

"What Have We Become?"

A talk by the Rev. Jim Foti
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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<https://firstunitarian.org/what-have-we-become/>

Today I want to start with a question for those of us who live in the Twin Cities. In the past week, how many of you have received a message from an out-of-town friend saying something like, "Hope things are OK in Minneapolis." Or, "What's it like there?" Or maybe, "Holding my breath and thinking of your beautiful city."

Only a generation ago, it would have taken days for such messages to travel through the mail to reach us. But in this time we live in, people far away who know us, and know our city, and know what's happening, can tap out their thoughts and send them to us in an instant.

And so many of them were thinking of us, watching us, watching us this week and for almost a year. The eyes of our friends, the eyes of our country, the eyes of much of the world have been on this once-small city. A place long known for its purported quality of life, and now widely known for a particular manner of death.

"Hope things are OK in Minneapolis."

Throughout the trial, things were both OK and not OK. Heartbroken witnesses took to the stand, heroically, to testify about the horror they had seen, in person, firsthand, and to talk about the helplessness they felt. At those very same moments that the brutality was being recounted, you could stroll placidly beside one of our famous lakes and pass a rainbow of urban humanity benignly doing the same.

OK and not OK. Beautiful, and as ugly as humanity can be, all in the same moment.

The Latin origins of the word "verdict" are a simple translation of its syllables - the word means "true statement." And we - you, me, and the world - we heard three true statements on Tuesday: guilty, guilty, guilty. These were welcome words, words that brought with them some sense of relief and an aura of justice.

But even though we have all heard that the truth shall set us free, this truth, these three truths, as welcome and as powerful and as hard-fought as they were, these truths were not the same as liberation or justice.

"How are things there in Minnesota?"

No two flakes of snow are alike, even when it snows in April, and no two reactions have been identical.

A friend of mine who was at George Floyd Square when the true statements were being read said the people around her who were under 40 cheered, and those who were over 40 cried. Perhaps those who were older were wearier of the long story of our country.

Elsewhere around the city, race and age were less accurate predictors of reactions. There are black people and white people calling to defund the police, and black people and white people who were not.

Myron Medcalf, an African-American columnist for the Star Tribune, reported feeling a bit of hope - "for the first time in a long time," [he wrote in Wednesday morning's paper](#), "I could see the light." That same day, the Unitarian Universalist minister the Rev. Karen Hutt recounted the violence that she and her African-American relatives have suffered over more than a century, and she described hope "as a naïve conundrum that doesn't inspire action... America depends on black people to wait and hope and pray," she said; "it is useless."

"How are things in Minnesota?"

Well, it's a time of valid views that contradict - contra-dict means opposite statements, but right now, these differing perspectives are all deeply rooted in what's true.

Probably even more complicated right now than the concept of hope is the concept of justice. "Justice for George Floyd" signs sprouted on buildings and lawns across the city and far beyond last summer. It is a wrenchingly familiar phrasing - Justice for Jamar, for Philando, for Breonna, for Daunte, for Ma'Khia.

The verdicts we heard this past week were right and good. But was justice achieved via what's officially called our justice system? What does justice even mean? What would it look like?

Maybe we think we know, or thought we knew. We use the word "justice" frequently in our congregation - our 2nd Unitarian Universalist principle calls for justice, equity,

and compassion in human relations, and we have a social justice minister. But what does justice look like when someone is murdered, and murdered by the state?

Old-school, Old Testament-style justice would use an eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth framework for rebalancing the scales of justice, with the goal of identical amounts of death on each side. But people of many theological stripes see the death penalty as primitive retribution, not justice, and in any case, it's not a legal option here.

Were the verdicts justice? That's been a common question these past several days. That's in part because a true, positive justice would be a reversal of Mr. Floyd's death penalty for his very minor crime; a true, positive justice would be George Floyd still living among us. Minnesota's Attorney General, Keith Ellison, was grateful for the verdicts but [said they fell short of justice](#). "Justice," he said, "implies true restoration."

