



A Note from Rev. Casey Banks

Pastor of Newberg First United Methodist Church

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Dear Siblings in Christ in Newberg,

This week, our nation received the verdict on the high-profile trial of former police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd. He was found guilty on all three charges. After hearing the judge read the jury's verdicts, I thought perhaps this conviction was a moment signaling national transformation, that black lives did matter. But in the same week, 13-year-old Adam Toledo and 16-year-old Ma'Kiah Bryant lost their lives during encounters with the police, and we are again left asking, "Were these uses of deadly force justified, or are they part of a larger pattern of police brutality against black people?" We cannot pretend that the conviction of a single officer is a sign that the system is now fixed. There is still much to learn, many questions to ask, much work to do.

Like many of you, I am making my way through the book, *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo, and I recently read chapter six "Is police brutality really about race?" This chapter has weighed heavily on me. Oluo offers a perspective, honestly and bluntly, that I have not previously considered. A significant argument Oluo makes is that people of different races can have different experiences of the same police officers and both experiences are valid and true. White communities have historically felt that the police are there to protect life and property. Black communities have historically felt that the police are there to maintain white supremacy by controlling people of color. Oluo does not portray an image of the police force where there are simply "a few bad apples" who need to be removed, but rather the same police officer who is professional and appropriate with a white offender can be disrespectful and life-threatening to a black offender. Two people of different races can hold very different opinions of the same police officers—and both can be true.

This perspective got me thinking about my own encounters with law enforcement. I've been pulled over for a taillight that was burned out (twice), for having expired tags, and for speeding...also twice. Each time I was afraid. Afraid of a possible fine, insurance rate hike, and the embarrassment of having my name in the paper. But never once did I fear for my life the way that many black people do. And many of them fear this so much that they call a family member or friend or post to social media that they've been pulled over, in case the situation becomes deadly. Listening to people of color share their experiences of police interactions is an important step toward understanding why so many are calling for reform, defunding, and/or abolition. Our

nation cannot avoid having these difficult policy conversations, so I urge all who read this to begin by listening to the stories of those whose experiences with law enforcement are different from your own. And reflect honestly on your own experiences too.

As I reflect on my experiences, I'm discovering that it's even possible to hold contradictory feelings within oneself. I have both profound respect for those who risk their lives to show up in dangerous situations and also deep concern about the militarization of our police force and the types of personalities who get approved to wear a badge and gun. And even though my experiences with police officers have been overwhelmingly professional, there is a particular police officer for whom I hold both gratitude and resentment. In my first encounter with him, this officer came to my rescue when my life was in danger. He was a protective presence who ensured my home was safe for re-entry, explained my legal options, and empowered me to make my own decision about pressing charges. A year later, I ran into the same officer at City Hall where he made a sexist and embarrassing joke about me in front of my mother. The power, gender, and age dynamics of that experience left me feeling that I could not possibly dare to report his misconduct. It's hard to report misconduct when society says I should just be grateful for his protection. How could he be a bad cop now if he was such a good cop to me before?

But we do not have to adopt the binary view that police are either good or bad. We can acknowledge nuance and complexity. We can recognize that, like all people, police officers are human with internal biases and a continuing need for education to improve. If I expect others to acknowledge the sexism I experienced and if I desire changes to prevent that kind of harm from happening again, then I must acknowledge the racism that people of color experience and support them as they seek changes to prevent the harms of racism from happening again.

Right now, I am looking to add learning opportunities to our Focus on Anti-Racism which explore the history of policing and the rationale behind the calls for police reform, defunding, and abolition as they relates to police brutality against people of color. I will be previewing some recently published curriculum designed for communities of faith, and I am speaking with a retired police officer who has served as a guest speaker at churches. Please look for news to come and prayerfully consider participating in these learning opportunities. In the meantime, let me know if you'd like to borrow a copy of Oluo's book, and know that I'm available for pastoral counseling via Zoom for anyone who needs to process the results of the Chauvin trial.

Blessings,

Pastor Casey