

Our city is burning.

George Floyd was murdered. A police officer pressed a knee into the unarmed, handcuffed man's neck and was not fazed as horrified onlookers warned him for several minutes that he was killing the man. Unfazed as George Floyd gasped, "I can't breathe."

Later, as videos emerged from various angles, we learned that two other officers also knelt on George Floyd as life left his black body. A fourth officer stood guard at the sidewalk, preventing those watching from intervening.

George Floyd was murdered in the street, on video, in the waning hours of daylight. His life mattered.

Our city is burning.

Have you ever felt your heart burning? With fear? With dread? With rage? With grief? With hopelessness? With passion? With a purpose?

Our city is burning. With fear, with dread, with rage, with grief, with hopelessness. And our city is burning with passion and purpose.

There is more than one kind of fire burning in our city.

Our city is physically burning from fires set the last few nights to destroy local businesses and burn down the centers of community in neighborhoods of Minneapolis. These are not righteous fires, and those who set them seek only to further damage, divide, and destroy us. These fires, kindled with hatred and lit with recklessness must be extinguished. They harm us all and most especially harm those who are already feeling the deep pain of injustice and inequity.

But those are not the only fires burning in Minneapolis this weekend. The heart of our city is also burning. The heart of our city is burning with grief and anger, passion and purpose. It burns, fueled by years...decades...generations of injustice and oppression.

Black lives matter.

It is easy to become distracted when looking up at the branches of the trees. To talk about bad individuals who do bad things. To focus on the flames and the damage they are causing and dwell in that space where we all get to be victims together of chaos.

It is hard, hard work (especially for we who live in whiteness) to dig down to the roots, to examine the blood-soaked soil. It is hard, hard work to trace the flames back to their source, to the fuel and the spark that ignited the fire. To release our white victimhood and fragility and see the pain and sorrow and outrage of our neighbors. To look in the mirror.

It is easy to say we love all people. It is harder to live like we do.

Today is the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to Jerusalem and rested upon the followers of Jesus, anointing them to carry on his work in the world. As fire. The Holy Spirit came upon them as fire. They burned in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Not their buildings, not their neighborhood. Their spirits, their hearts, their sense of passion and purpose. They burned with their desire for God's kingdom to be made real.

Our city is burning. Behind the flames that are bringing down black and immigrant owned businesses, beyond the flames that are endangering lives, our city is burning with a desire for God's kingdom to be made real - for justice to roll down, for people of all tongues, tribes, and nations to be treated with dignity and humanity. The voices of Minneapolis cry out a clear message in many languages: our lives matter. Our children's lives matter.

When we see fires of destruction set by agitators burning down the city, we are right to be angry and to grieve together even as we stand behind our neighbors to offer our labor, our contributions, our dollars, our sweat toward the building of their neighborhood in ways that will be just and equitable and honoring.

But we also need to see the other fire, the internal fire that burns. Do we have the courage to look deeper and grieve for the loss of life that sparked these fires? The loss upon loss upon loss? Do we have the courage to look deeper, into the soil, to find the pressure-packed fuel of generational trauma that feeds those flames? Do we have the courage to stand together in the ashes and build something new together, led by the voices and dreams of those we have shoved to the margins again and again?

It is natural to see our cities in chaos and fear for the safety of the people we love. Do we have the courage to also feel the pain that lies beneath the chaos? Do we still believe in a God who can speak creation into the waters of chaos?

Do we burn for the kingdom of God to be made real?

My colleague, Rev. Dr. Ronald Bell, Jr., a United Methodist pastor in Saint Paul wrote this week: *I think you were so busy looking for a riot that you missed the gathering of the grieving. I think you were so busy looking for looters that you missed the lament and heartbreak of a community. I think you were so busy looking for trouble that you missed the tragedy of systemic racialized trauma on the bodies of black and brown people. Tonight, tomorrow, and even the next day I beg of you, look again. Look again. Do not look away.*

If this conversation makes you uncomfortable, do not look away. Following Jesus is uncomfortable. Seeking justice is uncomfortable. The kingdom of God requires something of us, more than we want to give. The Holy Spirit anoints with fire. And fire burns. It refines. It destroys and draws attention and leaves piles of ashes where structures once stood.

Ashes have their place in our story as people of faith as well. Ashes are a sign of confession. Ashes are an invitation to repentance. What will we do with the ashes of our burned city? Are we prepared to pour them out over our heads and confess our sin of racism, our sin of complacency, our sin of silence?

In the church year, when we arrive at Ash Wednesday, we read the prophet Joel, the same prophet Peter quoted in his sermon on that first Pentecost.

On Ash Wednesday we read Joel's second chapter, often this part of verse 12:
*Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your hearts,
with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow; tear your hearts and not your clothing.*

Tear your hearts and not your clothing.

How did we get here?

We have not torn our hearts in confession and repentance for the racial inequities that plague our communities. We have held on to our physical comforts and emotional neutrality at the expense of the lives of our black and brown neighbors.

In Minnesota, we lead the way as one of the most inequitable states for people of color. Choose any metric you like, and our results are shameful. Education, access to affordable housing, home ownership, healthcare, incarceration, poverty. Inequities based on race exist in all of these areas across the United States, but here in Minnesota, the gaps are mind boggling.

We have kept the peace and we have been nice and we have prayed for justice, but we have not done the work to close the gaps. We have asked people to be patient and civil and decent and not to disrupt our days, and we have watched the gaps widen. We have put out the fires one at a time and then rebuilt the same facades again and again. We have torn our clothing for show but have protected our hearts, our privileges, our comfortable white supremacy.

Our city is burning.

Will our hearts also burn?

Do not look away.

Feel this pain. Hold on to this discomfort. Pray for safety for all of our neighbors. Pray for those who are risking their safety to protect against the agitators who only seek to harm our neighbors. Pray that those who have come to our city to cause wanton destruction and harm will be stopped. Pray that those who have come to start fires of division and distraction from this real pain will be stopped. Not all burning is righteous. May we not allow those who invite deeper pain to black, indigenous, and people of color to succeed in their efforts to capitalize on the pain of our neighbors. And...may we bear witness to this pain without trying to whitewash it or fix it superficially or make it go away.

Our mission is providing hope for our community. Now is the time, dear ones, to dig deep and discover what hope really means, and what it really costs. May the Holy Spirit inspire and renew us in our commitment to God's love for everyone.

Amen.