

Episcopal Conference: “Unholy Trinity: The Intersection of Racism, Poverty, and Gun Violence”
Keynote, 4.21.2017, Rev. Julian “J.Kwest” DeShazier

The phrase “Unholy Trinity” has a history in Black Chicago. The “Policy Kings” of the Southside, who ran the gambling rackets that they brought from the South, became THE economy of the Black Southside. Hotels were built, neighborhoods were self-sustaining, and then these “kings” of policy entered an alliance with the mafia and city hall, called in *retrospect* the “Unholy Trinity” because it resulted in the state takeover of the numbers game, which in 1974 was made legal and given a new name: The Illinois Lottery.

Racism, poverty and gun violence are no less part of THAT story than it is our story today. And as a pastor, naturally I think about the church’s role in this. Not only in the ways churches then were against or for policy, or against gun violence or for protecting the rights of gun owners, or *against racism* or *mostly ignorant about race*...something more than a stance. Speaking is powerful but insufficient. I’ve learned that in nearly 7 years pastoring, no matter how many times I’ve said, “Stop the violence,” it didn’t. Not once. It’s taken years to learn that symbolic action must have with it strategic planning and deep relationship.

I’m going to tell 3 stories, with some music in between because I’m a rapper and the music that best reflects the intersection of poverty, racism, and guns is HIP HOP, which is also called “unholy” and sometimes, with it’s misogynist and capitalist urges, is.

Song: BLACK MAN

Story 1: TRAUMA CENTER, moral leadership

I got involved with the campaign to bring a Level One Trauma Center to the Southside of Chicago for one reason. It wasn’t because we would be the first church signed on; that movement had been being led by young people for 6 years with NOT ONE NEIGHBORHOOD CHURCH SIGNED ON! It wasn’t because it’d be an easy win for the church; it would actually make us very unpopular with the University of Chicago, with whom I had a relationship, OR the City of Chicago, who I had heard have a unique way of rewarding and punishing churches based on how adversarial they were toward them. One pastor I asked to join me said plainly that he *couldn’t*; another said he “needed to look more into the issue,” which meant he *wouldn’t* but was hoping I’d forget. (Cowardice is difficult to forget).

You need a Level One Trauma center for gun violence, period, and other accidents, but with Chicago having more gun deaths than any other city, from a VOLUME perspective you NEED a trauma center, and you need one within a reasonable distance to where the violence occurs (otherwise, what’s the point?) And the thing loses money: that’s what trauma centers do. So I’m going to ask you: how many trauma centers are on the Southside of Chicago today? ZERO.

Moral leadership does not happen on a continuum. In other words, it’s not that once something is THIS bad, we finally speak. Moral leadership, and specifically our kind – the faithful kind - means to be the witnesses of the violations of basic human dignity, and to help translate that violation as *a violation of*

divine law. (C.S. Lewis describes morality as objective; the rightness or wrongness of a thing is independent of our *feelings* about it) but we have made morality serve our interests. We have been on the sidelines of the biggest fights for justice recently, and when we have taken a bold stance, it has been translated as “revolutionary.” When did it become REVOLUTIONARY for Christians to care about justice? It can only be translated as such when silence and appropriation have become the status quo. Only then can a church saying that all God’s children deserve the same access to health care and timely treatment be REVOLUTIONARY. Only then can a church agreeing to partner with the community they serve be DANGEROUS. If it is extraordinary, then God is damning our ordinariness.

We have turned our churches into think-tanks but not action centers. We consider our pastors theologians but not community leaders. There is a REASON why the 4 Little Girls died inside a church: because THAT was the center, and churches served as a moral center of the entire community. There is a reason the Underground Railroad had stops at churches. Because churches saw themselves invested in communities. We have become agents of condemnation – we condemn this and condemn that – *articulate arbiters of injustice* and condemning any particular evil. But if that goes only as far as our words, and divest from our communities, and are not truly PRESENT in our communities, we CONDEMN THEM TOO.

We won’t always know HOW or WHAT, but if we know WHY and can help the community see WHY and that it is difficult but NECESSARY, this is the moral leadership our people are waiting for. We are good at becoming more corporate, but our community needs our MORAL leadership.

Why did we join the movement for a trauma center? Because despite the incredible difficulty, it was the right thing to do. And in Spring 2018, there will be a trauma center 3 blocks from where I am standing. Gun violence, poverty, and racism are all MORAL issues, and we must be (1) the MORAL voice.

