

## DIVERSITY COLUMN: THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND FAITH

### Open Season

We listen to the news and we frequently hear about “Black Death” — not the tragic health epidemic that took place in Europe centuries ago, but rather the accounts of Black men, women, and children who die at the hands of the police. These persistent Black deaths could be



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described as a kind of disease, but a more fitting and bone-chilling metaphor would be that we are experiencing a “hunting season” - now open on people of African descent. The announcements of instances of African American deaths come regularly enough that some may have become desensitized. However, others like me who fully grasp this hunting season metaphor have been moved to outrage.

When I hear about the death of Black men, women and children at the hands of police officers, regardless of the nature of the incident, I can’t help but feel like it is open season on us. Unlike any official hunting season, however, this open season has no specified “close” date. As with any hunting season, the “hunters” are protected to a large degree as they hunt down less powerful and more vulnerable prey - unless there is undeniable video evidence to contradict police reports documenting the deaths of African American people. Such was the case in the murder of Walter Scott, who was shot in the back numerous times by Officer Slager. Slager’s report was contradicted by eyewitness video. Then again, there was video in the case of Eric Garner’s death - he said, “I can’t breathe” at least 10 times. No arrests.

Freddie Gray died on April 19, 2015 in a Baltimore hospital after receiving life-threatening injuries while in police custody. He is not the first nor is he likely to be the last to die in police care, under questionable circumstances. But there is something particularly heinous about the fact that during transport in a police van,

he sustained injuries serious enough that his spinal cord was almost completely severed.

Then consider the recent death of Sandra Bland. Ms. Bland was found on July 13, 2015 hung in her cell in Waller County, Texas, 3 days after being arrested for not signaling a lane change. It is being called a suicide? Her death is now being scrutinized by the media in a pattern similar to the media attention that occurred following Michael Brown’s death in Ferguson, Missouri.

These incidents, because they are racial motivated, have similarities to other racially motivated attacks like the one at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, SC in which nine Black church attendees were murdered. These and other racially motivated events generate a grief that wells up out of wounds that are centuries old, and have never truly healed. To make matters worse, the wounds get packed with new sand or salt when the response to these incidents includes vilifying the victims. For example, we hear from the media over and over again about the police arrest records and troubled histories of the individuals who are killed as if this knowledge justifies deadly aggression towards the unarmed, and should exonerate the badged culprits. Herein lies the rub. These recent events overshadow examples of Black undercover or off-duty officers being shot by their own non-Black colleagues. Too often there is no line of demarcation whereby the villains and the heroes are clearly identified.

My focus in this article is not solely to point out these incidents of police aggression against Black men, women, and children, but to help us understand the pain of African Americans on emotional, psychological and spiritual levels. The connection between police aggression and African American pain is starkly highlighted when African American men discuss the care they need to demonstrate when being stopped by police while driving. The special “be careful” instructions the parents pass on to their sons is a message I’ve heard repeatedly by parents of young African American boys who might get stopped by our uniformed protectors. I don’t believe the sightings of police should trigger fear in any African

Americans. However, the fear is real when experience reveals that some of those charged with protecting and serving do neither with regard to African Americans.

While my and others’ outrage about this “open season” is understandable, I also recognize that a strategic Christian response is necessary. In all these incidents mentioned in this article, the most prominent response has been a secular one, with the response from the faith community seeming to come in a distant second. It is unclear if the seemingly absent faith response is due to secular resistance to the Christian voice, which seems to be on the rise. However, I have seen that when Christians are determined to be heard, our voices cannot be silenced. As social workers, we bring a unique understanding of societal systems that enables us to develop a multi-level change approach. As Christian social workers, we bring indomitable faith in God. Our professional mandate to fight for social justice emanates from God’s character (Isaiah 9:7). Yes, we live in a sin-marred world, “But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Our goal is not just to build ad hoc coalitions to address social problems, but to build intentional partnerships designed to have strategic and lasting social impact.

In November at the NACSW convention in Grand Rapids, I will explore themes and various change efforts focused on the issues described above. I will present an organizing metaphor and discuss what appears to be a repetitive pattern in media and societal responses to racial inequality. After discussing my analysis of this pattern, I will suggest a more transformative direction for us as Christian social workers to take. I don’t have the ‘better-mouse-trap’ answer to suddenly stop these types of incidents. However, the ways such incidents are presented to us and analyzed for public consumption needs to be reframed. My hope is that we will begin to find different ways to think about how we “consume” and respond to the media coverage. This will in turn present opportunities to forge new paths toward Shalom in our neighborhoods and cities in regards to “open hunting season” incidents.

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