

**“Remember that During Your Life You Had Good Things...”
For Philando Castille**

Introduction: Anton Sterling

I had never participated in a protest before in my life. Never been one to join the “rabble” or to consider myself a “rabble rouser.” In fact—if at all possible—I tend to avoid crowds altogether. I am what you might call: “anti-social.” I *shun* unnecessary public events. And I am happiest when I am alone.

All of that changed, however—at least for a few days—the morning of July 7th, 2016. *Just* the night before—on July 6th—I had been in a *daze*—in a *fog*—over footage that had been circulating on the web earlier that day—*footage* of what has become all too familiar in our cities today—*footage*—of another African American male being shot by the police. This time it was in Baton Rouge. This time it was in the chest and in the back. This time it was a situation that escalated—from the selling of CDs.

I *sulked*—that evening—slumped in front of the TV—with nowhere to go. I had *nowhere* to put the images. *Nowhere* to put the grief. And I didn’t have a *clue* of how to piece it all together and process what I had just seen. My only thought was—that *we are rotted from within*.

And with that—I went to bed to try and forget.

Philando Castille

There was no reason for me to expect that the morning of July 7th would be *any* different from any *other* sunny, summer morning in Minnesota. I’d get up. Make the coffee. Get ready. My wife would be off to work soon enough and I’d be on my way to camp—to drop off our nine-year-old—and then to steal away to work for a few hours. Things are *quiet* in our neighborhood. They are idyllic. It is peaceful.

The shooting in Baton Rouge, however, was just beneath the surface—simmering—without resolution in my mind. *What on earth is going on here?* (I thought). *Was this the **only** way things had to play out? How did we all get here?* And how is it that our *humanity* is lost sight off—*so easily*—*so quickly*—not only

by those *involved* in these tragic events but also by those who *observe* them and deign to dismiss ‘em?

The questions had barely begun to surface in my mind—when suddenly—out of the corner of my eye—upon turning to the morning news—I caught sight of a *Glock* aimed inside of a car, and *another* African American male, this one—gasping for air, shot four times, and a woman livestreaming the final moments with her four-year old daughter in the back seat—*here* in Minnesota—and not just anywhere in Minnesota—but within a *mile* of where we worship today and on the road to my daughter’s camp. The proximity—felt like an indictment.

The Protest at Dayton’s

This was the first time that I would hear the name, Philando Castille—the name of the cafeteria school worker whose life had just been cut short—a name that would stick with me from that day forward—and a life, whose circumstances I would contemplate over and over again.

I’m not sure of exactly *what* it was that compelled me to act that morning, after seeing the footage. There were many things—all of them hitting me all at once and overwhelming my senses. And it wasn’t even a matter of “having all the facts”—often a convenient excuse for doing *nothing*. There was only *one* thing that was clear—I could not simply *absorb* this kind of violence in *these* kinds of circumstances—and *continue*—as if it was just *another* sunny day in Minnesota.

It wasn’t long before I found myself driving down Larpenteur Avenue—the very road where Philando lost his life not 12 hours before—and heading to Governor Dayton’s residence. A group was going to be gathering there that morning to protest and I felt *compelled* to be there. I didn’t have a plan and I hadn’t really thought through *what* I was doing. There was no strategy. And I certainly wasn’t worried about “effectiveness.” The only thing I knew is that I *could not get there* fast enough. My heart raced and I was nauseous. I *had* to be there—if only *to weep with those who weep*.

For the most part I stood silent—listening to the chants and to the slogans—occasionally uttering a prayer or joining in in song—and frankly, attempting to find solace in a crowd, which *itself* was struggling to find it. There was an understandable and *unfathomable* sense of grief over what had just happened the

night before—exacerbated by the fact that it *appears* to fit into a well-established pattern. And it was clear to me at *that* moment—that this was no longer the Minnesota I had known for ten years and it was *equally* clear—that it *never* was for this group.

The Press Conference

At some point a press conference was convened in front of the Governor’s residence where various people spoke, including Diamond Reynolds, the woman who live-streamed the aftermath of the shooting just hours before. The crowd had grown by this time with people filling the streets and sidewalks in front of Dayton’s. There was a discernable tension in the air—and a palpable sense of outrage and sorrow, as *speaker* after *speaker* rehearsed—not only the series of indignities that have been endured by the community to that moment—but also by the conviction—that *of all people*—Philando Castille should *not* have suffered this fate.

There was a sense in the crowd, however—that what was *known* about the incident—outweighed any question of a person’s character. Whether or not a person is good is a *very* different question from whether a shooting is justified. As one of the pastors put it that morning, “I shouldn’t have to *say* that Philando was a good man...And that he *didn’t* deserve this.” In other words, a victim is a victim. And the urge to distinguish between *worthy* and *unworthy* ones must be resisted.

