

Stand Up For Justice – Debbie Stockdale – June 07, 2020

This morning we are talking about racism. The past two weeks have revealed just how deep and wide racism is here in North America.

This morning I have chosen to share a letter with you that was published to our Broadview website this week. It is written by Adele Halliday who is the Team Leader for Discipleship and Witness at the United Church's General Council Office. It is important to hear the experience of those who know what the situation is because they live it every day.

What I need from white people right now - It's way past time to confront anti-Black racism

By Adele Halliday | June 3, 2020

Some of you may know me — as a General Council Office staffperson, an anti-racism educator, a writer, a parent, a theologically trained layperson, or a lifelong Christian. I am all of these things, and more.

But today I write as a Black Canadian.

The events of the past few weeks have been deeply traumatizing. I have been cycling through three main emotions — intense anger, immense exhaustion and deep pain. These emotions are not new to me — they are part of what it means to live in a Black body with the reality of racial injustice.

Some of you already know that I've been angry and weary. And now, I'm beyond fed up. Some of us have been demanding action for a very long time. The time for subtle changes is over. It's time for a revolution against relentless racial oppression.

Let me also be clear that I am not writing this letter to my Black colleagues. Many among us who are Black are experiencing a collective and vicarious trauma—an emotional shock that does not just go back a few days, but generations. And we have been finding our own ways to cope and act in the midst of a lifetime of oppression. No, this is directed towards those among you who are white—those who have white privilege and who have benefitted from systemic racism.

I would first implore you — please stop saying that you are not a racist. Please stop only pointing to the overt and outrageous actions of a few individuals and demonize them, and say that you are nothing like them, without challenging systems of privilege. Instead, please acknowledge that you have benefited from a system of white supremacy in this country, and then do something to change the system. Some of us began naming white supremacy and calling out racial injustice long before it was popular. Please also be proactive and do your own work to dismantle racial injustice. It's time to be actively anti-racist.

Some among you have asked what you can do, and what I might need from you at this time.

I can't speak for the whole Black community in Canada, or even Black leaders in the United Church, but I can name what I need.

Some of you have asked how I'm doing. Here, I need you to be pastoral. I have been re-traumatized by the video of a modern-day lynching. I am terrified that I will be one of the Black women shot by police in their own homes. I am full of grief for parents who have had to bury their Black children. I am infuriated that the police were weaponized against a peaceful park walker through a dishonest emergency phone call.

I've been reminded yet again that just having Black skin may be my cause of death. I have already had extensive conversations with my four-year-old about racism, and yet I struggle with how much to share with this child, who senses my anger. I am filled with the pain that my children will experience in life simply because of having Black bodies.

Many among us in the Black community are carrying a range of emotions these days. But we still need to be present to do our work, to parent, or whatever else goes on in our daily lives. The everyday reality of anti-Black racism takes a toll on us and our mental health. So, please be pastoral if we are not always emotionally present these days.

Some have wondered what you can do to support me. I need you to be prophetic. I need you to acknowledge and name the realities of anti-Black racism and white supremacy in Canada, and stop falsely postulating that we are better than the United States. I don't want your sympathies, your guilt, or your attempts to mollify my emotions. I also don't want you to make this about me, as an individual. Instead, don't be silent. Say that Black Lives Matter! Interrogate the disproportionate inequities faced by Black peoples in Canada and around the world. We are part of a faith tradition where prophets name truths – I need you to do that too.

Maybe you're tired of seeing news articles about anti-Black racism. I'm tired of living with it. And I don't get to opt out of the reality of racial injustice. To support me, and other people in the Black community, do not opt out of action either.

Some have wondered what role churches play. I need you to please: Pray. Preach. Protest (and repeat). I heard a few people say that the only thing we can do about racial injustice is pray. Don't get me wrong, I am a praying person, and deeply believe in the transformative power of prayer. So, while I may get down on my knees and pray to God, I also then need to get up and preach. I need to protest. I need our churches to not only pray on Sundays, but to also offer a prayer through a lifetime commitment to systemic change.

Please keep doing this work long after the current display of anti-Black racism has faded from the news cycle and our social media feeds.

When you protest and preach and pray, please focus on racism. Too often, I've found that conversations about racism by white people quickly devolve into conversations about patriarchy or poverty or other inequities. I am deeply committed to working towards equity in all its forms — it is my life's work and passion. But, sometimes, we need to get specific about racism without adding other forms of discrimination and oppression that people may feel more comfortable addressing.

And remember that this is long-term work. Please keep doing this work long after the current display of anti-Black racism has faded from the news cycle and our social media feeds.

Some have asked where God is in the midst of this. Of course God is present, and I believe that Jesus would be among those who are rallying and calling for change. Jesus often aligned himself with people on the margins and those experiencing oppression. Plus, we have just celebrated Pentecost, when God's Spirit is poured out to the church. I believe that God's Spirit is moving among the privileged and comfortable and is prompting, disrupting, prodding and urging. I believe that God's Spirit is moving among us who are wounded, and is soothing, comforting and encouraging.

The work of racial justice is ours to do along with God's. I need you to partner with God in actively doing this work, and not to leave it for God only to do.

Please. Do something, for God's sake. For all our sakes. It's a matter of life and death.

Having listened to Adele's plea, let's take a few moments to look at what we, the St. David's church family, can do to address this aching injustice in our world. The first step is acknowledging there is a problem right here in Calgary. This is not someone else's problem. It is our problem and it is getting worse.

I know many of you heard Jon Cornish's story on the news this week. He is an ex Calgary Stampeder who was harassed when peacefully walking with his wife by a white woman in his own neighbourhood where he has lived for the past 10 years. He says:

"She came out and started yelling at us. That proceeded until [we got to] the end of the lane, and then she told us that she was going to call the cops," Cornish explained.

"My wife and I started getting a little bit uncomfortable at that point," he said. "We continue on and we see that she's now in her car following us. This continued for a little bit. We get out to a main intersection and she ambushes us.

"[She] pulls up in front of us and then tells us to 'get out of her neighbourhood and never come back.'"

This is scary stuff and it is but one of many examples I could have cited. It cannot be tolerated anymore. It is way past time to stand up for justice.

Adele asks that we pray, preach, protest, and repeat until justice and equality are achieved for all God's people. What does that look like?

First: Pray

This is where we spend time looking deep within ourselves to see what is in our souls. It is hard to admit we are racist and that we have fallen short in acting to stop racism. As Ijeoma Oluo says, 'Anti-racism is the commitment to fight racism wherever you find it, including in yourself.'

Prayer includes confession and lament.

Confess our own biases and prejudices, our rationalizations as well as our actions that are racist. Confess our lack of action that perpetuates racism. If you have white skin like me, acknowledge our white privilege. If you find yourself bristling at the mention of this, pray on that to find out why.

Don't be afraid of tears and anger. Know you are held in God's strength and love and that letting emotions flow leads to healing and from there, the energy and commitment to act.

Pray for vision. Ask for God's help in seeing the injustice in ourselves, our community, our church, our province, our country.

Finally, pray for the courage to act and speak so that we can be anti-racist in our actions and in our words. Pray for the strength to be Christ's hands of love and justice in our world.

Second: Preach

Don't be afraid of this word. It doesn't only mean standing here where I am standing.

Remember the saying: actions speak louder than words. Or: Preach the gospel, if necessary, use words.

Step one is to educate yourself. What is the history? What is the current situation? What are the statistics? What needs to change? Take time to learn how our legal, justice, education and health systems are racist. Take time to learn.

Be an ally. Don't assume you know best. Listen to those who have lived the experience and let them lead in knowing what is needed.

Speak— tell your neighbour that his or her joke is racist, speak out against unjust laws even if it means breaking with the majority views. If others don't know where you stand, make it clear.

Third: Protest

We've watched the massive protest marches this week. We've seen vigils all across the country. We've watched people risk their personal safety in the face of riot police hurling tear gas and firing rubber bullets. If you were there with a sign, what would your sign say?

- White silence = white violence
- No justice, No Peace
- Black lives matter. Aboriginal lives matter

It changes something inside you when you make such a public declaration of where you stand. There is a power of presence when you stand shoulder to shoulder and hold your sign. The energy of justice vibrates between each one present and sends that energy out into the world. In these Covid times, care must be taken, but peaceful public protest is a beautiful thing.

Vote – This is key in our democratic society. Make justice a high priority when deciding how to vote. If a candidate holds racist views do not vote for them. Hold your political party and government accountable for their actions. The only way to address systemic change is through our political and legal systems.

Sign petitions. Write letters. Keep at it even when it seems to do no good. Be the water drip that gradually makes change.

Repeat – this is a long game I'm afraid. We are called to seek justice and resist evil. Keep at it until justice is flowing like a mighty unstoppable river. Be anti-racist in every way you can.

It is time to take a stand. Let's stand up for justice.