

OFFICES OF THE BISHOP

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Diocese of Missouri
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

August 16, 2017

Only a few days ago I had meant merely to point the people and clergy of the Diocese of Missouri to the statement from the Bishops of the Diocese of Virginia, which can still be found [here](#). Charlottesville, after all, lies in the geography of their pastoral concern, not mine. My desire was then, and still remains, to support ministry and faithful witness on the ground, where the wound actually occurred. The President's news conference on August 15, however, has broadened the reach of some deeply troubling issues and made them pertinent to every citizen, everywhere in this country. I thus have no conscientious option left but to speak out. And I do so primarily from a moral and theological perspective, not a political one.

A foundation of Biblical faith requires belief in the One True God and a corresponding renunciation of all others, who are but idols. Idolatry is a cagier, more insidious matter than we often realize. It certainly includes all the false gods made of sticks, stones, or metal, yes. At base, however, an idol is just something that is no god at all—but still demands the allegiance which belongs to the true God. Ideology, for example, can therefore become such an idol. So can any particular manner of life. And the pursuit of wealth—another likely suspect. Notably, a nation may also turn idolatrous, and thus the so-called Confessing Christians in 1930s Germany had to renounce the false claims of the state over the lives of its citizens, claims about ultimate, unbending, and unquestioned authority. Only God rightly makes such claims. Psalm 115 solemnly mocks both the false gods and those who follow them. Idols are ridiculous, the psalmist says, and those who make and worship them are like them; idols and idol-worshippers are both alarmingly ridiculous! The Confessing Church added its voice to this chorus of sober mockery.

There is therefore no ultimate supremacy except that belonging to God. Claims to any other supremacy, including racial supremacy, are idolatrous—and, frankly, ridiculous. Believers are obliged to recognize these claims for what they are, to call them out, and to renounce them. Racism is caustic to our national life, beyond a doubt, and it erodes our morale and the social character of all that we share, all that would make us good. As such, there is a political aspect to this great wrong. But there is more. Racism, especially in its vilest claims about white supremacy, is also a sin against God, and it is evil. Within this idolatry lies a moral and theological nature that believers do well to recognize: Racism is deeply, deeply sinful.

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Racism is also sneaky, and it is persistent. Its structures are everywhere in American life, and thus faithful people need to examine and re-examine our lives, personal and social, for racism's lingering presence. New levels of awareness can be shocking and humbling, especially for people of privilege, people with power. New awareness also deserves a renewed renunciation—seeing the false power, the false god, implicit in racism's allure, and saying a resounding No! to it, all over again.

During the past days, our nation has witnessed racism in its rawest, most recognizable form, laid bare for everyone to see and to renounce. Not everyone has seen, and not everyone has renounced. I call upon you, dear brothers and sisters, to see this sin for what it is, and to renounce it.

For the sake of saying a more profound Yes! to the One True God, made flesh in Jesus Christ.

The Rt. Rev. George Wayne Smith
Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri