Episcopal Church, reminds us:

As members of the Jesus movement, we can have a profound effect on the public square if we advocate for policies and practices that transform our systems. We can do so while working for the conversion of hearts and minds. The church can help lead this movement by serving as a convener of people, communities, and institutions. We can use our moral foundation and spiritual practices to hold open safe spaces for dialogue and sacred conversation.⁶⁸

If not now, when?

03/episcopal-church-releases-becoming-beloved-community-guide-for-racial-reconciliation-efforts/.

⁶⁸ Charles Allen Wynder, Jr., "Bloody July," *The Living Church*, July 23, 2016, <http://livingchurch.org/bloody-july>.

