**Funeral Blog 3 Kae Chatman July 19, 2020**

Every human culture has created rituals to assist the spirits of the dead in navigating the vast, silent space between worlds. Equally important, funeral rites help the living to manage their shock, fury, denial, despair, guilt and relief—Elizabeth Kǖbler-Ross’s stages of grief—and the additional torments that an unforeseen, unjust death or a multitude of deaths may occasion.

In 2020, the people of the United States have seen the space dividing the living and dead shrink to the size of a windshield. An infectious disease, a killer plague has traveled from a Chinese street market, where vendors sell fresh flesh of bats and dogs and fish, to meat processing plants in Arkansas, Nebraska, and Utah. Not every American infected with COVID19 dies, but the numbers continue to climb, each day amounting to several 9/11s.

The practical difficulties of arranging funerals for casualties of COVID19 compound the suffering of survivors. Someone whose death results from the corona virus should not be kissed or touched. To many Americans, the only sensible option for a COVID19 funeral is “immediate cremation followed by a memorial service in the park,” as a retired RN advised me.

But not everyone can take this path. Judaism and Roman Catholicism forbid cremation. Whenever possible, the body must be prepared for burial to await the final resurrection of the dead. A Jewish friend shared her recent experience of participating in a “Zoom Shiva.” She didn’t mind the separation of immediate family in the house from more distant relatives and friends outside (required by health considerations, not religion). But she never saw two members of the mourning family, and she worried that following the rules for a COVID19 home service cheated the survivors of the support of the wider community. As she explained, “The whole concept of Shiva centers on gathering.”

Sad to say, COVID19 is not the only angel of death at America’s door in 2020. On May 25, George Floyd, 46, stopped by a Minneapolis convenience store to purchase a pack of cigarettes. He paid for his smokes with a $20 bill. The clerk at the cash register suspected the currency to be counterfeit and called 911. A police car arrived at the scene, where three uniformed officers, soon joined by a fourth, confronted Floyd. Within 17 minutes of contact with the police, George Floyd was arrested, laid flat on his back, and suffocated to death. Eyewitnesses used their cell phones to document Floyd’s passing as a policeman’s knee pressed to his neck, and Floyd rasped, “I can’t breathe.”

Nineteen years earlier, four Los Angeles police officers beat and severely injured Rodney King, an unarmed African-American construction worker who had fled an arrest for drunk driving. An observer taped and released to the media a grainy black-and-white film of the attack on King. Three of the four officers involved in King’s beating were tried but not convicted, setting off the 1992 LA riots.

King and Floyd bracket a great many names on a roster of African-American men, women, and children who have been injured or killed in encounters with police in the past two decades, not to mention the horrors of the last four centuries. Eyewitnesses armed with cell phone cameras have established beyond all reasonable doubt that the lives of non-white Americans sometimes matter little to law enforcement officers in a country where of marble statues of Confederate generals stand proudly in our public squares, protected from public insult and injury.

But now that we know statues may lie, while cameras can tell the truth, what should we do? How can Americans begin to work our way through the trauma and shame of our sometimes cruel, careless history and the awful plague that continues to capture thousands of our fellow citizens? This is what funerals are for, acknowledging death, standing still, crossing over, going home, remembering.

The going home ceremony has deep roots in African-American culture. George Floyd enjoyed the kind of funeral typically reserved for former presidents, war heroes, and celebrities. Televised from Houston, Mr. Floyd’s home town, the three-hour service invited all American citizens to learn from African-American religious tradition how to turn loss into courage, grief into glory, and the most bitter memories into a thirst for social justice. Appearing on video, former Vice-President Joe Biden thanked the Floyd family for sharing their recollections of George Ford’s life. He praised them for showing Americans how to transform “numbness into purpose.”

Other speakers described George Floyd as a man from humble beginnings, an avid sports fan, a ghetto angel, a brother. The Reverend Al Sharpton memorialized George Ford in the words of Psalm 18:22: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone of the temple.” There was music, of course, and flowers. Family members appeared on stage alongside local dignitaries.

But through it all, and for all George Floyd has come to symbolize for the Black Lives Matter movement and for America’s renewed interest in civil rights, Floyd was a person, not just a type of person. He was an individual, the one and only. He had a story, he had a face, and he died.

What a face that man had, George Floyd. He stares at America from gigantic likenesses painted on murals in every city. He looks neither left nor right, up or down, glad or sad. He doesn’t look *at* us, he looks t*hrough* us, posing questions all humans worry about, death, purpose, grief, guilt, and homecoming. George Floyd and COVID19 have given us this season of loss, this vale of tears, to remember old questions and craft new answers.

It begins this way: lives matter. So do deaths.