

Ahmaud Arbery's lynching begs America to respond

What would it take to stop seeing neighbors as intruders and threats?

by [Dorothy Sanders Wells](#) in the [June 3, 2020](#) issue



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Few people know the name Michael Donald. I know that name: he was lynched in my hometown, Mobile, Alabama, in 1981.

In 1981, I was naive enough to want to believe that crimes against black people for merely being black had ended. There were laws, right? There was public acceptance that people just couldn't do such things anymore, right?

But that year, Donald was killed by a group of white men who admitted that they were out looking for a black person to kill. The local newspaper ran articles about the killing—as well as a picture of Donald, hanging from the tree where his killers left him.

I never forgot the name. I was a college student then, living in another city, but when I learned about his death, I realized that we were the same age. Years later, I

thought about where he lived and realized that we must have attended the same large public high school; as it turned out, he graduated just one year after I did.

It had to sink in for me that I could have ended up just as Michael Donald did.

There seem to be some inherent dangers to living life as a person of color in the United States. Perhaps those dangers have their origin in the days when it was legal for black people to be disciplined, lynched, reminded that we occupy a lower place in society.

The segregationist laws that allowed that kind of discrimination were struck down—twice, actually. When people who didn't like the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution persisted in creating human laws that devalue human lives, we tried again, an effort that led to the sweeping civil rights legislation of the 1960s.

But over the years, we've learned that laws can't end the danger of living life as a person of color. The many lessons continue.

We learned in 2012 that 17-year-old Trayvon Martin could be killed while walking down a Florida street—because he looked like he didn't belong. We learned in 2014 that 12-year-old Tamir Rice could be killed by a police officer seconds after the officer pulled up to the Cleveland park where Rice was playing.

We learned in 2015 that pastor Clementa Pinckney and eight members of Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, could be killed in their church after hospitably welcoming a young stranger into their midst.

In 2018, on the Fourth of July, we learned that Jazmine Abhulimen and her young child could be asked to leave their neighborhood pool in North Carolina because a neighbor who didn't recognize them determined they couldn't possibly belong there—while on the opposite coast, 91-year-old Rodolfo Rodriguez, a Mexican man legally visiting relatives in California, could be beaten with a concrete block by a passerby who demanded that he go back to his own country.

We also learned that year that Botham Jean could be killed while sitting in his own apartment in Texas, bothering no one, because an off-duty police officer could just make a mistake.

And this year, we learned that Ahmaud Arbery could be killed while jogging in Georgia because someone who saw him as he passed by on his run decided that surely he must be a criminal. We also learned that Georgia officials saw nothing wrong with this.

We've learned a lot of other lessons that there simply isn't enough room here to describe.

The shared history of people of European descent and people of color on this soil is a troubled one. It includes slavery and the subsequent laws that devalued human lives. It has bled into the reality of the separate and inherently unequal lives that we lead today.

And for all 400 years that this land has been inhabited by people of European descent and people of color alike, faithful people have tried to justify separation and segregation. Some Christians have used the Bible to defend slavery and ideas of racial purity. But there's a difference between the Bible describing something and condoning it. Our scriptures acknowledge the sinfulness of our human hearts: our tendency to deny the image of God in other people, our unwillingness to follow the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Instead of neighbors, sometimes we see intruders and threats.

The Bible also contains instructions on holding one another accountable and reproving one another in love. The Jesus Christians claim to follow frequently engaged in those behaviors. And he saw no one—not even the ones who ultimately would take his life—as being beyond God's mercy and love.

My 1981 teenaged self hoped that Michael Donald's story would be the last one like it in my lifetime. In 2020, my naïveté is long gone. Now I pray that Christians will live more like Jesus and call out acts of injustice when we see them—until such time when Christians and others alike are able to recognize that our collective fate rests on the well-being of each person.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Another American lynching."