

The First Rodney King Verdict: A Chaplain's Response

BY REV. GILBERT C. WASHINGTON

When I heard the verdict of the first Rodney King trial, I was disappointed and dismayed, but most of all, I was mad. Anger swelled up in me like peas in a pot. There is nothing like unadulterated anger—blinding, searing, seeking expression. I was about ready to burst. I wanted to strike out, to hit something or someone.

How could they? How could that jury justify what had happened to King? For me, as well as for countless others, that court decision represented rampant racism: The blows struck against King vicariously bruised bodies in Birmingham, Jackson, New York, and Selma. Suddenly, we were all reminded of a not-so-distant past when "white" was right and Blacks were relegated to living the nightmare while merely dreaming of a society where they would be judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin.

In light of the pain shared by me and so many others within my institution, I sought meaning and relief. The day after the verdict was rendered in the King trial, I called in sick. And I was sick—sick and tired of the yoke of oppression, sick and tired of having to explain my anger, of being denied justice, sick and tired of the world being defined in black and white.

Yet I also realized that the graphic details and poignant aftermath of the Rodney King trial called for a constructive examination of our attitudes, behaviors, and feelings concerning race. Entrusted by both God and the public to serve those in need, we in healthcare understand that the matter of race is both pertinent and pressing. Several questions came to mind: How can healthcare institutions monitor their employment, recruitment, and promotion policies to ensure and reflect fairness? Can institutions empower their

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employees through special programs and workshops on racial sensitivity? Can neighborhood fairs and community-based health clinics serve to model behavior and foster multiracial understanding? So many good things begin with questions.

After a day of prayer, reflection, and just lying around, I went to my job at the hospital. I was still stunned but somewhat heartened because I had an embryonic plan. This was my day to be the on-call chaplain at the hospital, and I was to deliver a short meditation over the public address system. The day before, I had thought a lot about justice, evil, sin, and the King verdict.

As I searched for a framework that would help express my pain and relieve my anger, I recalled a story from a book I had read in divinity school, Karl Menninger's *Whatever Became of Sin*. As I began the morning meditation, I invited my audience to listen as I retold the story. "There was a man in Chicago during the 1960s, a time of unprecedented change and turbulence. This man was marching up and down the street wearing a billboard that advertised something or other. Emphatically the man shouted while shaking and pointing his finger—guilty, guilty, guilty, guilty!" Then I paused. "We are all guilty by commission or omission, existentially or ontologically," I continued. "We are guilty given our humanness, and we all stand in need of God's forgiveness and grace. Amen."

My meditation was well received, as fellow employees shared their approval and interest, and their own feelings of pain, dismay, and fear. While my meditation on the King verdict was both measured and calculated (taking into consideration both the climate and culture of my institution, as well as my vocational duty and personal integrity), I think I hit something. Amen. □



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