

DECIDE WHAT YOU STAND FOR

A sermon preached the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr, Rector, 7th June 2020, Trinity Sunday, at St Stephen's Church, Belvedere, CA. Based on the appointed first reading, Genesis 1. 1 - 2. 4.

“It takes all kinds to make a world.”

—John ‘Jack’ Ellsworth

From Genesis: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. . . . God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.” May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“It takes all kinds to make a world.” I heard my Grandpa Jack say that time and again. They are the words I most remember him by. Today I want to speak of two Whites. First, Vicky. You know her as Victoria, the woman I get through the nights with and enter every new day beside. Vicky White was born in Brussels but grew up in the Congo. The daughter of American medical missionaries Muriel and Robert White, her father was, when they lived in Wembo-Nyama, the only physician in a 300-mile radius.

In 1964 Chinese-Communist-inspired rebels were committing atrocities in the Congo. Whites were being shot on sight. Their skin wasn't the ‘right’ color. American Embassy officials told all missionaries and their families to leave the area but said doctors could stay if they chose. The United States Army airlifted many families, including the Whites, out of country. The plane carrying them was so overloaded it clipped the tops of the trees at the end of the runway. Her father didn't board the plane; he feared it wouldn't clear those trees, and he had Congolese patients who were going to die if he abandoned them. For two months the family didn't know whether Robert Bracken White was alive.

He made it. He made it to safety because of the compassion and bravery of the Congolese. Some were patients whose lives he'd saved; all of those who came to his aid decided to take a stand. They created an escape route out of the country. At one point the Congolese put their bodies between him and rebels who wanted to kill him because he was White.

The other White is Kim. Kim White and I became friends because her husband, Dr Benjamin White, a retired Lieutenant Colonel of the U.S. Army, a West Point man, was my son's ROTC commander in college. (Benny was a wide receiver for Army when they played in the Rose Bowl. Everything relates to football.) I don't know better people or a better family than Kim and Ben and BJ and Logan. Here is Kim in her own words, writing on May 30th:

Keeping it real today. I've been trying to write this post for the last few days, but every time I started writing, the tears started too and I was unable to see what I was writing so I would stop and promise to come back to it. Today, despite the tears, I'm committed to it.

As I write, my husband is sitting across from me, in our shared home office, writing down his own thoughts. He's pounding away on the keyboard. I don't know exactly what he is writing, but I know he is frustrated. I know he is sad and I know he is not ok.

As I write, our daughter is on a call with work colleagues. Her company has had a number of open conversations, via Zoom, to let their employees talk, share, and vent. During the past few weeks, she has shed many tears, probably more than me. She's 24. She has an answer for every question put before her, except one: why is there still so much hate? I know she is frustrated. I know she is sad. I know she is not ok.

As I write, our son is out on a run. Yep, he came into the office and said, “I'm going for a run.” He's a runner — he should be able to go for a run. Period.

But at that moment, the three of us locked eyes, all thinking the same thing. He sees the fear in his parent's eyes, and we see the fear in his. He kisses me on the cheek, dad says be safe and off he went.

I have a pit in my stomach, but I remind myself

— he knows the rules when he leaves the house.

He's 28. We've been over them a gazillion times. Stay on the main road. Keep your hands out of your pockets. Comply. Don't talk back. We will deal with what we have to deal with after the fact...just come home alive. Our son is well aware that his Blackness makes some uneasy. He can't bring himself to watch the videos... I know he is frustrated, I know he is sad and I know he is not ok.

As a mother of Black children, my journey has been and continues to be different than those who are not raising Black children. While our hopes and dreams may be similar, our fears when our kids walk out the door are not. I prayed for my kids to never feel the sting of racism but unfortunately that prayer wasn't answered. They've spent countless nights in my arms as I held them and wiped away their tears and not because of a relationship gone bad but because someone called them the "N" word or monkey.

As adults, they continue to share stories of injustices that they've personally experienced and those of their friends. I feel helpless. I am frustrated, I am sad and I am not ok.

I'm thankful that my children are back home with us during this pandemic. I can't imagine them being alone in their respective apartments back east during this time of isolation. I'm thankful we are able to share in the day-to-day routine with each other. We've had mostly good days, but on our not so good days, we mourned the loss of our beloved dog, BeLo, the passing of one of Benny's cousins due to the coronavirus, and the murders of three people none of us knew and yet each of us felt a connection to: Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd. SAY THEIR NAMES.

As I write, I hear the door open. Our son is home. He's breathing. He's alive.

The death of George Floyd has touched a nerve in our country. Peaceful protesting can lead to meaningful change in hearts, minds, and policies.

Looting and rioting do not; they harm, and harm disproportionately, the people who need help.

What can you and I do to make things better? Much of what follows comes from Kim White.

- Acknowledge the inequities in our country that disadvantage Black people.
- All lives matter of course, but we're focused on Black lives now the way the world, after 9/11, focused and said, We're all Americans now.
- Acknowledge and confront your racial biases. We all have them.
- Acknowledge and strongly believe that racism has no place in our community and our country.
- Engage in conversations with people who don't look like you.
- Call out people/friends in your circle when they 'joke'.
- Be an ally. Be an ally the way the Congolese were who got Robert White to safety. Put your body on the line between Black people and racism.

Finally: Don't be afraid. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself — and Japanese Americans." (No, FDR didn't say that exactly; I add the last part because his Executive Order 9066 forced the relocation and incarceration of Japanese Americans. In California if you had as little as 1/16th Japanese lineage you were forced into internment camps. It was a racist thing to do.) Don't be afraid to be uncomfortably honest, to straighten someone's tie when necessary, including your own, to the glory of God. Don't be afraid to be faithful. As Clayton Christensen used to say to his students at Harvard Business School, "Decide what you stand for. And then stand for it all the time."

"It takes all kinds to make a world." In the name of the Holy Trinity who creates us all, every one of us, in the image of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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For more information about our life and mission, and how to connect with us as we gather virtually, please visit our website at ststephenschurch.org.

Let us know how to pray for you by emailing us at info@ststephenschurch.org.

And please, remember us in your prayers.