

Opening Prayer for Little River UCC Juneteenth Protest

In Gooding Graveyard (*adjacent to Pleasant Valley Memorial Park, Annandale, VA*)
June 19, 2020

Offered and Written by Dawn Jefferson

Oh God of the Nile River Valley, Creator of rivers that flow from the bosom of creation from the land of brown and sun-kissed people. We acknowledge You today in Your power and authority. We ask for Your mercy and once again Your grace. We ask for forgiveness as we stand in a graveyard that tells the story of continued oppression. The root of slavery stretches way back before the Egyptians and its fruits and its curse extend to this very day: Juneteenth of 2020. God, we would like to first give honor to our ancestors and speak the name of every person, every human being, every enslaved soul who was kept hostage and dominated by members of the Gooding family.

We speak the names of those who forcibly served the Goodings and their surrounding community against their wills for decades in Fairfax County. To each mother and father, each child, each friend who worked this land, was passed down as property and chattel, and then was buried here anonymously.

We speak the names of: *Mark, Mary, Jacob, Laura, Lucy, Lina, Leah, Ben, Harrich, Kitty, Charles, Armistead, Julia, Milly, John, Herbert, Rachel, Emily, George, Rachel, John, Ella, Mark, Steven, Fanny, Sibyl, Harry, Albert, Lana, Dinah, Sally, Westley, Frederich, Cecelia, Caroline, Lucinda, Lucy, Darry, Jim, Jackson, and Edmond.* And all those whose names are not in the record.

We ask that you hold the memory of the lives of all those names we will not discover, who breathed in life and lived a life in bondage, and died. We say their names to speak peace to their souls. May the spirit of the ancestors aligned with your Holy Spirit give us the strength for this journey, this assignment, this act of resistance and future resistances.

We receive the prophetic assignment proclaimed in Jeremiah: "to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant." We agree that "the weapons of our [resistances] are not of this world alone, but are divine power to demolish strongholds." Dismantle systems of death, supplanting codified laws that maintain poverty and mass produced violence. We expose the loopholes of justice and ask that mercy be visited upon those who are defenseless, subjugated, and disenfranchised.

We speak to all of the ancestors in this cemetery today. To each baby and child, each woman and man. We speak restoration to family trees and households, to bloodlines tainted with violent rape, manipulation, and subterfuge. For the decades and hundreds of families bound by the peculiar institution known as American slavery, recaptured after manumission, confined by Jim Crow, and incarcerated by unmerciful criminal law. We extend our prayers into this post modern age and identify economic enslavement of poverty, of human trafficking, and colonial extortion.

God, we ask for healing to all of Your people. Heal our implicit bias, heal the fear that would cause us to stiffen and brace ourselves when we pass by someone who is Black and question our safety. Cleanse our imagination and circumcise our hearts from the mythologies that Black men and women are inherently dangerous, threatening, monstrous, foreboding and less than human. Give us more compassion to respond when we see ANY ONE suffering, in pain, in need, stir us up to stand up, lean in, and to resist.

Our hearts cry out to You today to expel the sin of racism, the lie of Whiteness and white supremacy informed by genetics and culture that ascribe value to lives based on their melanin or bone structure; we call out the false construct of race as a lie.

And at the same time, we affirm the culture of Blackness that has emerged out of this trial, this suffering, this pervasive denial of rights and human compassion. On this day, some are celebrating Juneteenth, a historical marker for the end of American enslavement built on the capitalist economy of this country, and in Your name we call out every other violence committed by the state against Black people, LatinX people, Asian people, non-male persons, women, trans people, queer people, and children. We call out all violence done out of ignorance, done with intention to harm, done with guns, done with a knee on a neck, done at the hand of paid officials, committed by paid officers of the state, frightened neighbors, and delusional vigilantes.

We ask that you would cover this cemetery, that these spirits would be at rest, but that you would enliven in us the spirit of resistance, the strategy that helped Rahab coordinate with the Hebrew spies, and all thoughtful, collaborative energy that would expose the cultures of violence and undermine our own ignorance and forgetting – that would expose the urgencies to fire on innocent young people and not attend to true needs, to mental illness, to legitimate calls for help. That You would expose the inconsistencies, the falsified reports, the coordinated efforts to slander the names of young Black people and uphold criminal acts. Expose every unjust act and every cover up that followed.

At the end of this prayer, I speak the names, Oh God, of Your children. A list that grows every year, every week, and every day – of people who You loved who were murdered.

I speak the name of *George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Atatiana Jefferson, Aura Rosser, Stephon Clark, Botham Jean, Philando Castille, Alton Sterling, Michelle Cusseaux, Freddie Gray, Janisha Fonville, Eric Garner, Akai Gurley, Gabriela Nevarez, Tamir Rice, Jamel Floyd, Dustin Parker, Michael Brown, Tanisha Anderson, Ezell Ford, Sean Monterrosa, Monika Diamond, Tony McDade, Dominique Rennie Fells, Riah Milton, Eric Harris, Justin Howell, Miya Hall, David McAfee, Frank Smart, Jerame Reid, Laquan McDonald, Dante Parker, Tony Robinson, Walter Scott, George Mann, Anthony Hill, Phillip White, Salvoado Ellswood, Jonathan Sanders, Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin*. All the other names that I just couldn't bear to write down. All of them who were not quite 22 or 32, or whose lives were lost because of an encounter with police.

As You accounted for the blood of Abel, so too we ask, oh God, that we be held accountable for the blood of these young people. These Black people. Give us wisdom, grant us mercy, give us courage to resist, to stand, to fight, to vote, to serve, to give enough that this will change. That we will change. We have no other recourse outside of Your guidance and direction. And with the determination of every other freedom fighter, we declare, "Ain't nobody gonna turn us round, turn us round, turn us round, Ain't nobody gonna turn us round, we're gonna keep on walking, keep on talking, marching into freedom land."

We declare this land the land of freed spirits, the land of freed people. Free all Your people today, God. Free Black people from violence, free white people from fear and hate, free us all from apathy and inaction. Give us the heart of Your Son who came and stood to see what the end was going to be! In the bold name of the Spirit who came in Acts to quicken the people to spread the Gospel, we Your people avail ourselves of Your Spirit again to save life, protect Black lives, and live lives worthy of You.