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What Does #DefundThePolice Really Mean?

Awakening Our Abolitionist Imaginations

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This coming Tuesday, May 25 is the one-year anniversary of the death of George Floyd. Michael Eric Dyson, in his powerful book Long Time Coming: Reckoning with Race in America, devastatingly described the video of Floyd’s final minutes as **“the most affecting murder by a cop that we have witnessed in the homemade cinema of Black death”** (67). In response, along with many of you, I participated in what became **“the largest and most sustained round of protests this country has seen since the 1960s”** (New York Times). The number and size of these protests around the country—and around the world—is all the more remarkable for having happened despite the complications of the Covid-19 pandemic.

I should also mention two important pieces of background. As part of the protests last summer, I offered a well-attended presentation on the background behind the #DefundThePolice slogan. And I preached a sermon on **“What Does Prison Abolition Really Mean?”** The slides and text from both are available through the **“Resources”** link under the #BlackLivesMatter section in the upper right side of frederickuu.org. I can’t say everything there is to say in one sermon about the large and interconnected issue of policing, prisons, race, class, and more in our society. So although I’ve designed this sermon to be understood on its own, I have also tried to focus on aspects we haven’t covered previously.

I also committed last summer to preach a sermon today, on the Sunday closest to the one-year anniversary of Floyd's murder, as one among many parts of making the response to his murder not a mere *moment* in time, but part of a longterm *movement* for systemic change. As the saying goes, **"A movement, not a moment."**

And I could talk for a long time this morning about the long line of similar outrages that preceded Floyd's death. And I could talk for a long time about all the similar outrages that have continued to happen in the year since his death. But I want to do more today than stoke outrage, although by all means outrage is one appropriate response. Instead, I want to invite us to spend this limited time exploring how we might responsibly change the system to co-create a different and better world.

We all have different touch-points for understanding how we arrived at our current societal circumstances. I will share just one example from my own life, and I encourage you to consider what the parallels have been in your own consciousness-raising around these issues. My first real awareness of the problem of racist police brutality was the assault on Rodney King. I was fourteen years old when the acquittal of those four police officers triggered days of rioting—or uprisings, if you prefer—in Los Angeles. As the journalist Sarah Kendzior has said, "I remember with Rodney King, the anticipation that it would be different, that the officers' guilt was undeniable because this time the evidence was on video. I was a kid then and nothing has changed except there are more videos. **No justice, only sequels**" ([Twitter](#)).

Now, on the one hand, a guilty verdict has delivered some justice for George Floyd. On the other hand, I will limit myself to one among many examples of how the end of that trial did not bring about the entirety of the better world we dream about: Ma'Khia Bryant, a 16-year-old girl, was killed by police officers on the same day that Derek Chauvin was declared guilty of murdering George Floyd. It is important to wrestle with these complicated truths, but I also don't want to get lost in debating the details of one case. If we zoom out, a more salient statistic is that the guilty verdict in the case of Derek Chauvin is highly unusual. **"The murder conviction of a police officer is an exceedingly rare event. There have been only seven murder convictions of officers for fatal police shootings since 2005"** ([The New York Times](#)).

Now, for the sake of argument, we could stipulate that many police shootings may be justified. But what has led to so many protests against police brutality over the years—from the L.A. riots thirty years ago to the George Floyd protests last summer and so much before that and in between—is a growing sense that the system is too often rigged in ways that are not holding police officers accountable for routine cruelty, wanton abuse of power, and even murder. In the words of one *New York Times* reporter, **“a wide gulf remains between the public perception of police violence and how it is treated in court”** ([New York Times](#)).

If you want to dive into the data, one excellent resource is *The Washington Post*'s Police Shooting Database. For now, I will highlight one particularly relevant statistic: **“Black Americans are killed at a much higher rate than White Americans:** Although half of the people shot and killed by police are White, Black Americans are shot at a disproportionate rate. They account for less than 13 percent of the U.S. population, but are killed by police at more than twice the rate of White Americans” ([The Washington Post](#)).

