

# An Oasis of Hope in an Upended World

*President Whitaker's message to the King community on June 4, 2020*

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Dear Members of the King Community:

It should go without saying that King University as a Christian academic community unequivocally rejects and condemns racism, bigotry, hatefulness, cruelty, unlawful violence, and the dehumanization of others—in all its forms. Sadly, we have seen in our nation in recent days evidence that there remains much work to do to address such conduct and attitudes. And that calls us all to take a stand for that which is better, that which is good, and that which affirms the dignity of every human being as made in the image of God.

A white Minneapolis police officer by all available evidence cavalierly killed an African-American man suspected of a non-violent offense, the officer using obviously excessive and unnecessary force. He and his fellow officers ignored George Floyd's pleas for help as he was asphyxiated and died, the cause of his death the police officer's knee on his neck—an ugly reality and ugly symbol, both. Trials to come will presumably make even more plain for the world exactly what happened and answer the cries for judicial justice. But however that is resolved, the larger issues of equal treatment and justice under the law will remain, and remind us all that one cannot take for granted any of the values we hold dear as a nation: they require our attention, our work, our vigilance.

In a democracy such as ours—with bedrock Constitutional guarantees of free speech and peaceable assembly—the right to protest peacefully is not only permissible but seen as a positive (if sometimes uncomfortable) good. And, indeed, across the country there have been peaceful protests uniting people across racial and ethnic divides in response to what happened to George Floyd. This should encourage us and give us hope.



Sadly, however—despite urgings from George Floyd's family that protests remain peaceful—many of the protests were hijacked or overshadowed by people who did not share that commitment to peace, who had a violent political agenda unrelated to George Floyd's death, and who seemed to lack all moral compass. Indeed, much of what followed reflected the same callous disregard for life, the same dehumanization of others, and the same assumption there would be no accountability that were on display in George Floyd's tragic death. Evil begets evil, and now in addition to George Floyd's senseless death by police brutality are also the deaths of multiple innocents, young and old—most reportedly being African Americans; the destruction of minority businesses and low-income housing; the loss of jobs held by minorities in urban areas especially; and many other individual and societal wounds not easily or quickly healed.

At each stage of this terrible unfolding of events we have witnessed not just cruelty and the cheapening of human life, but also others actively encouraging the same and taking apparent glee at the suffering of others. It is a repulsive sight for any civilized person, one would assume, and yet we see it, again and again.

Our natural reaction at all of this is, frankly, a selfish and defensive one: to tell others: "I'm not like that." There is much moral preening by politicians and pundits and others eager to be seen as better people than that—and the hope is that, in fact, we are. But the danger of such proclamations (and, indeed, an e-mail like this one) is that they can too easily be such an exercise in self-flattery, accomplishing nothing, changing nothing.

There is a story of G.K. Chesterton being asked by a journalist what was wrong with the world, to which he supposedly replied simply: “I am.” And that is the proper Christian response to seeing such corruption of character—to first assess ourselves, not brag to others how good we are. The Reformed tradition sometimes uses the jarringly harsh term *total depravity* to describe the condition and inclination of humanity. Given all we have seen on the news—most especially the horrendous video showing Derek Chauvin’s knee on the dying George Floyd’s neck—the term seems sadly spot-on and not in the least excessive. But that theological descriptor was not aiming to describe just other bad people—but *each of us* when judged by the standard of a perfect and holy God. It presumes what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn observed when he said “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” No matter how “good” we may think ourselves (especially in contrast to the evil we have all witnessed), we fall desperately short of the standard God sets for us—and indeed cannot meet that standard on our own, apart from God. As the Prayer Book in my tradition puts it, “Apart from [God’s] grace, there is no health in us.” If we are self-satisfied as we look at the cruel and indifferent police officer who caused George Floyd’s death or as we look at the vicious mobs causing so much pain to others, or if our focus is on congratulating ourselves in front of others for being better than that, *we entirely miss the point*—and the opportunity to address and seek help from God for what is wrong with us.

So might I respectfully suggest that the first thing each of us should do at this troubling moment is examine ourselves, not against a political or social measure, but against the much higher standard of Jesus. In doing so, if we are honest with ourselves, we will find that we fall desperately short in how we view and prejudge and treat others, individually and collectively. We do let skin color and ethnicity and nationality and gender and sexuality and other factors unfairly inform our judgments and actions. We do not as we should listen to and seek to understand those whose experiences diverge markedly from our own. We do not treat others as we wish to be treated. We do not forgive as we ought. We do not love as we are commanded. We may not have not done any of the terrible things we are witnessing, but the same reflex to put ourselves

first at the expense of others and God is in each of us, and we need to be remedied of that. The presenting symptoms may be different, but the malignant disease is the same. As Christians, we believe there is only one miraculous cure.

Only three years ago we were beginning Fall Semester in the shadow of the white supremacist marches through Charlottesville, Virginia. I wrote the community then to reassure everyone here and those soon arriving about the welcoming character and high expectations of this place: of how racial prejudice is antithetical to our Christian worldview; how King has a strong civil rights record and example; how we value diversity in all its dimensions; and how our mission leaves no room for prejudice, bigotry, or the dehumanization of others.

[You can find my 2017 words here](#), and I commend them to you. Sadly, they remain relevant and necessary. But they also describe King as a place that can (and must), owing to its strengths and character be better than what is possible elsewhere, a place of genuine Christian hospitality and welcome, of fair and equal treatment. Right now, it is most important that our African-American colleagues, students, friends, and community members know that King and the entire King family supports them in what is a difficult and trying time, when so many hopes and expectations have been toppled or put into doubt. We must all work to ensure King is always a place where hope is renewed and flourishes: an oasis of hope in an upended world.

What a year 2020 has been—and it’s not yet half over—an *annus horribilis* to be sure. But just as the pandemic has the potential to strengthen us and reorder our priorities, perhaps the tragic death of George Floyd and all the terrible aftermath can yet do likewise if we look to God to redeem it—in our lives, in our families, in our cities and nation, and in this—our King community.

May it be our prayer together that this be so.



**Alexander W. Whitaker**  
President