

“When Courage and Empathy Embrace”

Very rarely in my life have I struggled to find my voice. Ideas, thoughts, opinions, and suggestions have always flowed freely and are rarely scarce. But during the course of the days since the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, I have really struggled to find my voice. I suppose that the reason why I have struggled to find my voice is the coming together of a number of very powerful emotions. I'm embarrassed, because I would be quick to call Minneapolis home. I'm angry, because once again a Black American's life has been taken from them while in police custody. I'm ashamed, because I have not done enough to change the culture of hateful racism that permeates our society and churches. And frankly, I'm scared that our nation could be on the brink of collapse and we lack the kind of leadership in the White House necessary to hold us together.

Finding my voice began in the most peculiar of ways. I had just finished my weekly trip of “hunting and gathering” for the family when I pulled into a 7-11 to gas up the Subaru. I love frozen Snickers, and the “hankering” for one grew exponentially as I pumped my gas. There were no other cars waiting for gas, so I quickly locked the car and began to walk into the 7-11. As I approached the glass doors, I immediately noticed that the store was very crowded and most of the people in the store were not wearing masks.

So, feeling somewhat out of place in my very fashionable homemade mask, I returned to my car knowing that I could simply cross Colony Avenue and get a Snicker at the Rite-Aid store. Or so I thought! As I pulled out of 7-11, crossed Colony, and then into the parking lot of the Rite-Aid, I saw another group of non mask-wearing types entering the Rite-Aid as another group of non mask-wearing types were exiting. Feeling even more confused and threatened by these non mask-wearers, I decided to drive even further down Warwick Boulevard to the Walgreens. Perhaps Walgreens would be a safe-haven where I could find a Snicker's bar to satisfy my hunger. Well, much to my delight, as I entered the Walgreens, almost every person I saw was of the mask-wearing sort. So, feeling safe (because I was surrounded by other mask-wearing sorts), I purchased my Snicker bar and returned to my car so that I could speed home to put it in the freezer.

As I arrived home, two thoughts overcame me. First, I was struck by my feelings of social isolation, and dare I even say, social oppression. I felt like I could not enter the 7-11 or the Rite-Aid. I did not feel safe, but I also feared that I would not even be welcomed. Why did I have such feelings? Well earlier that same day, while at Lowes, I had some big burly dude tell me my mask was cute. (I'm pretty sure it was not a complement and he was not flirting with me!) Sadly, the first thing that popped into my head was to say back to him, "Your dog is cuter!" You see I had Cicero with me (all 90 plus pounds with piercing Arctic Ice eyes), and he had a toy poodle with a bow in its hair. But I didn't want to wear a 2x4 home so I walked away like a duck! My feelings of social isolation grew as I began to wonder if there would be some stores that I could enter and some that I could not, because the stores did not enforce mask-wearing and encourage social distancing.

Now take my feelings of social isolation and magnify them by thousands, and we begin to come close to how Black Americans feel in our culture. Black American parents tell their children that there are certain places where they are not welcome and certain places where it is not safe for them to go, simply because they are black. Black Americans continue to experience social isolation and social oppression as they are systematically discriminated against.

My second thought had to do more with the depth of my own personal anger toward and mistrust of people who were not wearing masks. I really do not understand why people will not wear masks. Why is it such an inconvenience to protect yourself and show concern for your fellow human beings by wearing a mask? I just don't get it and frankly it makes me angry. So non mask-wearers had become a strange group of "others" who I saw as threatening to my life and safety. I would not go so far as to suggest that I hated the non mask-wearer type, but I certainly did not trust them, I felt threatened by them, and I did not want to be in association with them. I felt very conflicted, and then began to weep when I again made a connection between what I was experiencing and what Black Americans experience everyday of their lives.

Black Americans don't just feel like they are not trusted, they know that they are not trusted, simply because they are black. Black Americans don't just feel like they are threatening to other people and threatened by other people, they know that they are threatening and threatened, simply because they are black. And Black Americans know that far too many White Americans do not want to be in association with them, simply because they are black.

The feelings I had of not feeling safe in the presence of non mask-wearers, I know will be a temporary inconvenience. We will, at some point, get past this pandemic and the distinction between mask-wearing and non mask-wearing types will cease to exist. But for Black Americans, the feelings of social isolation and social oppression have not been predicated on a virus that will either cease or become more manageable. The Black American reality of social isolation and social oppression are the end result of centuries of hateful, systemic and personal racism the overcoming of which will be vastly more difficult than overcoming Covid-19. But we must overcome the reality of racism in our culture, by being and giving witness to the inclusive kingdom of God.

So, what can we do? These very challenging times need a balance of courage and empathy. We need to feel and understand the pain of Black Americans so that we can empathize with our black brothers and sisters. And then, we need to find the courage to give voice to a different vision for God's world.

This delicate balance of empathy and courage has been witnessed recently. Genesee County (Michigan) Sheriff Christopher Swanson showed an incredible amount of empathy and courage when he removed his weapons, embraced a protestor, and then marched with the protestors in Flint, Michigan. He later said he knew he was risking his job by removing his weapons and marching with protestors, but he believes that Black Americans are victims of systemic racism and he did not want to appear to be siding with oppressors over against the oppressed. But what can we do to address this problem in our culture and churches?

Well, I think there are many things that we can do. But rather than overwhelm you with my ideas, I want to hear from each and every one of you in terms of what you think we can do. To facilitate hearing from you, I want to host a Zoom meeting on Wednesday, June 10 at 7:00 p.m.. But in advance of this meeting, let me share one idea.

Ann Aulich, Director of the Warwick River Children's Learning Center, is working through the process of getting "our" Learning Center certified as a subsidy vendor. What this means, is that once approved, we could begin to see more and more low-income people (some single-parents, some minorities, etc...) begin to utilize our Learning Center and be present on our campus. The opportunities that this could create for our church to be welcoming, to be equipping and

empowering, to seek justice, and to be the presence of God's Kingdom is staggering. I suggest that we get behind Ann and the work that she is doing, as we also begin to think in creative ways of how we can be welcoming of, and of service to, struggling Black Americans who may very well see our Learning Center as an oasis of hope.

I look forward to hearing from you Wednesday, June 10 at 7:00 p.m.

Pastor John