

## Black Lives Matter March and Call to Action

June 12, 2020

Good afternoon,

My name is Marichal Gentry, and I will guide today's public demonstration. On behalf of the organizers of the Black Lives Matter March and Call to Action, Welcome.

There was a reason why the march began in the St. Mark's Community. This historical section of Sewanee was where African-Americans lived—the vital members of the Sewanee community who helped build this university. Some of whom still reside in this area of Sewanee. It's where they worshipped and fellowshiped with one other. It is fitting and right to honor the African-American residents, both past and present, of Sewanee's St. Mark's Community as we come together in protest.

As we begin the program, I first want to thank you for showing up. I want you to know that this demonstration is being live-streamed, so that all of our Sewanee students, in particular, can watch, and I am certain that they appreciate that you are here today.

I shouldn't have to tell you that showing up is the easy part. It's a good start. Stepping up moves us forward in a real way.

So, again, welcome. Thank you for showing up, and I look forward to see how you will step up.

I, Marichal Gentry, am here today for many reasons. I join socially-distanced hands with anyone who wants to openly, publicly, and fervently denounce the killing of black people, my people, by the police. I rebuke any action that suppresses and oppresses the lives of black people.

Long-held institutional systems must change, and there must be an intentional commitment made through actions, to forever end the oppression of black people. We are weary of empty words and toss-the-can-down the road rhetoric. That's why I'm here. Why are you here?

As a longtime member of the Sewanee community, I currently wear and have worn many hats. I once was an active student, I am an alum, I was a former member of the Admission office, hired to create a program to recruit black students, I've been a Board of Trustees member, and now I serve as the Vice President for Student Life and Dean of Students.

I greet you today, stripped down from all of those titles, because I want you to see me as a black man, nothing else. Titles don't matter when you're black and being held down with a knee to the neck by a police officer, in the case of George Floyd, or being shot eight times in your own home, in the case of Breonna Taylor, or when taking a jog through a neighborhood, in the case of Ahmaud Arbury. These people were killed because they were black, and because someone maliciously exercised a very wrong sense of racial hierarchy

against them. None of these killers thought twice before gunning down or choking the life out of these black people.

I could go on naming names who have fallen victim to racist, anti-black crimes, such as Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, Oscar Grant, Sandra Bland. Let us not forget young, 12 year-old Tamir Rice, who was killed by the police for having a toy gun. Do you know that in less than two weeks, on June 25, Tamir would have turned 18?

I'm sure many of the black people here today and those of you who are watching or listening can tell stories of a black family member or friend who has fallen victim to the evils of *minding their own business while black, sleeping while black, jogging while black, driving while black, bird-watching while black*. Are you listening? These senseless, racist killings must stop, now. Enough.

Black Lives Matter. My black life matters. All black lives matter.

I'm exhausted and exasperated that there is a need, yet again, to demonstrate to get your attention. However, I have been inspired and energized by the protests that are taking place. And though I am tired, I am reminded of the old spiritual song that says:

I Feel Like Going On

I Feel Like Going On

Though trials come on every hand,

I feel like going on.

Many of the protests taking place have been organized and led by young people, and if more of our students were here today, I know that this demonstration might have included something that we missed. Nonetheless, we are here, standing with you, and our message is clear. Stop killing black people. Take your knee off our neck. WE CAN'T BREATHE.

As horrifying and angering as these brutal murders are, this historic, global revolution for change that is taking place is challenging many of the usual bystanders who believe that the oppression of black people is someone else's problem to solve. This movement is forcing you to examine yourself.

Even at Sewanee, the Roberson Project on Slavery, Race, and Reconciliation is forcing Sewanee to come to terms with her own past. Telling the truth about Sewanee's history and entanglements with slavery does not stop at confessing the sins of the past, but to lift up the stories and experiences of African-Americans who have been a vital part of Sewanee since the very beginning.

The challenge for many people is that you either are for racial equality or against it; you either believe Black Lives Matter, or you don't; you either will answer the call to action or you won't. If you are not for racial equality, if you don't believe that Black Lives Matter, or don't plan to answer the call to action, then step aside, because you are allowing the inequalities of an unjust society to persist. Examine yourself.

If in your conversations with people you have become more bothered by our righteous anger and disgust more than these injustices themselves, then you are psychologically disowning the difficult conversations about racism you should be having.

If during your conversations with people who are angry about these brutal murders of black people, that you require niceness over truth, or positivity over authenticity, then you are what psychologist, John Welwood, termed a spiritual by passer.

If you are one of those people who'd rather avoid the difficult work, shutdown the difficult conversations and walk away from an uncomfortable encounter when someone is expressing their righteous anger, then, you are perpetuating the inequalities of an unjust system, and you are contributing to our oppression. I urge you to examine yourself.

I know that there are several things that black students have called for, and I support those requests, because I believe they are extremely important to the success and satisfaction of our students. While progress is painfully slow, people are working on these issues, and I believe they will happen.

And I believe just as much, if not more, that real, sustainable change will come when we as a community get the nerve to eliminate, for good, the dug-in, deeply-rooted, sometimes not even realized racism and exclusionary practices that exists systemically in some of our traditions and our practices, and how this racism manifests itself, sometimes unknowingly, but

not always, in the behaviors and attitudes of people we work, play, and study with every day.

So, how can I help, you ask? I get that question a lot.

As I close, I'll share a few ways that you can begin to help, as a start:

One, Listen, take it in, and grapple with what you hear.

Two, Educate yourself. It's not black people's role to educate you. There are plenty of fact-based books out there that can help you understand how 400 years of oppression has led us to what we are experiencing today, police brutality, poverty, trauma, the impact that the coronavirus is having on black communities.

I urge you to learn something about racism, anti-racism, white fragility, micro-aggressions, and trauma in the black community, on your own, and then actively put what you have learned to good use. As scholar and author of *How to be an anti-racist* has said, you need to actively fight against racism, rather than passively claim to be non-racist. In order to fight effectively against an oppressive system, you must do your homework.

Three, act on what you learn. For example, start with your immediate family. Have conversations about and challenge yourself and your family members about their own racism. Bravely engage your extended family in these difficult discussions and ask them to make a commitment against all

forms of injustice, and then expand those conversations to your friends and members of your communities.

This last point is for my colleagues in positions of power and hiring authority. You will not get more diversity in your department, if you don't start expanding your applicant pool. Doing passive searches just so you can fill a position must be replaced with more aggressive attempts to find someone who will add to the quality of your service to students. You really have to do the work. It is not easy convincing people of color to come to work here, but it is possible.

All things are possible.

Thank you.