So, in the words of our UU Sixth Principle, what might we do differently to create a world with “peace, liberty, and justice”—not merely for some, but “for all?” Arising out of the George Floyd protests, the most attention-catching and controversial slogan of what we might do is #DefundThePolice, and I want to invite us to go deeper into the context around that hashtag.

Let me say up front that, no one is saying that all police officers are bad. We have members of this congregation who are police officers, as well as members and friends of this congregation who have close family members who are police officers. Likewise, we have members of this congregation who have had horrific encounters with the police. I can think of two scary encounters I've had personally with authoritarian, abusive police officers, and I'm a pretty privileged white dude. #DefundthePolice is bigger than what any individual does or doesn't do; it's a call for change at the level of systems, institutions, and culture.

Activists would invite us to consider that behind #DefundthePolice, “The message is clear. Policing in America is broken, and must change.” As a starting point for addressing the needed change, it important to acknowledge that we're not just

talking theoretically. We already know that the way things are here in the United States is not the only way to approach public safety. Our county spends more on policing “than almost all its peer countries and much less, relatively speaking, on social services” ([The New York Times](#)). So when you hear *defund* the police, what that slogan is calling for is not only taking money away from the police, but also **reallocating that money to fund conditions that help prevent the need for police in the first place**, such as a more equitable distribution of wealth, “safe and affordable housing, health care, education, living wage employment, child care, and mental health treatment” ([Ritchie 241](#)). The hope is that the resulting better living conditions will eliminate many of the root causes that contribute to violent crimes being committed.

In addition to improving the social safety net, there are interesting studies showing that it is even more effective in lowering violent crime rates if cities also fund “physical upkeep: knocking down vacant buildings, cleaning vacant lots, putting in streetlights and video cameras” ([The New York Times](#)).

To add in another important angle, the controversial debates about #DefundThePolice often fail to mention the ways that police misconduct has been “defunding cities” for decades. In the past ten years alone, U.S. cities have “spent more than \$3 billion to settle misconduct lawsuits” ([538](#)). Even with just the murder of George Floyd, the city of Minneapolis will pay \$27 million to his family to settle a wrongful-death lawsuit ([The Washington Post](#)). All of that money—as well as all the human suffering and anguish—over an alleged counterfeit \$20 bill.

Again: behind the hashtag #DefundThePolice, the message is clear, *policing in America is broken, and we need systemic, institutional, and cultural change*. And here’s where I want to invite us to go one step further. Some of you may be thinking, why not use a different slogan? Well, for one thing, #ReallocatePoliceBudgets isn’t quite as attention-catching. And #FundCommunity doesn’t directly address the argument that many activists precisely attribute a major source of the problem as over-funding police. And whether various ones of us ultimately agree or disagree, I do want us to at least understand that an increasing number of social justice activists do *literally* want to #DefundThePolice completely—in the sense of total abolition—and they mean it in a quite serious and sober way.

Let me say more about that by way of introducing you to the New York City-based educator and organizer Mariame Kaba; for anyone unfamiliar, Kaba is among the most interesting and influential people in the burgeoning abolitionist movement. Similar to how Rodney King was a wake up call for me, Kaba names the “police killing of Michael Stewart as formative to her own political awakening. On September 15, 1983, Stewart, a twenty-five-year-old African-American artist, was arrested for graffitiing the subway. Transit police beat and hog-tied him; he never regained consciousness. Nearly two years later, an all-white jury acquitted six police officers accused of murdering Stewart” (New Yorker).

Long before the police killing of George Floyd raised awareness about #DefundThePolice, Kaba has been a leader in the movement to dismantle our current system of policing and prison in this country. If you are curious to learn more, a few months ago Kaba published an important book titled We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice. It is pretty short at around 200 pages, and both accessibly and engagingly written.

