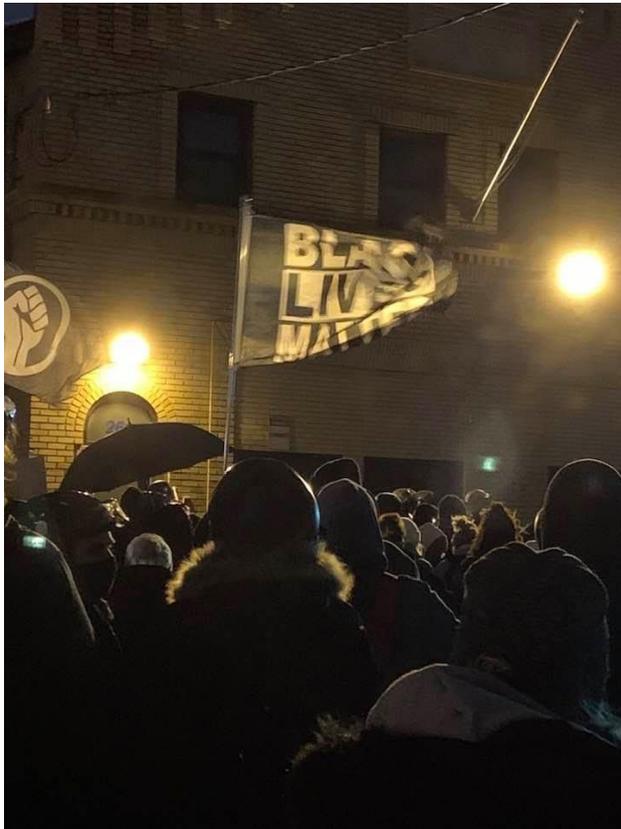


A Witness for Love and Justice

By Rev. S. Brae Adams

Daniel Prude was a 41-year-old African-American man whose life ended as the result of being hooded and restrained against the pavement by police for 2 minutes and 15 seconds. This happened in Rochester, New York, USA on March 23, 2020. The following is a personal account of the experiences of a white Pastor and spouse who protested alongside their African-American neighbors, Black Lives Matter, and other supporters.



“Love your neighbor as yourself” Mark 12:31

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Letter from a Birmingham Jail

**“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”
“The church cannot merely “bandage the victims under the wheel,” but must “jam a spoke in the wheel itself.”
Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

These quotations (and many more) helped me to understand my role in the current Black Lives Matter movement. It is not enough to speak out against injustice, but as followers of Jesus, we must stand up and take action. This is what my spouse, Debbie, and I have been doing since the videos of George Floyd came out. We have attended rallies and marches, put up two Black Lives Matter signs in our yards, and engaged in dialogue with those around us about the effects of white supremacy in America. I have spoken at press conferences and from the pulpit about our call as people of faith to bear witness to and speak out against racism. To love one’s neighbor is to be persistent in wanting better for them, in seeking justice for them, in standing alongside “the least of these...”

When the news came that Daniel Prude had been murdered in our own town, a small group of clergy, who knew one another from social justice events and clergy groups, created a group text to coordinate donations of water, masks, and other supplies. Debbie and I drove supplies to where the rally was being held - the very location where

Daniel Prude took his last unassisted breaths. That first night, I was the only person in clerical garb. Deb and I were two of maybe five white folks in the crowd. Those gathered were united in their pain and wanted only to be together and share their stories. We were careful to “stay in our lane” and spent the evening distributing snacks and offering cold bottles of water to those gathered. We were a ministry of presence - taking part only in the lament - standing along-side.

The protests, rallies and marches continued for several nights, always angry but always peaceful. Two nights into the protests, as unarmed marchers were approaching the bridge that separates the part of town where Daniel was killed from the Public Safety Building, they were met with police officers in riot gear firing tear gas, pepper balls, and rubber bullets indiscriminately into the crowd. The following night, the police advanced upon the crowd again, firing tear gas and pepper balls, even as the crowd dispersed and retreated. Later that evening, police even surrounded a church in which the injured and frightened had taken refuge, firing so many pepper balls that the façade of the building was permanently damaged. We had been there each of the previous evenings, but got home before the violence began.



The next night was Sunday and Deb and I joined with clergy and other elders of the community placing our bodies between our black siblings and the police. Because we had been there every night, Deb and I were honored to be asked to be in the front row. We remained there, placing our bodies and our faith in front of tear gas and billy clubs and rows of dead-eyed police officers in riot gear.

