

A Pastoral Letter from Brian Heron, Presbyter

Dear Members of the Presbytery of the Cascades,

Like many of you in active ministry, I had planned one message for today only to realize that the world had shifted over the weekend. It is hard to believe that a message meant to provide resources to help our congregations negotiate through the coronavirus pandemic suddenly felt incidental. But that is the reality of our current American context.

A virus just as deadly as the coronavirus seems to be sweeping across our nation right now. America's deep stain of structural racism is impossible to ignore. The death of George Floyd in Minneapolis at the hands of police officers and the response is just the most recent and obvious sign that racism is deeply imbedded in America's DNA.

While the nation tries to share equally the burden of the coronavirus African Americans are dying at a disproportionate rate (23% compared to their 13% representation). African Americans make up 37.9% of the federal prison population—triple their proportional representation. Natural disasters often have a deeper effect on minority populations who live in areas with substandard infrastructure. While most Americans are not overtly racist, we cannot avoid the reality that we participate in a system that is racist.

It is time for those of us who call ourselves Presbyterian to hold a mirror up to ourselves. Despite our good intentions we are still a denomination that is 93% white. We are, in general, more educated than the average American and have at our disposal economic, social and political power. I am not a sociologist, but I believe this is what we have come to call *white privilege*. I have it. You have it. Most of us in the PCUSA benefit from it.

While trying to digest the rapid unfolding of America's anger I was struck by the images of people, protesters and police alike, kneeling in honor of George Floyd. I was struck by the multiple and powerful meanings of kneeling that occurred to me. The words from "Let Us Break Bread Together" scrolled across my brain. *When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun, Oh Lord, have mercy on me.*

It is time for us Presbyterians to take a knee. We take a knee to remind ourselves that, like the police officer who pinned Mr. Floyd down, we have power over the vulnerable. Even when we don't intend it we cause pain and sometimes, even death. We take a knee to remind ourselves that we live in a system where some of us are holding us others down by virtue of our privileged position.

We fall on our knees in an act of repentance. We fall on our knees to confess our corporate sin. It is time to fall on our knees, to hold a mirror up to our lives and our structures, and confess that we are participants in a structural racism that is as deadly as the coronavirus.

At the 222nd General Assembly held in Portland in 2016 the commissioners considered and approved an overture submitted by our presbytery titled, "On Choosing to be a Church Committed to the Gospel of Matthew 25." That overture took root and has become a national movement now called [Matthew 25 in the PCUSA: A Bold Vision and Invitation](#). One of the three foci of this movement is to dedicate ourselves as a denomination to ["Dismantling Structural Racism."](#)

The Presbytery of the Cascades is proud to be the catalyst for this movement. Now it is time to lead again and embody the Matthew 25 initiative in our congregations and our presbytery. This is our moment.

The PCUSA has [numerous resources](#) dedicated to understanding structural racism and ways to act including a 21-Day Challenge, scriptural resources, explanations, and book recommendations. Consider the resources for yourself. Consider them for your family. Consider them for your congregation.

The facts behind the death of George Floyd are still to be determined. But one thing we do know is that this event and this moment calls us to once again fall on our knees and cry out, “Oh Lord, have mercy on me. Have mercy on us.”

In grief and in hope...

Brian

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