I've found myself using the phrase "a measure of justice" to describe the trial's outcome. I saw other folks in recent days talking about the verdicts being "a good start" and the right step; there was a range of opinions as to whether this was justice, or merely accountability, or perhaps not even that.

When we can't undo a horrific wrong, our system that is called a justice system turns to punishment. I often think of our justice system as a punishment system. Similarly, our system that we call corrections is in many cases just a penal system, with little success in "correcting" the wrongs perpetrated or in turning around the trajectory of the perpetrators.

It's real to acknowledge that we may note some satisfaction in seeing a murderer punished, even for those of us deeply critical of the prison-industrial complex. As Kelechi Okafor, a London commentator, [said on Twitter](#), "I want prisons to not exist *but* I also want Derek Chauvin to serve 15 million years." She added: "I will unpack this in due course." There's indeed a lot to unpack for many of us, as we wrestle with contradictions informed by competing truths.

At a [nationwide UU vigil](#) held Wednesday night, the same one at which the Rev. Karen Hutt spoke, one of the speakers was [the Rev. Jason Lydon](#), a minister in Chicago who was once incarcerated for six months for an act of civil disobedience. Rev. Lydon pointed to our Universalist ancestors, who more than two centuries ago concluded that no one in the human family would ever be sent to hell by a loving God.

This viewpoint was harshly rejected by more established Christian religions, who saw the threat of eternal punishment as key to keeping humanity in line. But one need not think very hard to see how the threat of hell has failed in spectacular fashion over the millennia. "Punishment is not salvific," Rev. Lydon says. "Punishment is not transformative."

Punishment, not justice, is why George Floyd was arrested. Punishment, not justice, was what the attempt to take Daunte Wright into custody was about.

These encounters were about small amounts of money - a few hundred dollars in fines, a fake \$20 bill. They were about money and property and control. They did nothing to keep you or me or our communities safer.

They were not about public safety. They were about enforcing the law.

The [history of law enforcement](#), like so much of United States history, is steeped in race, class, and brutality. In St. Louis, the police were originally organized to protect whites from indigenous people; in the South, policing has its origins in slave patrols; in the big cities of the Northeast, the merchant class promoted centralized policing as a way to quash labor unrest amid growing populations of immigrants who were deemed "dangerous classes." Policing in the United States has deep roots in protecting the haves from the have-nots.

And while frequent attention is paid to the salaries, overtime, and pensions that provide many police officers with financially comfortable lives, policing as practiced in the United States also can hurt police. Officers are [more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty](#), and they have [a higher suicide rate](#) than the general population. Officers are witness to human tragedies and behaviors that are unimaginable to many of us, and serious questions exist about how well America's police are trained and supported.

In some European countries, it takes at least two and half years of preparation to become a police officer; in the United States, it's sometimes five months. That's not a lot of time to learn about helping people with mental illnesses, or de-escalation, or personal strategies to cope with the traumas of the job. As Paul Hirschfield, a criminal justice professor at Rutgers University, [told The Atlantic](#), "If you only have 21 weeks of classroom training, naturally you're going to emphasize survival."

There are a lot of complexities to hold, like the reality that some police department cultures are more harmful than others, a reality that, in Minneapolis, [has attracted the attention of the U.S. attorney general](#). There's the complexity that some people affected by crime and policing want the police abolished, and some of them want more police, just to increase the chance of having something coming between them and the criminals.

And there's the reality that the safest neighborhoods in just about any metro area are the neighborhoods that see the fewest police. The police aren't standing guard, keeping out the crime or actively deterring it; in the "best" neighborhoods, they're not even there. Things like real estate and zoning and housing prices and school district boundaries and transportation policies and incarceration policies - those are the things that are walling in or walling off the social problems that fuel cycles of poverty and more violent and property crime.

There's another divide that I want to mention here, because of the disproportionate political power that rural areas have in the United States.

A few weeks ago, the Star Tribune published [a news article looking at how rural Minnesotans view law enforcement differently](#) from the way many city dwellers do. And one of the reasons you'll see "we back the badge" signs on country roads is that, in small towns and sparsely populated counties, officers and deputies are not an anonymous occupying force of people who live elsewhere, which is how many of us in Minneapolis feel about our police force. Rural deputies and their families often are known in their communities, sometimes for generations, and those relationships make it easier to have a starting point of trust and accountability.

