“A Sermon Against White Supremacy in 4 Acts” by Erica Lloyd, Amy Moffit, Sallie Holmes, and Lucy Slater

June 20, 2021

Lucy said:

So first, I want to acknowledge that we are a diverse group, with White people, and Black, Indigenous, and other people of color in our midst. But today, we are white people, speaking primarily to white people about our white experience.

To me, white supremacy speaks to the American culture and systems we live in that have been built on the belief that white people constitute a superior race. It teaches white

people to see people who are not white as strangers. Because of it, our ancestors committed murder and theft, and because of it we have learned from our ancestors to justify murder and theft. It is a system and a culture into which we have been born and by which we have been traumatized.

When I am with people of color, this trauma of white supremacy disconnects me from them. A small example: my team at work sets aside time each week to discuss racism and the impact on our work. Last week a Black woman on our team shared a short video on micro-aggressions that Black women experience in the work-place. Immediately, I felt a surge of adrenalin, tightness, constriction in my body! I was thinking: *Am I being called out for micro-aggressions that I personally have perpetuated?! Am I bad person?! Now I am being reminded of the history and consequences of slavery, the exploitation of Black women, the poverty that many Black women experience, and it is a painful reminder*! I had to watch the video at least twice before I could get past my own alarms and defensiveness to actually hear and empathize with the exhaustion and sadness that the Black women in the video described experiencing in the work place. Let alone begin thinking about how to work with my team members to try to change that with them.

Too many of us white folks freeze, deny, or run away from really noticing and accepting the harms we have done, and so, racism continues to divide us – it disconnects us from each other, from ourselves, and from the earth.

As many of you know, in the last two years my nest emptied, I have left my home and friends and neighbors of 30 years and my job and the colleagues that felt like family. I have been isolated through this pandemic. I have felt the pain of being far from family and friends as they grappled with the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder in their neighborhood last

year. I am exhausted. I **yearn** for connection. We all do. I don't want to feel this kind of pain, this denial, this disconnection from myself and others anymore. I don't want my children to feel this way. I want them to be able to sit together with people from all races as family – understanding each other, communicating with each other, loving each other, working together, and appreciating each other.

I know to get to this place is challenging. It is why I am ashamed to say that I have denied doing it for so long. The hard part is accepting and acknowledging who I am as a white person, what I have been born into, and what I and my ancestors have done and are complicit in. The hard part is the actual process of repentance – of turning to my sins and the sins of my ancestors, facing them, feeling them in my body, sitting with those feelings so they can shift and dissipate, as I did when I saw the video on microaggressions, so that when those hard moments of seeing our bias happen in my day to day life, we I work through them and move on to listen, acknowledge the harm I have caused, make amends and repairs, and begin to reconnect and rebuild.

There is joy for white people in this process as well. All of us here, white people and people of color, are people of faith, and so we know that essentially, we are all unique, we are all loved, we are all an integral and necessary part of the beauty of the world. White people can draw upon our essential goodness as a resource when we seek to end white supremacy. We are like David in the face of Goliath. We already have all the resources we need. We don't need special armor, or strength or size. We can use the tools that we know and are comfortable with, recognizing that even the smallest actions make a difference.

We are in the season of Trinity, where we reflect on the three legs of the stool which makes a firm foundation for our Church. We come together to support our inner life, our outer life, and our community life. The four of us come to you at

very different places on our journey with anti-racism, each working on different “leg of the stool”. What we share is a calling to hold ourselves and the Seekers community as a whole accountable to the urgency of undoing white supremacy. We have many, many ideas as to how we would like to move forward with you, (inviting speakers, working through curricula and trainings as part of the School for Christian Growth, forming book clubs). For me, I need your support to do my work of repentance, and reconnecting with family. We invite you to join the four of us to think about what comes next.

Erica spoke next. The text of her contribution is not yet available

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Amy said:

On June 3, 2020, Barack Obama participated in a virtual town hall regarding the George Floyd protests. He gave a speech in which he encouraged young people, particularly young people of color, to continue to work to change things. He spent most of the time speaking about police reform and referencing the findings of the 21st Century Policing Task Force he created while in office in response to the murder of Michael Brown. I watched the Town Hall because I missed Obama so very much, and I felt my whole body relax when he started speaking, remembering what it felt like to have someone in office who had class, restraint, who behaved like a leader. I even had tears in my eyes. I know I wasn’t the only one.

But he wasn’t the star of the show. No, that distinction went to Brittney Packnett Cunningham, who facilitated the town hall. While serving as Executive Director of Teach for America in St. Louis at age 30, she was at the forefront of the Ferguson protests over Michael Brown, and in 2015 co-founded Campaign Zero, a non-profit aimed at policy reform for

policing. That same year, she was appointed to Obama's 21st Century Policing Task Force. Her expertise on the topics of police reform and advocacy is unarguable and impressive.

Packnett Cunningham referenced Campaign Zero's "Eight Can't Wait" campaign, where they put forward eight concrete police reforms. The reforms are:

1. Ban chokeholds and strangleholds.
2. Require de-escalation.
3. Require a warning before shooting.
4. Require that all alternatives be exhausted before shooting.
5. Require officers to intervene when excessive force is being used.
6. Ban shooting at moving vehicles.
7. Establish a Force Continuum.
8. Require comprehensive reporting.

During a 2016 study, Campaign Zero found that the average police department in the United States had implemented only three of these recommendations, and none had implemented all eight.

At some point during the town hall, whether it was while I was doing internet research on Campaign Zero or texting/chatting with a couple of friends, the topic of police abolition came up as a counter to Campaign Zero's policy reforms. There are many who think these and other reforms to policing are completely insufficient, and that the only solution is to dismantle policing altogether. I remember thinking wait, what? And asking my friend about it. She was incredulous that I wasn't familiar with the concept and suggested I just Google it because there was SO MUCH out there on the topic.

I let her mild rebuke settle with me for a moment and considered what her rebuke suggested. As you're probably aware, "woke" white people spend a lot of time giving each

other a hard time for not being “woke” enough. However, my friend is an academic and an activist and a true sister friend. She wasn’t trying to one up me… she was sincerely shocked that I wasn’t familiar with the concept.

But not only was I not familiar with it, the entire subject just struck me as insane and deeply irresponsible. It seemed like the kind of thing that suburban white people who don’t have to deal with break-ins, car thefts, and shootings would come up with, not at all reflective of the lives of people living in marginalized communities who are afraid of frequent crime. You need the police to discourage and investigate crime, especially in areas where crime is frequent. Not *all* police randomly murder black people.

It was that last thought that pulled me up short. The point is that there are quite a lot of police offers who *are* murdering black people. It’s not restricted to one geographical area. It’s not even restricted to white officers (remember Freddie Grey?). Despite protest after protest after protest, police officers routinely murder people of color and face limited punishment, if any. It *was* possible that the problem was the structure of policing itself.

I was shaken. I could give hesitant assent to this mentally, but my gut was NOT ok with this idea. I’d never thought of myself as being particularly pro-police, either. Was this one more big, gaping blind spot in which I unconsciously took comfort in the very structures that destroyed the lives of people I claim to care about? Defensively, I sought internal balance against the cognitive dissonance by re-telling myself my anti-racist story.

- I started with my rock-solid conviction as a small child that I would fight racism my whole life (based in part on stories about slavery I’d heard in school but primarily on my deep and abiding love of Whitney Houston)

- I thought through the life changing experience of attending a majority black high school where I and my other nerdy white friends faced verbal threats and physical violence from black students, an experience that was deeply troubling for a shy, bookish kid who considered herself antiracist. I emerged from my four years there with an appreciation of how I could walk away from that violence as soon as I left school. Whatever led them to behave that way towards myself and my friends, it was inside of them. They couldn't just walk away from it.
- I thought of my years living in the UK and being part of a parish in London that was largely made up of working people of color with their own experiences of racism. I thought of my years of work with international students. I thought of when I founded a Race and Conflict working group while doing my master's degree in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at GMU.
- I thought of my years of witness to the life of my friend Charisse Cecil, a poet and historian who died suddenly at age 32 of a pulmonary embolism. I have a Sankofa she painted tattooed over my heart as a permanent reminder never to forget her friendship and to work daily against racism in my heart. I've held her up over the years on the radio, in poetry readings, and blog posts, so she's not forgotten.
- I thought of all the times I'd marched with Black Lives Matter in DC protests.
- I thought of my time leading a Stand Up for Racial Justice book group on race and class where we explored our own reflexive instincts of having grown up as lower-class white people and engaging with the notion of our "privilege" from that place of comparative disadvantage.
- And I thought of my four and a half years attending a historically black church, being The White Lady In The Choir, and learning a ton about the assumptions, anxieties, and reflexive mechanisms around race still

living inside of me

These experiences were and are an important part of my self-definition as an anti-racist. But what did it mean if I could not even allow myself to ponder the idea of police abolition. I don't have to ultimately agree with it, but refusal to even think about it? It seemed like maybe I'd reached my new frontier of internal anti-racist work.

