

As we all continue sorting out the many disturbing events of recent months, a friend gave me a copy of the following sermon by Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II. Dr. Barber is Pastor of the Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina, President of the North Carolina NAACP, Architect of the [Forward Together Moral Monday Movement](#), and an Auburn Senior Fellow.¹ I think his words merit our attention



The painful and dangerous message: Only Black Deaths Matter.

Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II | July 13, 2015 ²

“During my meditation on the messages being sent out from South Carolina this week, three scriptures came to me:

Jeremiah 31:15 – *This is what the LORD says: “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

John 8:32 – *Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

Isaiah 58:1-3 – *Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. “Why have we fasted,” they say, “and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?”*

Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.”

“When the Confederate flag was removed from the South Carolina statehouse Friday morning, Gov. Nikki Haley spoke solemnly of the nine Black churchgoers who were shot to death less than a month ago at Charleston’s Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. ‘We have all been struck by what was a tragedy we didn’t think we would ever encounter,’ Haley said of the horrifying massacre. Before signing the bill with nine pens that will go to the families of the victims, she called those who were murdered during Bible Study at the historic church, ‘Nine amazing people that forever changed South Carolina’s history.’ The Governor referenced the ‘grace’ shown by the nine families, when they forgave the white gunman. She said their grace helped usher the state toward this long overdue decision.

¹ See also <http://www.naacpnc.org/president>

² www.groundswell-mvmt.org/our-nation-is-in-need-of-prophetic-pastoral-counseling-because-it-is-sending-the-message-only-black-deaths-matter

“The assassinations at Emanuel A.M.E. Church, followed by the public forgiveness from the grieving families, were similarly cited by several South Carolina lawmakers as their reason for voting to remove the flag. What they are really saying is that Black Deaths Matter, not our lives. Black people in the US are only deemed worthy of action in their death, not in their life.

“In a year that has seen thousands in the streets, young and old, black white and brown, saying to the nation, ‘Black Lives Matter,’ the painful and dangerous message coming from South Carolina this week is: Only Black Deaths Matter. That’s the painful and dangerous narrative being developed out of South Carolina; it’s a narrative that the oppressed of this land have known for a long time: Only Black *Deaths* Matter.

“Our nation is capable of doing the right thing – such as taking down the Confederate flag in the year 2015, a flag that represents the racist, immoral, unconstitutional defense of slavery and Jim Crow – but only when Black deaths happen and are met by a response deemed acceptable by those in power. Ever since this flag was raised in 1961, to send the message that South Carolina would not honor equal protection under the law, tens of thousands of small and large protests have not been enough to move the power brokers to take it down.

“In 1968, in Orangeburg South Carolina Highway Patrolmen shot and killed Black college students protesting racial segregation at a bowling alley. No one has ever been charged with those murders. But even this was not enough to bring the flag down.

“For 15 years the NAACP has boycotted South Carolina; but that wasn’t enough. In fact, for several years, my good friend and brother Dr. Lonnie Randolph, President of the SC NAACP, invited me to stand with him and NAACP’ers from North and South Carolina to raise a prophetic message at the state capitol during King Day at the Dome in front of that same flag, exhorting one and all, even God in heaven, to take it down. My church denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a predominantly white progressive body, committed to an anti-racism theology, honored the boycott. So I joined Dr. Randolph and all the NAACP warriors who refused to spend a dime in South Carolina for 15 years, with the cautious yet joyful feelings as the flag came down.

“Taking down the flag is a good thing. But when we look at the voting and policy records of most of the political leaders who helped to lower it, we should be careful with equating its removal as a history-altering event. Systemic racism is alive and well; they show no intention yet of dealing with the fundamental inequalities racism still causes in our society.

“But the power of racism has a strange endurance. This history of refusing to bring down the flag, despite even what happened in Orangeburg, shows that Black deaths alone are not enough to bring change. According to what some politicians and media commentators have implied, knowingly or unknowingly: Only if the murders are caused by someone who had posed for photos of himself surrounded by racist paraphernalia, and only if the deaths are accompanied by acceptable Black love and forgiveness, then it might matter. Then it passes the racist paternalistic standard and tone test. Clearly it has been said without these deaths there never would have been a debate regarding bringing the flag down. And herein lies a painful reality: Only extreme Black deaths will precede mediocre symbolic steps against past and present racism.

“We need serious pastoral counseling if we cannot see how ungodly it is to think that a ‘reciprocal grace’ response to nine Black deaths is the removal of a flag. Much has been said about the families’ forgiveness, but in the theological and nonviolent tradition of the Movement I come from, such forgiveness should not be misinterpreted as a dismissal of the greater evil. In fact, the type of Christian forgiveness of Dylann Roof is actually a subversive forgiveness

that says the nation cannot place the entirety of the blame on the individual perpetrator alone. The system and culture that produced the climate and perpetrator must also be indicted.

“Let us be clear about what’s being said: nine Black deaths may get the flag lowered, but it will not get you one pen to sign Medicaid expansion throughout the South, which would save thousands of Black lives.

