

On the anniversary of the murder of George Floyd, I remember my Black father's military service

He prayed things would get better. It's not too late.

by [Dorothy Sanders Wells](#)

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George Floyd mural near the place where he was killed in Minneapolis. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Lorie Shaull](#).

Monday, May 25, 2020, was Memorial Day, the day on which Americans honor members of our Armed Forces who have given their lives in the service of our country. Memorial Day is a day on which we give thanks for the sacrifices of the men

and women who have helped to safeguard our freedoms.

But May 25, 2020, was a day that would be remembered for other reasons. Early that morning, a Black man named Christian Cooper went into an area of New York's Central Park known as the Ramble, pursuing his hobby of bird-watching. He encountered a White woman named Amy Cooper (no relation), who was walking her dog off-leash in the Ramble, where dog owners are required to keep their pets on-leash. When Christian Cooper asked Amy Cooper to leash her dog, she instead called the police and reported that an African American man was threatening her life.

Except he wasn't. Because he had recorded the encounter on his cell phone, Christian Cooper had video to show that the only person being threatened in the encounter was him.

Twelve hours later, police in Minneapolis were called to a convenience store, where a Black man named George Floyd allegedly tried to purchase cigarettes with a counterfeit 20-dollar bill. Under Minnesota state law, this nonviolent crime is a misdemeanor—an offense which, had Floyd survived to be charged, tried, and convicted, likely would have yielded no more than a year in jail and a fine.

Floyd, of course, never made it to a police precinct. A teenager's cell phone video bore witness to the more than eight minutes during which a police officer, Derek Chauvin, knelt on the neck of a handcuffed Floyd on the street in front of the convenience store, killing him.

Memorial Day 2020 left some of us wondering about the freedoms that hosts of African American men have served to protect and defend. My father was one of those men. He answered the call to serve in the US Army as a 28-year-old man. He served in World War 2, proudly and honorably—even though the America to which he returned was a place where he was still, at age 30, called “boy,” among other names used for Black men in the Jim Crow South. He was legally discriminated against in every walk of life, with laws limiting where he could sit or stand, drink water, use the restroom, get a job, buy food, or buy a home. He knew fear at home—for his safety and the safety of his family—that was at least as great as the fear he knew at war.

In spite of all that, he never lost his sense of patriotism and love for our country. He went on to work as a civil service employee for 25 years. Had he given his life for his country in the war, he would have done so with pride. His hope and prayer always

were that “things would get better.” I wonder what he would say if he were alive today.

We’ve learned a lot about ourselves as Americans since last Memorial Day. We've learned that we can look at the same cell phone and police camera footage and see the events captured there very differently. We’ve learned that where some of us continue to see isolated, unfortunate incidents, others see acts of hatred that repeat over and over: the 18-year-old Black youth in Seffner, Florida, who was riding his bicycle through his mostly White neighborhood to an early-morning basketball practice and was illegally stopped by a vigilante, who lied to police about the teen breaking into cars. The Black and Latino second lieutenant in the US Army, in uniform on his way home from training, who was stopped, threatened, and pepper sprayed by the Windsor, Virginia, police. The Black man in Killeen, Texas, whose family had phoned police with continued concerns about the man’s mental health crisis, who was shot and killed by responding officers. Just the day before, the police, together with a mental health officer, had taken the man to the hospital.

We’ve wondered how George Floyd, who allegedly committed only a nonviolent misdemeanor, did not survive his arrest, while Dylan Roof arrived safely at a police precinct in the hands of law enforcement after having joined the minister and members of Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston for prayer and Bible study and then murdering them, and an armed Kyle Rittenhouse was ignored by police officers in Kenosha after shooting three people, killing two of them.

We've learned that if we thought we lived in a post-racial world, we were wrong. There is still work to do, there are still eyes to open, there are still hearts to change.

But it’s not too late. It’s not impossible.

The disciples had some work to do after Jesus’ death, too. After the joy of reuniting with a resurrected Jesus, they had to survive the disappointment of letting him go a second time as he ascended into heaven, to overcome their fear, and to accept their mission to go out into the world as witnesses, continuing his work. The book of Acts gives us a glimpse of the diverse world of Jews and Gentiles into which the disciples were called to share this new message of God’s love. They were rich and poor, devout keepers of faith traditions and having no faith tradition at all, sick and begging at the temple door, authorities of the Roman Empire, eunuchs, and slaves. The apostles were called to minister to all of God’s people—and even when they

weren't so sure how or to whom to tell God's story, the Holy Spirit always seemed to empower them.

There are so many lessons for us from the first disciples. Like them, we are called to stand together—from our differing backgrounds, with our differing expectations, in our brokenness, sorrow, grief, fear, confusion, and with our shattered hopes—to look after, uplift, and love one another. We are called to truly hear one another's stories and give thanks for the ways that we all stand to be enlightened by deeply listening to how each of us sees the world.

Like the first disciples, we are called to share the story of God's love with all of God's people, in all of our differing states and conditions, until all know that they are loved by God and worthy of God's grace. We are called to share the gifts that God has given us and to trust that those gifts are enough for us to answer the call to be God's hands and hearts of healing and reconciliation in this world, enough for us to seek justice and righteousness for all.