

In the aftermath of the Trayvon Martin verdict, two members of UBE's (United Black Episcopalians) leadership, the Rev. Randy Callender, young adults advisor and Alexizendria Link, youth advisor, offer the following reflections.

The Power of Love vs. Institutional Racism

By The Rev. Randy Callender

Since George Zimmerman was acquitted of murdering Trayvon Martin, I haven't been able to shake the profound sadness in my heart. Many have said, "That could have been my child on that Florida street, confronted by that gun." As an expectant father, I've said that myself. And I've continued to feel deeply the conviction that Trayvon Martin was not served by the system ostensibly there to serve all of us.

From my experiences mentoring urban young people and leading numerous Bible studies in prisons, I've learned that this situation is not singular it's representative. In countless episodes throughout our history, the American justice system has failed. This failure – and all others – should cause us to press essential questions about how we relate to each other across racial lines.

Recently, I've been struck by the messages in the Jimi Hendrix lyric, "When the power of love overcomes the love of power only then will the world know peace." Drawing on my experiences and with that thought as an anchor, I've become increasingly convinced that institutional racism is one of the strongest forces dividing this country. The verdict and the country's response to the verdict are evidence of that.

I believe that the love of power is the root of institutional racism. Robert Fuller once said, "The most important misconception of the last century was the belief that some people were superior." I maintain that misconception is alive and destructive in this century. In the political sense, egalitarianism requires that all of us be treated equally. Institutional racism requires the continual affirmation that the love of power is right. Institutional racism requires institutionalized inequality – superiority and inferiority – in order to persist.

While overt racism is no longer acceptable and the N-word is more frequently condemned, the visible effects of institutional racism are everywhere: this verdict, our children's right to walk the streets unhindered, and black-on-black violence. As an African American male, I know that we urgently need to address black-on-black violence. But we can't use its scourge as a cover for the very real issue that comes with institutional racism: acceptance of the lack of value for African American men in the American justice system.

With racism buried in the institutions that we look to as foundations of egalitarianism – due process under law, for example – we have entrenched inequality that is more difficult than ever to surface and abolish. We can start by digging in and advocating for laws that will help keep our children from entering the justice system: stronger gun control laws and the end of stand-your-ground laws.

Trayvon Martin didn't have the chance to speak about what he undoubtedly knew was happening to him: he was tagged as a threat and pursued because of his appearance. He never had the choice to say to his accuser, his ultimate attacker, "I forgive you for

deciding that I was a criminal because of the color of my skin. I forgive you for taking away my ability to be on the street at night – or at any time – without questioning my right to be there. And I forgive you for using the legal system to question my character when I can't defend myself.”

As we wait for the trial of Michael Dunn and look expectantly for a verdict, we have a renewed opportunity to speak truth to power. If Dunn is found guilty in this murder trial, many will see it as a victory for African Americans scarred by centuries of injustice within the American legal system. A guilty verdict won't be the end of that injustice. It should be a challenge to all of us to focus on transforming our country into a multiracial, multicultural and love-based society.

By virtue of geography, we live together. Through God's gift of free will, we can make the choice to stand together for the end of institutional racism. Together, choosing to heed God's intent for us, we can leave behind the love of power that divides us. We can become a nation where individual strength and pride does not come from superiority over others. Instead, we will achieve collective strength from the sure knowledge that submitting to the power of love brings us closer to living our Creator's command: “Love one another as I have loved you. Love your neighbor as yourself.”