Song: Whatever Happened

Story 2: JESSE JACKSON & BLM, good partnership

So in late November 2015 the word got out that - in response to the release of a video showing Laquan McDonald being shot 16 times and the subsequent obstruction of justice by the police and, well, EVERYBODY - people were going to march down Michigan Avenue and shut down shopping on Black Friday. Who was LEADING this campaign? The young activists: BLM Chicago, BYP100, Assata’s Daughters - all young bodies of color putting their lives on the line for justice.

So they’re marching and actually shutting it down (most stores on the Magnificent Mile projected 50% less sales that day) and something interesting happens...Rev. Jesse Jackson and *Operation: Push* have set up an area for the march to end: the cameras are there; it’s been set up FOR THEM. But the protestors don’t stop – they don’t listen to him! - and a confrontation ensues. Confrontations like this are sadly not rare in this movement; two generations at war over strategy and process (one saying, “Stop making our mistakes over again!” the other saying, “Stop trying to OWN everything simply because you’re the church.” Stop being patriarchal. Stop being condescending. Stop pretending you OWN the movement for social justice simply because you are “Church.” CHURCH is the

reason black, queer women rescind into the background as they have in ALL movements for justice, even though black, queer women came up with #BlackLivesMatter: Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, Patrice Cullors...SAY THEIR NAMES!!! Churches have been **terrible** partners, and although they value our moral language, they despise our patriarchal ethos. *If we're involved, we need to own it. There needs to be a figurehead.* We don't take orders well. We don't offer our privilege to others; we want to use it FOR THEM. FOR. INSTEAD OF. But we need to stop doing things FOR people, or TO people; we need to do them WITH people. Are we missionaries, or do we see ourselves as equal to the communities we serve?

What can we do? We can be better partners. We can offer our space for meetings, offices; we can use our buildings to offer SANCTUARY to protect the most vulnerable. We can see the church as WITH the people. *I'm against violence but I'm not against my people. I'm against the world that has pushed up against them.* Don't be AGAINST the community; live WITH them. Be willing to be LED by them.

Song: Still Alright

STORY 3: SANCTUARY, confronting death

When Lazarus dies, they send Jesus a text that basically says, "Come do something about this." And he waits two more days and his phone is blowing up, "Jesus, he dead: come do something." And the disciples say, "Jesus, it's dangerous there. Let's NOT go." Then finally he's at Lazarus' house and Martha says, "It's too late, he's too far gone." And in each of those instances, Jesus decides to confront death anyway. Happens again, Palm Sunday, happens throughout, and THEN on Easter these terrific women come to the tomb of Christ. While the other disciples are LOCKED AWAY, Mary and Martha confront the reality of death.

The Christian Church is built on a legacy of speaking up and going with the vulnerable. Giving them voice. Risking our privilege to confront death. The fact that Peter gets to be the father of the Church is both *irony* and *foreshadowing* because too often do churches still lock themselves away. But if Church is going to mean ANYTHING, we are going to have to do something about this death around us. It means less for millenials because we do less direct confrontation. Well meaning liberal, progressive folks think the height of all action is the podcast. As if the work of privilege is to LISTEN. IT IS to listen, but as moral voices, as community partners, we must go from talking about death to CONFRONTING it.

That's a lot of what this conference is about: HOW? We get all this information, then what? Then you go home, and you sit and make the MORAL argument against poverty, against gun violence, against racism. Then you find community organizations that care about this work and invite them into your space, and say TEACH US. You learn about the issues and you ask, "How can we confront that?" Not for the sake of a better sermon but to impact reality. In Chicago we look at bond laws and you see they are DIRECTLY impacted by racism and poverty (people ROT in jail) and we can help abolish the bail system. We're afraid of coming across political, but see, it's NOT political. We stand for the dignity of all people, the love of God to be known through the forms of justice, and we must use our POWER to protect people. It's only political when THIS LAW stands in the way of justice. It's only political when you work against my people, THEN I must work against you.

We need to unlock our parishes. I mean theologically but LITERALLY. What if all dioceses had jobs programs? What if every church in a community more than 50% white was REQUIRED to enter a partnership with an organization acting against black injustice? What would it mean for historically underrepresented voices to take on greater leadership?

What would it mean to be a moral voice at the tables of power and not just happy to be there...

...to be in better partnership with our communities, more "holy alliances"...

...to push our people to talk about, and then confront death?