ELLA J. BAKER HOUSE

*A Black Pastoral Defense of Justice, Law and*

*the Boston Police Department*

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The murder of George Floyd by Officer Derek Chauvin as three of his colleagues stood by and watched has unleashed upon the public a flood of anger and nonviolent protest as well as looting, violent and arson. This tragedy is part of a historical pattern which is frequently underreported and underexamined. It is a pattern of criminality, corruption and violence on the part of a minority of police officers who have enjoyed reprehensible impunity from justice.

It is true that the vast majority of police officers in this country are honorable, hardworking men and women who are entrusted with the enormously difficult task on enforcing the rule of law in incredibly circumstances in cities across this country. It is also true that rarely is there sufficient recognition accorded to those who perform their duties with professionalism and fairness on a daily basis. Unfortunately, it is also true that there is a very small number of criminal officers who have been guilty of extrajudicial murder. One of the most brutal examples is the case of Walter Scott who was shot five times in the back. In many cases the victim was accused of some minor infraction as in the case of Eric Garner who was choked to death in New York City. Historically a largely Irish Catholic police department in Boston was in the view of many in the black community racist and brutal in its treatment of American citizens whose major crime was being black.

However, in the mid-nineties, there was a transformation in the practice of law enforcement in Boston after the St. Clair Commission Report on police brutality. The emergence of black activist clergy who were responsible for developing new models of faith community-law enforcement partnerships, based on a strategy of prevention, intervention and enforcement were an important element in the approach to policing that was implemented. Thus, in the mid-nineties Boston emerged as a national model and served as the protype for what the Clinton administration called community policing. What is unique about the Boston story is that a collaborative model of policing, in partnership with black activist faith leaders was able to essentially “deracialize” law enforcement with targeted policing in the most violent neighborhoods. During this period, we witnessed a substantial drop in violent crime. Currently homicide rates continue to be extremely low. Community-police partnerships which provide services for children in our poorest neighborhoods is the norm. Police involved shootings are rare and are promptly investigated in a transparent fashion. The Boston Police Department has developed a culture that strongly discourages unmerited violence against residents. In addition, effective recruitment and training strategies have reduced the likelihood of including bad actors in the police force.

It is for this reason that we as black faith-based activist clergy and others stand in solidarity with our partners the Boston Police Department. We do so in strong opposition to the “trust-fund, Becky with the good hair revolutionary Communists” or “white-boy Carl the anarchist from the Upper East Side who is a junior at Sarah Lawrence” who reject the very idea of law and order itself. When these anarchists torch an innocent police car they should be arrested and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law as would obviously be the case if “black Kareem” were caught committing the same crime. Having said this, we support and salute the courageous young people who have protested and legitimately challenged white supremacy and demanded an end to racial injustice. They have functioned as the conscience of the society. Their civic activism is an attack on the white supremacy which has served as the ideological foundation of far too many federal, state and municipal law enforcement agencies. Their moral vision for justice has inspired the society.

Any coherent conception of justice must be indivisibly connected to the rule of law. The rule of law is the core philosophical defense against a society’s descent into dystopian chaos. And it is this chaos that we are witnessing in the violence and looting that has occurred in far too many cities across the country. The rule of law is the principle that all people and institutions must be subject and accountable to law that is justly applied. The adherence to the rule of law is a logical precondition of any rational society and proper democratic governance. The clear enforcement of law is the first line of defense of the very concept of civilization itself. Without order there can be no justice.

We stand in solidarity with the Boston Police Department who as public servants have worked to earn the trust of all citizens of goodwill. We stand in solidarity with the Boston Police Department, its leadership, Mayor Martin J. Walsh their demonstrated commitment to fairness and inclusion for the black community. We call upon the Boston Police Department to assist us in attracting resources from the commonwealth’s supplemental budget to support six-day-a-week academic enrichment programs for the poorest youth.

*Reverend Eugene F. Rivers III*

Director, Ella J. Baker House