

Dear students,

You are hearing from me at this moment because I wasn't ready before now. I was always taught by my parents to pause when I'm angry or fed up, and pausing is what I've been doing. I hope you all realize that, like you, we older people hurt, too. My heart goes out to the family of George Floyd, who has become another in the long line of senseless, racist murders.

I've spent the past few days working through some of my own feelings, speaking to, and more importantly, listening intently to my own mentors, and spending time in meditation at a memorial that my colleagues, Nicky Hamilton and Professor Paige Schneider, constructed near the southwest door of All Saints' Chapel. Now I'm in a better space to serve others.

As a black man, I know that Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and all the other men who have been killed easily could have been me, my brother, my nephews, or my soon-to-be-born great-nephew. I resonate with the pain and fear that my young women family members and friends also are feeling—that someone would come into their homes, like in the case with Breonna Taylor, while they are sleeping, and shoot and kill them.

I mourn for the hundreds of thousands of peaceful protesters. I mourn especially for the Sewanee African-American students who are hurting (I once was you, a Sewanee student, and the few of us African-American students, then, also experienced racism and bigotry).

I see and hear you, and I urge you to continue exercising your right to protest peacefully. I understand how anger can turn into violence, but for the few folks who are not protesting for the right reasons, I cannot condone that behavior. The destruction of someone else's property is not right, it's too easy, it's distracting, and it won't get us any closer to justice.

Last week, I interviewed one of my dear friends, Dr. François Clemmons, an African-American man who's gay, an activist, actor, author, world-renown singer, and a recent Sewanee honorary degree recipient. He also played the role of Officer Clemmons (a police officer) on the children's television program, Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, and was the first African-American in America to have a recurring role on a children's television program. In the wake of these horrific murders, I asked Dr. Clemmons how Fred Rogers would have engaged his role as Officer Clemmons on the show in a way to reassure young black men and women. His response was not what I thought it would be. He said that Fred Rogers is dead, so he no longer imagines what Fred Rogers would have done. He went on to say that the legacies left by countless leaders of past generations were ones of hope—the hope that young people would pick up the stained banner and lead us toward a better, more just world. You all as Sewanee students have tremendous power and privilege to do that with leadership, determination, and sheer will. I am a change agent, and so are you!

As we all are angered and trying to make sense of these brutal, racist killings, we must, together, and more than ever, continue using our voice, our vote, our time, and our platform; and we also must hold our leaders and ourselves accountable.

Now is not the time to feel sorry for ourselves; angry, sure; fed up, absolutely; hurt, no doubt; energized to change our nation and our world, most definitely. Let's move forward, together.

In anticipation,

W. Marichal Gentry
Vice President for Student Life
Dean of Students

We encourage those who feel they may need additional support to contact The University Wellness Center. You can contact our Mental Health Crisis Line anytime at (931) 598-1700 to connect immediately with a counselor, or call Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at (931) 598-1325 during business hours.

If you are struggling with thoughts of suicide and are concerned that you are at imminent risk for hurting yourself or someone you know, call 911 and/or visit the nearest Emergency Room. For other after-hours assistance, consider the National Crisis Hotline at 1-800-274-8255, or send a crisis text to 741741.