It opens with an important essay titled “So You’re Thinking about Becoming an Abolitionist?” That essay alone is worth the price of admission and makes some crucial points. Perhaps the biggest misunderstanding about the abolitionist movement is that they want to get rid of police and prisons tomorrow and leave the rest of the world as it is. That would be a disaster. Instead, abolitionists are about something more interesting. They are challenging us to be more honest about all the ways that our current approaches to policing and caging our fellow citizens are also a disaster—and then to imagine “What would our country look like if we had billions of extra dollars [currently spent on policing and prisons] to spend [instead] on housing, food, and education for all” (Kaba 17).

This question gets to the core of Kaba’s definition of what the contemporary abolitionist movement is all about: “creating the conditions that would allow for the dismantling of prisons, policing, and surveillance and the creation of new institutions that actually work to keep us safe and are not fundamentally oppressive” (72). We’re not going to get there tomorrow, but what if we started the process of taking significant steps in that direction?

None of this means that if your life is in imminent danger later today that you shouldn't call the police. But if your life is not in imminent danger, it does invite you to pause and ask if there are alternatives to calling the police:

- **“Is this merely an inconvenience to me? Can I put up with this and be okay?”**
- **“Can I handle this on my own? Is this something I could try to talk-out with the person?”** ([SURJ](#))

We need to be honest about the many times that calling the police—and having officers show up with guns—has made situations worse and too often lethal in ways that might have been avoided.

Relatedly, the abolitionist movement is calling us to ask **“Why do we not have other well-resourced options...to reduce harm?”** (2-3). Why is sending armed police officers often the only option? Here the case of George Floyd can be a compelling example. What if there had been an option for the store clerk to call someone else to the scene—someone who was not armed with lethal weapons—in response to a possibly counterfeit \$20. No one needs to die over \$20. Similarly, ask yourself, if there is a car accident, is a police officer with a gun necessary? I could go on with countless examples—mental health crises, school yard fight, etc.—in which armed police officers are often not the best equipped to respond.

Shifting funding from the police to teams of social workers, mental health specialists, and/or meditators with nonviolent intervention training could de-escalate the vast majority of situations and begin holding various parties accountable in ways that have less of a chance of becoming abusive or lethal ([The New York Times](#)). There have already been successful programs along these lines, but what if we tried funding these problems not with thousands of dollars, but with the millions and billions currently spent on policing?

Last month, I should name that there was one move in the direction of greater police accountability close to home. Maryland became “the first state to repeal its powerful Law Enforcement Officers’ Bill of Rights and set new rules for when police may use force and how they are investigated and disciplined” ([The Washington Post](#)).

More broadly, further steps could include passing [The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act](#), which (among other things) "bans chokeholds and would end qualified

immunity for police officers.” This bill passed the U.S. United States House of Representatives in February, but will continue languishing in the Senate unless there is filibuster reform. The BREATHE Act, supported by the Movement for Black Lives, would go further to “divest taxpayer dollars from policing and invest in alternate, community-based approaches to public safety” (66-67).

The good news is that around the country there are increasing examples of experiments in these directions. To name only a few examples:

- In Denver, Colorado, there has been success with “A program that replaces police officers with health care workers on mental health and substance abuse calls” (CBS News).
- In Austin, Texas, the City Council has recently reallocated funding from the police budget to purchase a hotel that will be transformed into “60 units of permanent supportive housing for people experiencing chronic homelessness” (The Appeal).
- In Seattle, Washington, the city is reallocating \$30 million from its police budget through a “participatory budgeting” process that will allow the public to help discern the most needed health and safety priorities (The Appeal).
- In San Francisco, California, voters abolished the law mandating that police officers not fall below a previously established minimal level of 1,971 full-time officers (The Appeal).

There is, of course, a lot more to say about all this. For now, I hope that you have some further context for understanding the slogan #DefundThePolice, and that I have helped to awaken our individual and collective imagination further that the way things are is not the way they have to be. Another world is possible. Kaba often says it this way: “Hope is a discipline.” We have to act one step at a time toward creating the world we dream about. There is no promise that the journey will be easy, but I am grateful to be on that journey with all of you.