Set in predominantly white rural Minnesota, the article failed to address how indigenous people, immigrants, and people of color in those areas relate to the police. But the article helped me better understand the state and national political hurdles to making changes to law enforcement. Because there's a very wide gulf between those who see police as allies and even neighbors and friends, and those who see the police as life-ending adversaries.

So what do we do? That's a big question on a lot of minds, and it's been on my mind as I read about systemic ways to save black lives and reorient our communities toward thriving. Here are just a few ideas.

First, in our congregational community, it would be good for us to warm up whatever muscles we have to embrace complexity and difference of opinion. As UU congregations go, we are fairly uniform in our theological outlook, so we may not be as practiced with remaining in covenant when not everyone is like-minded. We have members who rightfully fear the police every time they leave the house, and we have members who have close personal connections with officers. We are not monolithic.

I encourage white people to be aware of our assumptions and of the sources of our discomfort, and of superficial, lopsided comparisons, such as “black lives” and “blue lives.” Being black in America is shaped by 400 years of violence and oppression; being a police officer is a choice. And it seems a good time to repeat the quote I shared last month from the writer Robert Jones Jr.: “We can disagree and still love each other, unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.”

My second suggestion is that all of us as citizens should acknowledge the limits of looking to the judicial system and the penal system to provide justice. By the time someone has been killed, it’s too late for justice in the truest sense. It’s impossible to bring someone back to life.

But it is possible to question how that death came about, how that life was valued less. How resources are allocated across society. It’s possible to look at who benefits from how our cities and systems are structured, and to examine how much of daily life is oriented toward preserving the wealth, comfort, safety, and separation of white Americans. It’s possible to dig deep into the rot that regularly allows white mass murderers to be taken into custody unharmed, while blacks are killed in the streets over minor infractions.

My third suggestion is that we should put all options on the table regarding the Minneapolis Police Department. It’s true that that many people of color do not feel safe around any police; it’s also true that some police cultures have more catastrophic outcomes than others. I’ve known it since I moved here nearly three decades ago; anyone who pays attention to the brutality settlements and [the mishandling of sex crimes](#) knows it; U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland and the federal government know it.

Words this week from UU minister the Rev. Kristina Spaude echoed the sentiments of some of the witnesses in the trial: “George Floyd, I wish we had done better when you were alive.” I agree. And the next unarmed victim of a police killing is still alive right

now. If we could do better by that person, we'd never have to say their name. We'd never even learn their name. Dare we dream of such a world?

There's no quick solution. Abolition is complicated in a country drowning in guns. Defunding is complicated when those most affected by crime and policing don't all agree. And believing that mere reform is enough or even possible is to believe in something for which evidence is hard to come by. Something bigger than reform may be needed.

In 2013, the police department in Camden, New Jersey, was dismantled, then reconstituted with many new hires and with training that focused on community connections and de-escalation, with training that de-emphasized the use of handcuffs and guns. Camden is still a very troubled city, but [violent crime has dropped by 40 percent](#); homicides dropped by more than half. Camden calls itself "[the birthplace of Unity Policing.](#)" Maybe Minneapolis could become the next city to have that kind of public-safety rebirth.

"How are things in the Twin Cities?"

Our out-of-town friends are going to keep asking, through the sentencing of Derek Chauvin, through the trials of the three other officers, throughout the Daunte Wright case in Brooklyn Center, through whatever happens next in the months and years to come.

We're going to keep asking ourselves that same question, too. And things are going to be OK and not OK.

There's a chance for things to be more OK than they have been in the past, than in the past 50 years, since Minneapolis switched to more of a "law and order" police model. How much more OK things get depends on our leaders - which leaders we choose, and what those leaders do in response to our votes and our pressure. This means, ultimately, that it depends on all of us.

As we go forward from our time together, may we take care of ourselves and each other. May we take action. And may each of us find a way to work toward the more just world we dream about, so all may freely breathe.