But the fact of the matter is—that that is *precisely* why I was there that morning—I *feared* that an innocent man—a *worthy* man—had been wronged and that a grave and public injustice had taken place—for *all to see*—right here in our backyard.

Portrait of a Good Man

I listened *intently* to the various speakers that morning—absorbing the mood, grappling with the moment. Diamond spoke about how Philando had never been in trouble with the law—as she put it—“*never been finger-printed.*” Another spoke of his record at High School and at J. J. Hill Montessori, where he had worked for ten years and was beloved by both colleagues and children. And finally Pastor Givens—a close personal friend of the family’s—shared about how just the week before he had *heaped* praise upon Mrs. Castille—Philando’s mother—for raising such exemplary children who had never had any run ins with the law. The portrait

that emerged only served to raise *further* questions about what could have happened that evening.

I left the protest that morning *benumbed*, heavy in thought. I had to return to pick up my daughter at Gibb's Farm, where she was at camp. It was her last day there, and there was an ice cream social for the kids. —And I had to travel back down Larpenteur to get there—only yards from where Philando had met his end. It felt like an *obscenity* to be there—at the camp—where *no one* appeared perturbed over what had just happened hours before—where a mother and her four-year-old daughter had to witness the unthinkable—while *we*—all ate ice cream. I thought I was going to be sick.

Later that evening there was a gathering at J. J. Hill for friends and family to remember Philando Castille. Grief stricken colleagues spoke of his love for the children. How he had all **500** of their names memorized, as well as whatever allergies they suffered, so that he could better serve them. There were stories of how—during lunch time—he would slip extra Graham Crackers to kids who were having a bad day and how he would fill in for other staff when necessary. His sister spoke of losing a father figure. Mothers spoke of having to explain to their children—in whatever way they could understand—why Philando would *not be coming back to school*. And his own mother, expressed rage, at the apparent “execution” of her son. He was unanimously described as a gentle man—a “Mr. Rogers with dreadlocks.”

Iris

This summer was supposed to be a summer where my daughter and I would visit all of the historical sites in Minnesota—that is—those sites listed by the Minnesota Historical Society on their map. My wife was working all summer so this would give us an opportunity to do something educational and fun—in addition to attending a number of camps. There was even a prize for visiting six historical sites in a row, where my daughter would get a “stuffy”—a “History Hound”—for having reached her goal. We had just finished visiting our third site when the news about Philando broke.

The juxtaposition of these two realities—these two spheres of existence *right here in Minnesota*—a nine-year old enjoying camps and historical sites with her father

and a four-year old witnessing the killing of her step-father—was more than I could *stomach*.

And the thing that I feared *the most*—more than anything else—was that I would be teaching my daughter that this was *not* her problem *by shielding her from it*—that I would be teaching her to *self-segregate* simply by rendering this a *non-event* in her life—and that I would be making *her* a part of the problem by rendering the people affected by such violence *invisible*.

It should not *matter*, if they were black, rather than Hispanic or white or any other race. It should not *matter* what neighborhoods they lived in or what their socio-economic status was. These were people with hopes, dreams, aspirations—and *rights*—just like any one of us—who now had to grapple with the unimaginable, a tragedy that *appears* to emerge—at the very least—from questionable circumstances and ones that appear to fit within larger patterns of discrimination. *This*—was her problem too.

And I had to ask myself—why was it *okay* for us—to tour all of these historical sites—up and down the state—most of which told a tale of oppression and conquest anyway—and *not* talk to her about the discrimination of others in our very own midst?

Minnesota Disparities

That racial and ethnic *biases* appear to play a role in Minnesota traffic stops is just *one* of the many disparities that *afflict* the state. In metrics across the board—in terms of *household income, unemployment rates, poverty rates* and *education attainment*—the gap between whites and non-whites in Minnesota is *larger* than almost everywhere else in the country. One study even puts Minnesota *dead last* in terms of financial inequality among racial groups.

The state—in other words—is a *far cry* from Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegone—

“...where all the children are *supposedly* above average.”

The beauty of Minnesota—for many—is *marred* by segregation, racial disparities—and now—*publicly*—police brutality.

Juxtapositions

The juxtaposition of these stark realities—*right here* in our state—is an indictment of the way things “are”—the status quo. And a *symptom* that *all* is not well in Minnesota. And perhaps *no one* should be *more* troubled by this than the very “Christ-Followers” who find themselves here today—at *Bethel*—and have committed themselves to following Him to their graves.