That is why I'm here, as a flawed human being who has a long history of Getting It Wrong but who wants deeply and sincerely to do better. I am also tired out by the pandemic, by the ugly and violent language of recent political discourse, by the worries of my own life, but I'm not so tired out that I can't *try* a little harder. I hope you feel the same way.

Sallie said:

As some of you know, I only preach at Seekers every 20 years or so, because I don't like to preach. But this issue has called to me over the last year, and after hearing Erica's sermon two months ago, and with courage gathered from my companion preachers, I felt compelled to speak today. I never thought that police and prison abolition would be important to me, that it would be something I would support, but here I am, much thanks to the influence of my daughter, Caren who joined the abolition movement years ago.

I spent much of my career as a social worker and therapist in schools in DC, PG County and Montgomery County. Almost 100% of the students and families I worked with were Black or Hispanic. As hard as it is to say, I know I thought of myself as a "savior" – a person who tried to intervene to effect meaningful change in the conditions of their lives. Working in this context as a white savior, but also a decent clinician, I loved my work. I loved the kids I worked with.

I was inspired by their resilience, heartbroken by their overwhelming burdens and trauma, amazed by their capacity for trust, crushed by the obstacles they had to meet, impressed by their determination and persistence, saddened by their grief. AND I was woefully ignorant to the historic and systemic ways their life experience was shaped. I realize now that I missed many opportunities to lay down my white savior role and recognize the white supremacy structure and privilege I was operating in and from. And to also better appreciate that the Black and Brown students I worked with lived their lives within that same white supremacy structure.

Of particular interest to me at this point in time is our egregious deficit in mental health services. Over the years, we have drastically cut those services rather than expanding them. We have unfortunately and tragically surrendered much of this important and essential work to police, who intervene in the way they were trained- by use of force and control with often disastrous and deadly results. No one needing emotional help should be assisted by someone with a gun, by someone who is part of an institution historically and currently responsible for systemic racist violence. As many have said before me, the system we have is not failing, it is working exactly as it was designed to. The more we learn, the more we understand the prevailing bias of police to see people of color, especially Black people, as less than human, to be treated as a threat to the safety of white society. Examples of deadly results of police intervention are everywhere and numerous, as we all know. In our region, there are many, including Robert White, who is being memorialized today at Christ Congregational Church, near where he was gunned down 3 years ago. Other **local** victims who recently and needlessly died at the hands of police include Finan Behre, Dominique Williams, James Johnson, Kwamena Ocran.

I was not expecting to embrace the concept of abolition, but particularly after this past year, I can’t imagine anything

less. I feel called to **listen to** and **learn from** and join a decades-long movement and struggle **– led by Black and Brown women** including Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mariame Kaba, among many others including those in our own communities – to abolish the systems of policing and prisons. **And** when we DIVEST from policing, we free up MILLIONS of dollars to INVEST in the things that really keep our communities safe: Quality housing, education, and healthcare; job opportunities, free transportation, accessibility, community based social services, and alternatives for addressing interpersonal harm. Reducing and repairing harm and violence in communities are key elements of abolition.

Most of us, including me, ask: So, if we abolish the police, what's the alternative? Who do we call? This is where it's easy to get stuck. We are limited only by our lack of imagination.

And this is why we need each other… to do the work together of collaboration, cooperation, creativity…in community. And holding each other accountable, as I would like to be. There are already many excellent examples out there of people and communities who are re-imagining public safety, sharing resources, and creating new ways to reduce violence and repair harm. This gives me hope.

Some of us are already doing this kind of work, taking steps toward abolition, such as: calling on local and state leaders to cut police budgets and to repeal the Law Enforcement Bill of Rights, to increase access to mental health services and create mental health crisis response teams, to remove School Resource Officers, and to hold elected officials accountable for directing resources to the real needs of our communities. We all want the same things: we want our communities to thrive, we want to prioritize real safety, housing and education. Abolition has the potential to facilitate that in a way the criminal punishment system never will.

As a Christian, as a social worker, as a human, I am choosing to be a part of this movement to abolish the system of policing and prisons. I am committing to no longer be complicit to a racist system which dehumanizes, murders, and inhumanly punishes as a system of control in the pretext of safety. And I acknowledge I have a lot to learn.

On this day after Juneteenth, I ask you to consider with us: What am I willing to do? What are we willing to do? I don't know how we get there, but I **want** us to get there.
I hope you will consider joining us as we explore what it could mean to create a more loving, just, and compassionate world like Jesus imagined.
