



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Law and Order: Race, Police, and Protests by Lyndsey Medford



Race

Beginning in the early seventeenth century, the concept of race as we know it was used to help justify and legally enforce the theft of land and labor from Black and Indigenous people in the European colonies of the Western hemisphere. In the four hundred years that have followed, our political, economic, judicial, educational, healthcare, and cultural systems in the United States have continued to evolve and grow from these colonial roots. Though some of the most egregious methods of oppression used against people of color have since ended, many of the most deeply ingrained, insidious, and invisible aspects of these systems remain. As a result, race, much like paper money or even our system of law, is a social construct with very real consequences for human lives.

While people of many races and ethnicities experience racism in different ways, the context of our current national conversation centers around Black lives, and this issue of *FaithLink* will focus on racism against Black people. The murders by police of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, and other Black people are vivid reminders that the ultimate consequences of white supremacy are not “hurt feelings” but the loss of innocent lives.

Yet, police shootings and white supremacist terrorism are not the only ways that racism kills. Due to massive racial inequities, our judicial system executes Black people at a far higher rate than white people and tears apart Black

The murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis has sparked protests across the nation and the world. How can we see the anger and frustration of these protests in historical context? As people of faith, how can we work to pursue peace that fully integrates the biblical demand for justice?

FaithLink is available by subscription via email (subservices@abingdonpress.com) or by downloading it from the Web (www.cokesbury.com/faithlink). Print in either color or black and white. Copyright © 2020 by Cokesbury. Please do not put FaithLink on your website for downloading.

families with unjust prison sentences. Similarly, our healthcare system fails Black people at all levels, including maternal health. Black women are three times more likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth than white women. Educational inequities contribute to high rates of violence in many Black communities and the sheer stress of experiencing interpersonal racism results in measurable negative health effects, including to the immune system. On top of this, enormous economic disparities exacerbate all of these issues while lessening opportunities to seek out healing.

As the Black Lives Matter movement has taken to the streets again in 2020, the conversation about racism in the United States has focused largely on issues of policing and related issues of racial injustice. Calls to divest from policing over time and reinvest in communities force us to ask hard questions. Is it appropriate to send people with weapons, trained to apprehend criminals, into every situation from domestic abuse to suicide risk, from noise disturbances to burglaries, from addiction crises to Constitutionally protected peaceful assemblies? Can we imagine more beautiful solutions to these problems for communities and for officers?

REFLECT:

- How has your understanding of race grown or changed since the first Black Lives Matter movement after the killing of Michael Brown in 2015?
- Does the phrase “white supremacy” make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?
- How do you see white supremacy leading to unequal outcomes across races in your town or your industry?

Police

The video of George Floyd’s killing highlighted the systemic, nationwide problem of unequal policing outcomes across race. Black men in the U.S. are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than white men. In the past, conversations about

racialized police violence have focused heavily on implicit bias, or the unconscious assumptions people make about one another. Addressing implicit bias against Black people, it’s sometimes assumed, can help individual police officers make better decisions in specific situations.

However, the problem of individual racism or bias is sometimes used to sidestep broader and more deeply rooted systemic issues. The 2020 protests have focused more on the ways racism is embedded into police departments as institutions and into our societal conceptions of what the police are “for.” When entire communities, across the country, live in fear of police, we must investigate the underlying reason. As one criminal justice researcher says, “The first police forces were overwhelmingly white, male and more focused on responding to disorder than crime.” Might that still be the case for many police forces today?

The mass protests around the country have only increased the urgency of scrutinizing the police as an institution as many cities have seen their police forces threaten peaceful protests with displays of militarized force that, all too often, lead to escalating tensions and violence. While many police officers choose their careers with intentions to protect, serve, and keep the peace, these reactions to protesters indicate that they are supplied with few tools for doing so apart from the threat of violence.

REFLECT:

- When you encounter a police officer, how do you feel?
- If you have friends of family who are police officers, how are you navigating these difficult questions during this time?
- Police officers experience high rates of substance abuse and the highest rates of suicide of any profession. What do you think leads to this? How could police be better supported to succeed at their jobs and process the trauma they experience?