“Black deaths will not get full voting rights, which saves Black political power and produces policies that save black, brown and poor white lives. It will not get criminal justice reform, which liberates Black lives. Nor will it get you full funding for public education, a living wage, or economic empowerment that will lift the lives of black people, minorities, and the poor. It will not get gun reform.

“Black deaths only get you the lowering of a low-down flag that should have never been up. It will get you nine pens as memorabilia and a signing ceremony at the Capitol. It will get you one final insult in the promise that an undignified flag, a symbol of hate, will be lowered ‘with dignity and respect’ as Governor Haley promised white people still committed to the Lost Cause. And you will get this only if Black people die, and the victims’ families and extended family in the human race behave in a manner declared acceptable and ‘Christian’ by people who have supported un-Christian, immoral public policy that continues to institutionalize economic, racial and political inequality.

“We cannot allow this narrative to stand unchallenged. If we do, we are complicit in the furtherance of a chilling truth that Black lives don’t matter . . . only Black death matters. I cannot help but remember in the movie *Glory*, when Black soldiers had to march to certain death in order for white Union soldiers, their comrades, to salute them! I cannot help but remember how four black girls had to be blown up at 16th Street Baptist Church in order to get certain people to consider that racism and Alabama Gov. George Wallace had gone too far. And it was only after Dr. King was murdered that we won the Fair Housing Act.

“Medgar Evers, James Earl Chaney, Jimmy Jackson, and scores of other black warriors, along with Andrew Goodman, Viola Liuzzo, James Reeb, and Michael Schwerner — white, but with black liberation in their hearts — had to die to get real action on voting rights legislation to enforce what was already our right from the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments of the United States Constitution. At least, in these cases, the Movement set the benchmarks for the policy changes we wanted. Now staunch adversaries of civil rights are the ones who decide the benchmarks they will ‘graciously’ give in response to Black deaths – that is, IF they approve of how we express our sorrow and grief. This is a kind of desecration and devaluing of even our deaths.

“Adding insult to injury, while we are having a photo-op next to the ‘dignified’ removal of the flag in South Carolina, their counterparts in US Congress actually debated whether to keep the same flag flying on federal property, of the same government land that the flag sought to overthrow. To some of them, Black lives, Black emotions, Black history, and Black pain don’t matter. Human beings, deeply hurt by death, are the only creatures who don’t have to respond with death. **But we must refuse to be easily comforted, and not to be tricked by cosmetic fixes. Our ability to forgive is, in reality, an act of resistance to the attempts to lay the blame for this horror at the feet of one man.**

“Two days after the nine assassinations at Mother Emanuel, I was asked to preach at New York’s renowned Riverside Church a sermon, which I later completed in my own pulpit, and said in light of the arrest of Dylann Roof:

[The perpetrator has been caught. But the killers are still at large.](#) The deep well of American racism and white supremacy that Dylann Roof drank from remains. The families of the nine martyrs challenged the schizophrenia of American morality that allowed political leaders to condemn the crime and at the same time embrace the policies that are its genesis.

Many of South Carolina politicians and others in the nation are examples. They decry the killings but steadfastly refuse to support efforts to quell their divisive rhetoric and to cease their push for policies that promote race-based voter suppression. They refuse to vote for the Voting Rights Act. They cut funds for public education in ways that foster re-segregation. They deny workers living wages. They refuse Medicaid expansion. They proliferate guns. They use racialized code words to criticize the president, all in the name of taking “their” country back to “prevent its destruction.”

When will they own up to the fact that there is a history of racialized political rhetoric and policies that directly spawn the pathology of terroristic assassinations and carnages, and of violent resistance to constitutional decisions.

—A Message to America in the Midst of Our Mourning, Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II

“If America is serious about this moment, we cannot cry ceremonial tears while refusing to support the martyred Pastor and his Parishioners’ stalwart fight against the racism that gave birth to the crime. Gov. Haley said the people killed in that Charleston church, and the forgiving actions of their families, set the Confederate flag’s removal in motion. If that’s the case, then the actions of Black-led protests don’t matter. Black political power doesn’t matter. Only in the face of nine Black deaths, and a certain acceptable perceived response, will anything be done.

“If this is the standard, how many Black deaths will it take to secure restoration of the Voting Rights Act, Medicaid expansion, public education funding, living wages or criminal justice reform? I shudder to think. This nation needs counseling and redemption until Black Lives Matters. And when Black Lives Matter, then all lives will matter. The dehumanization of Black Lives dehumanizes all lives.

“If the nation gets real sustained pastoral counseling, then, as Denise Quarles, the daughter of Emanuel victim Myra Thompson, said: ‘On the other side of that tragedy, we see a lot of positives coming out. Maybe people will change their hearts.’ Maybe we can be redeemed. Maybe we can do the real work of addressing the catastrophe of institutional racism. Maybe. Let us believe in maybe. This nation needs prophetic pastoral counseling at a time like this. But as any good counselor knows, it will be up to us to do the work, and that is yet to be seen. . . .”

My friends, these are hard words. They are important words. ***So what do we do now?***

Dave