That the matter ought to be framed in *precisely* this way is *urged* by Luke—the author of the third gospel—who portrays the cause of Christ—*starkly*—and in *polarizing* ways—often *juxtaposing* very different social realities—in order to *indict* those who are comforted and *condemn* the apathetic.

Throughout—Luke juxtaposes the rich and the poor, the holy and the unholy, the whole and the sick in order to draw attention to the *disenfranchised* and to leave *no doubt* about *those* with whom Christ is concerned.

Human conditions are *contrasted* and *disparities* are disclosed in order to underscore the need for redress. It’s almost as if Luke—by making such comparisons—is *refusing* to allow his readers to *distance* themselves from the troubles of the world—or from the very people *for whom* Christ had come in the first place.

That *we*—here at Bethel—are *not* at liberty distance ourselves from recent events is the *point* of Luke’s framing. The *contrasts* are a call to action. And to ignore them, is to run *afoul* of the very concerns of Christ.

The Poor; the Captives; the Blind; the Oppressed

There should be no doubt about those with whom Christ is concerned. These are identified *early* and clearly in Luke’s Gospel—when Jesus enters the synagogue and *discloses*—that he had come for *the poor; the captives; the blind; and the oppressed*.

That these categories refer not only the *spiritual* conditions of people but also to their *physical* and *material* needs—is *clear* from the numerous injunctions—given *repeatedly* to those who want to follow him—to *surrender* wealth and *give* to the poor; to *right wrongs* and to *do acts of justice*.

But these categories are also *social* categories. That is to say—that to be a *poor* person—to be a *captive* person—to be a *blind* person—or to be *oppressed*—was to belong to that class of individuals, who are *routinely* overlooked—*discriminated* against—and even *victimized* by our society.

And it would take *no* great leap of the imagination—for us to *recast* these categories in terms of the disparities that we see here today.

Just *who* are the ones that are overlooked in our society?

Who are the ones that receive the lion's share of discrimination?

And *who* are the ones that are *regularly* victimized?

Luke—is drawing our attention to the *vulnerable*—those who are *liable* to be betrayed by the system and abused by those in power.

And it was for *these* that Christ had come.

Conclusion: The “Facts”

The circumstances surrounding the life and death of Philando Castille—*here*—in what is routinely called the “miracle of Minnesota”—reads a lot like the *disparate* realities that occupy Luke's Gospel.

Whatever the “facts” of the case are supposed to be—just moments before Philando was shot—will have to be for others to determine. A number of investigations are currently underway and the justice department may *yet* get involved.

Preliminarily—however—the stop itself has already raised troubling questions—not only because of the *reason* for the stop—but also for the sheer *number* of stops Philando has had to endure—*here* in the Twin Cities.

Records show that Philando Castille had been pulled over **79 times** for minor vehicle and traffic violations—**48 of which**—that's over *sixty percent of them* (!)—were dismissed. And the tickets he *had* received were for petty misdemeanors.

None of Castille’s charges or convictions ever involved *guns, violence, threats against others* or *fleeing from police*. There were no felonies on his record. In fact, it was *this* very record that made him eligible for a permit to carry—and *may* have been the reason for his undoing.

And the stop that would prove fatal—which you can hear over the police scanner—was done on the basis of his “wide set nose”—which apparently was enough to identify him—*from afar*—as a potential robbery suspect.

And within a minute and a half of the call—*Philando* had been shot four times...

...I wonder what *Luke* would have made of this story?

Addendum: Iris at the Memorial

Most of the actions that I took that day—and in the ones that followed—were driven by a deep sense of sorrow—and the fear that an innocent man may well have been killed. I *also* dreaded the thought of raising a daughter who was *unaware* of the kind of world we live in—and how right *here* in Minnesota people experience two *very* different realities—two *harsh* realities—depending on race and class. And I feared—that she might become part of the problem if I did not make her aware of it.

So with that in mind—I took her to the corner of Philando Castille’s traffic stop—a road we’ve taken countless times. By then—only a few days after the event—a memorial had grown. There were balloons. There were pictures. There were signs. And chalk had been left for people to write on the sidewalk. There had *already* been a steady stream of visitors—leaving their sentiments in writing. The most poignant message read:

“There was a family in that car.”

And *there*—on the corner of Larpenteur and Fry—my daughter and I took time to process the unconscionable—to read the words, prayers, and rage of the mourners—and to leave our own thoughts in chalk.

I wanted her to understand—in *whatever* way she could—that this hurts us *all* and that we are *all* responsible for the world we live in.

And how much *more* so for us—*here* at Bethel—who—in *a world full of disparities*—have committed ourselves to following Christ—the very one who had *come* for the vulnerable—and *requires* us to act on their behalf.

Thank You.