Protests

Amidst a tumultuous reckoning with the terrible legacy of racism and current stories of police violence, the widespread Black Lives Matter protests offer a sign of hope. This movement, largely youth-led, demonstrates that more people than ever are committed to taking action to end police brutality against Black people—and even to ending white supremacy in the United States.

Since the protests began, on the day after George Floyd’s killing, the officers involved in Floyd’s death have all been fired and charged. Confederate statues have been removed in Maryland, Virginia, and Alabama. Police reforms have been introduced by attorneys general and city councils in New Jersey, Los Angeles, Denver, Michigan, and New York. Congress has introduced legislation to limit police access to military equipment, and the Minneapolis city council has committed to introducing community peacekeeping measures and disbanding the current police force over time.

Mass protests can create short-term results, but can also fuel longer-term movements. Nonviolent

direct action is a strategic choice and largely came to prominence in the United States during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, which built on the philosophy and strategy of Mahatma Gandhi. One key part of this strategy is civil disobedience, the choice to nonviolently break laws as a means to disrupt complacency. In other words, as the 2015 Black Lives Matter movement put it, civil disobedience is a deliberate transgression against “business as usual,” otherwise known as systemic injustice.

As Independence Day approaches in the United States, it is worth remembering that the Fourth of July commemorates an act of high treason, and in some places even entails a reenactment of the Boston Tea Party—when protestors destroyed property worth over 1.5 million in 2020 dollars.

REFLECT:

- Have you ever been to a protest? What were your reasons for joining (or not joining)?
- How have you seen protests fit into longer-term strategies for creating change?

Core Bible Passages

In Jeremiah 6:13-14 the prophet warns, “From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace” (NIV).

These verses refer both to the failures of Israel to embody true peace by enacting justice for the poor and outcast, and to God’s resulting judgment on Israel through coming wars. They remind us that we cannot invoke “peace” to cover over sin and pain simply because we fear disruption. If we are not creating the conditions for peace through justice, peace will not magically appear.

Jesus was executed by the Roman state on charges of being “king of the Jews,” or in other words, usurping power and authority from the empire. In fact, he was simply very popular, and had never encouraged an uprising. Still, the religious leaders and the political figures they helped to prop up found his presence disruptive, so they used what means they had to get rid of him: state-sponsored torture and death. Given his innocence and his social location, in the words of theologian James Cone, Jesus—like Ahmaud Arbery and countless others throughout history—was lynched.

REFLECT:

- What does “peace” mean to you? How might the word “peace” mean something different to someone from a different background/circumstance?
- Why is Jesus’ social location so important in understanding his death? Why is it important for us to remember that Jesus died at the hands of an empire for proclaiming a peaceable kingdom?

Learning and Doing

The Black church has been leading Civil Rights movements and investing in community care for generations. Predominantly white churches that want to invest in the work of anti-racism can begin by committing to learn together while also taking action together. While learning from books, films, and podcasts is an absolutely essential step, it can't teach someone everything and it doesn't explicitly lead to improved outcomes for people of color. On the other hand, taking imperfect and humble action allows us to embody Jesus' justice and love, learn through relationships, and make steps toward repairing harm that has already been done.

In many cities, networks of faith communities organize to work with local politicians on solutions to community issues, including economic justice, racial justice, and policing. A congregation can usually join, offer support, and learn as a community even without much prior knowledge of community issues and politics. Look for your city's network using the sources found under "Helpful Links."

REFLECT:

- Does any part of your church budget currently go to local Black-led justice organizations? Are there organizations in your community that you could support?
- Does your church have a policy about working with the police (for traffic, events, etc.) or about what to do in an emergency? How can your church shift to investing in community-led solutions whenever possible?
- Do your church's study materials, guest speakers, and guest preachers reflect a commitment to learning from (and paying) diverse leaders? What materials have you heard about in the past few weeks that you would like to study together as a church?

United Methodist Perspective

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church states, "We recognize racism as sin and affirm the ultimate and temporal worth of all persons. We rejoice in the gifts that particular ethnic histories and cultures bring to our total life. We commit as the Church to move beyond symbolic expressions and representative models that do not challenge unjust systems of power and access."

The Council of Bishops has endorsed a statement by Dakotas-Minnesota Area Bishop Richard Ough, which says in part, "It is our responsibility as persons of faith, and particularly as followers of Jesus in the Methodist tradition, to address this pervasive pandemic of racism. We are compelled to address this pandemic with the same intensity and intentionality with which we are addressing COVID-19." His statement underscores the importance of prayer, repentance, and learning in turning away from systemic white supremacy, but also how indispensable it is that we act.

Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., spent 2019 renewing relationships with two historically Black Methodist churches in the area which were formed in the 1800s due to racism and white supremacy at Foundry. The process of building trusting relationships is necessarily slow, but Foundry's senior pastor Ginger Gaines-Cirelli says, "I really believe God is calling The United Methodist Church to acknowledge the historic inequities and injustices that have been part of our structures and do some work on that. I feel that we have this opportunity to do at the micro-level what God is calling us to do at the macro-level."

REFLECT:

- What is the racial history of your church?
- How can your church work together for racial justice with other churches in your area?

Helpful Links

- For a visual illustration of the differences between systemic inequality, inequity, and injustice, check out this cartoon: <https://twitter.com/geoffdua/status/1270044955646590977>
- To learn more about the history of policing, read this essay: <https://theconversation.com/the-racist-roots-of-american-policing-from-slave-patrols-to-traffic-stops-112816>
- For more information on the cumulative effects of racism on health outcomes, read or listen to this story from NPR: <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/11/11/562623815/scientists-start-to-tease-out-the-subtler-ways-racism-hurts-health>
- Visit the Direct Action and Research Training Center (<https://thedartcenter.org/about/location/>) or Faith in Action (<https://faithinaction.org/the-network/>) to find a local faith network working for justice.

About the Writer

Lyndsey Medford is director of discipleship at Two Rivers United Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Lyndsey writes regularly for various publications, on Instagram, and at www.lyndseymedford.com.

Next Week in **FaithLink**
Connecting Faith and Life

Food Supply

by Jill M. Johnson

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a major disruption in the food supply chain in the United States. Why did these problems occur and how can we fix them in the future? How does our faith affect the way we view our relationship to food and agriculture?



Follow us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/106609035052/> or at <https://www.facebook.com/faithlinkconnectingfaithandlife>.

FAITHLINK: CONNECTING FAITH AND LIFE is a weekly, topical study and an official resource for The United Methodist Church approved by Discipleship Ministries and published weekly by Cokesbury, The United Methodist Publishing House, 2222 Rosa L. Parks Blvd., Nashville, TN 37228. Scripture quotations in this publication, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Common English Bible, copyrighted © 2011 Common English Bible, and are used by permission.

Permission is granted to photocopy this resource for use in FAITHLINK study groups. All Web addresses were correct and operational at the time of publication. Email **comments** to FAITHLINK at faithlinkgroup@umpublishing.org. For **email problems**, send email to Cokes_Serv@umpublishing.org.

To **order**, call 800-672-1789, or visit our website at www.cokesbury.com/faithlink.

Opening Prayer

Dear Jesus, our Prince of Peace, you sparked a revolution—not only with your grace and compassion but also with your calls for justice and your resistance to the violence of empire. When your children are dying, we cry out to you in grief and we look to you for courage. Let our compassion be more than a feeling or a moment but a transformational force within ourselves and in the world. Amen

Leader Helps

- If your class is predominantly white, remind the group that racial injustice is not only a problem for people of color but a problem created by white people. Invite them to consider that in order to upend white supremacy, white people must decenter themselves by making space for the voices, experiences, and leadership of Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color—even when it is difficult, painful, or confusing.
- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- Invite the class to trade phone numbers or social media messages with a friend to continue the conversation later in the week.
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

- Invite the class to “practice being uncomfortable” together during this lesson. Recognize that the conversation will include moments of grief, discomfort, frustration, and confusion, and that it’s possible nothing will be resolved here today. After your initial exploration of the topic, you may want to offer the class five to ten minutes to write down thoughts and feelings. Take a moment to breathe deeply, pray, and/or practice sitting with strong emotions together during the discussion. One centering practice that can calm your group involves breathing in together for a very slow count of five, holding the breath for five, breathing out for five, and holding for five.

Closing Prayer

God of the oppressed, by increasing our capacity for empathy and grief, may your Holy Spirit also increase our capacity for creativity, joy, and love. As we work to dismantle unjust systems, help us reimagine a world of beauty, justice, and rest for all. May we be humble. May we be kind. Amen.