In the seventeen days since the protests began, a larger group formed in our group text - including mental health professionals, social workers and more clergy. We wore orange bands and collars so that we could be available to anyone needing emotional support. In that role, I have stood silently - one night for more than an hour - with a young black man who simply remained motionless, staring at riot geared police behind barricades, looking upon the faces of his oppressors in the relative safety of a crowd. As white folks, we monitored our own, like the night that Debbie grabbed a white man who was attempting to make trouble and returned him to the right side of the barricade (she moves like a ninja!). He remained unharmed but was promptly surrounded by organizers and their security. One day, I prayed with a young white woman who emerged from the bathroom at the wrong time, was terrorized and then arrested. She

was seeking understanding and a glimpse of the image of God in those who had treated her with such cruelty.

Through it we were surrounded by love, by people who welcomed us, appreciated our presence, and called out a greeting of “Hey Pastor, Hey Deacon” when they saw us. Together, we have laughed and cried, danced and shouted, sung and chanted. The protestors are, almost to a person, folks of good will who in ever growing numbers said that enough is enough, that Daniel Prude mattered, that all Black Lives Matter.

A few weeks later, Debbie and Han, our child (they /them), and I chose to be a part of the cars that follow marchers to ensure their safety. When we reached an underpass on our way to the police station to stand in witness, we found ourselves blocked. There was no way to get the cars through without ramming barricades and no way to get the people through without risking clubs and pepper spray and rubber bullets and arrests. To our right was a tall hill and to our left was the on-ramp to Interstate 490. We were trapped, or so we thought. Instead, the brilliant organizers from Free the People ROC asked us if we would be willing to close off the Interstate with our cars. Led by the organizers, with our car second in line, dozens of cars and hundreds of marchers flooded the road. We cheered, chanted, sang and directed traffic the wrong way up the on-ramp. We were there around 20 minutes when it became clear that we should move out. In the distance, we could see blue lights across every lane of the road. We stayed behind to make sure that everyone got out safely, filling our car with the stragglers.

Two street medics were still walking when the state police descended. They grabbed the medics, threw them to the ground and stood on them as they were handcuffed. Our car was set upon by at least 5 angry men in uniform who beat on the sides of the vehicle with clubs and tried to pull Debbie through a half open window. With windows rolled up, we were able to drive away, but our two medics were taken.

After several hours and many phone calls, we located them in a town more than 30 minutes away. Debbie, Han, and I were asked to go and retrieve them, which we were honored to do. Debbie has said that those moments, the yelling, the police dog, the violent way in which our car was beaten and the bruises she sustained from the officer gave her a glimpse of what our black and brown siblings must experience. It was an evening that will be seared in our memories forever.

More recently, a nine year old girl was chased, thrown to the snow covered ground, handcuffed, pepper sprayed, and left in the back seat of a police cruiser for 18 minutes without medical attention. Once again our city of Rochester was in the news and once again we marched for justice. The only difference this time is that our city was covered in snow and the temperature had not risen above freezing in more than a month. The girl and her family have been embraced by our city and are receiving mental health support and other forms of assistance.

The Police Accountability Board, which was voted into office by a mandate of 74% of ballots, continues to fight in court with the police union for the right to hear cases and

discipline officers. A mental health response team has been formed to act in the place of police for non-violent calls, but there are only two full time and a few part time on call employees and they were not called for the little girl. The Mayor and her team remain in office. The Interim Police Chief has not made any notable changes. Laws have been introduced to change the amount of force and the types of weapons that can be used on citizens invoking their right to protest. De-escalation is still only taught for 8 hours in all of the police training academy curriculum, as opposed to the more than 100 hours of weapons training they receive.

The grand jury has still not indicted the officers involved in the death of Daniel Prude and they remain on paid administrative leave. An independent review of the case found that the officers followed procedures. The officers who handcuffed and pepper sprayed the nine year old girl also remain on administrative leave. The combined salaries, not including benefits, represent more than \$1,280,000 of taxes paid by the people of our city who still await justice.

EDITOR'S NOTE: On February 23, 2021 (11 months after Daniel Prude's deadly encounter with the police) the New York Attorney General announced that the grand jury declined to charge the seven officers involved. Once again, citizens took to the streets in protest.