

LOOKING BACK ON HOODIE SUNDAY

by Reverend Neichelle R. Guidry Jones



February 26, 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin took a walk. It was a Sunday evening in Sanford, Florida. The NBA All-Star Game was going on that evening, and it was the perfect opportunity to spend quality time with his family, including his father and his father's fiancée. Halftime came around, and he decided to walk to the 7-11 Convenience Store to grab a snack: a bag of Skittles and a can of Arizona Iced Tea. On his walk home, it began to rain.

Since he was wearing a hoodie, Trayvon pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head to keep from getting doused. He was on the phone with his girlfriend in Miami when he noticed that he was being followed. Before he had a chance to say goodbye to his girlfriend—or the rest of his family—he was confronted by a “neighborhood watchman” who had been watching him with suspicion long before Trayvon noticed him. By the end of this confrontation, Trayvon laid lifeless on the front lawn of a neighbor's home in the subdivision, The Retreat at Twin Lakes. On that evening, he became the latest victim in

the historic narrative of young black males who have ruthlessly died at the hands of racists.

In the days and weeks that followed, the nation began to murmur as we waited for his killer, George Zimmerman, to be detained and charged. A series of incriminating 911 calls surfaced, offering valuable insights into the motivations behind the killing. A collective cringe shook the nation as we waited for an arrest and a glimpse of justification of this young life having been snatched. When neither came, an interracial, intergenerational groundswell erupted across the nation. Latent stresses gave way to enacted rage and widespread public mourning. Multiple millions of people demanded an arrest by signing online petitions. Thousands marched and shouted in public protests around the country. When comparisons to the egregious 1955 murder of Chicago youth Emmitt Till were drawn, we understood that we were witnessing one of this generation's most salient brushes with racialized brutality and injustice.

But, that was not all that occurred. As African American Christians, we are intimately familiar with the holding patterns in which justice becomes entangled with the racial inequities of the American justice system. We have learned how to “occupy” heaven with our prayers and to lean on the theodicy of our God when this nation's systems have failed us. Indeed, it has been through such circumstances that we've been able to name our God as the One Who Can Make a Way Out of No Way. In this recent installment in this long saga, we did what we have done for many generations. We took to our churches to intercede, to commemorate, to prepare, to learn, and to weep—together. In what has become widely known as “Hoodie Sunday,” many African American congregations marked this historical moment with our hooded sweatshirts, our tears—and our liturgies.

I have spoken with several church leaders across the country to get their take on their experiences of Hoodie Sunday in their congregations. Through the course of these conversations, I attempted to unearth the liturgical significance of Hoodie Sunday and to articulate some of the ways that these liturgies facilitated transformation. As an associate pastor to young adults, I have been especially interested in the impact that was made on persons between the ages of 19 and 29. However, my dialogue with persons of a variety of ages, genders, and perspectives has pointed me in an organic direction that has yielded unanticipated glimpses into the intersection between uncertain liturgy and profoundly shared pain.

To begin, I am reminded of the historical liturgical creativity and agency that has long characterized the African American religious experience. I remember the images of slave worship that Dr. Albert J. Raboteau presented in his classic text, The Invisible Institution: Slave Religion in the Antebellum South. For example, the image of a large black pot, sitting in the middle of a circle, catching the voices of the preacher and the worshippers, so that their voices were not heard by mean slaveholders, continues to remind me that our everyday has always found its way into our worship. Moreover, texts and testimonies abound which remind us that African American churches have often been the sites of vast political mobilization and anti-political confrontation. So, it makes perfect sense that

Trayvon, his story, and the urgency of this moment found their way into our congregations.

Gathering to grieve; grieving to commemorate; commemorating to motivate; motivating to move—this is who we have been, and this is who we are.

Hoodie Sunday: A Case of Liturgical Intentionality

In a conversation with Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ, it was divulged that many of the Hoodie Sunday services that occurred across the country were conceived during an online conversation between 30–40 pastors and church leaders who were wondering “how they could bring attention to what had happened to Trayvon Martin.” Many had been privy to the secular hoodie marches that were taking place and decided that a “Hoodie Sunday” was a necessary ecclesial response. From this conversation, the idea began to spread via various social media outlets, and pastors began to craft their own iterations of what Hoodie Sunday would look like within their congregations.

And its countenance did, in fact, vary from community to community. In some congregations, only senior pastors wore hoodies, while pastoral staff wore them in others. And in others, entire communities were encouraged to participate by wearing hoodies. However, three components hold a majority of these liturgies in tandem: the employment of social media, the liturgical makings of these services, and the question of long-term significance.

“A social media-liturgical moment”

So critical was social media to the development and implementation of Hoodie Sunday that Moss refers to it as a “social media-liturgical moment.” As aforementioned, social media played a pivotal role in the proliferation of the *idea* of Hoodie Sunday. However, perhaps its role in proliferating the *event* of Hoodie Sunday was its greatest. With an urgency to match that of the moment, church leaders took to social media outlets to spread the word about Hoodie Sunday taking place within their congregations, many of whom made their decisions to participate the night before.

Such was the case at Emmanuel Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, where the Reverend Anthony L. Trufant is the Senior Pastor and where Tracey D. Hughes is a deacon. According to Hughes, it was “decided late on Saturday” that the church would observe Hoodie Sunday on March 25. Through the use of text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, and e-mail on that evening, over 80% of the membership arrived to worship in hoodies the following morning—for all three services.

Again, the significance of social media was further crystallized *during* Hoodie Sunday services. Services airing online enabled international viewers to partake in the liturgies. Facebook statuses and Twitter tweets became sites of theological reflection, emotional expression, and theo-political solidarity for people worshipping at Hoodie Sunday

services. Attendees utilized the Twitter hashtags [#Justice4Trayvon](#), [#JusticeforTrayvon](#) and [#TrayvonMartin](#) to participate in running national dialogues. However, a new hashtag, [#hoodiesunday](#), was created to broaden these dialogues to include the particularities of the Hoodie Sunday services across the country. Pastors and parishioners alike feverishly tweeted pictures, sermon excerpts, service reminders, and calls to continuing action. Whether participating in a live service or viewing a service online, the majority of these tweets were posted *as* services were going on, creating a mass connection and response during one critical moment.

The Rev. Joan Harrell, Director of Public Communications at Trinity, speaks of the international proportion that was achieved through the “holistic intentionality” around social media efforts. “There is a global community that we teach and preach to every Sunday,” she explains. “Therefore, viewers in places such as London, Vietnam, Norway, and Sweden were a part of the ‘We are Trayvon Martin’ Sunday at TUCC.” Finally, online movements such as the [Million Hoodie Cyber March](#) point to the vital necessity of mobilization through technology, even beyond Hoodie Sunday services.

Liturgical Makings

Hoodie Sunday liturgies varied from place to place, and the differences are exactly what made every service exceptional. It is said that liturgy is the place where “heaven meets earth” and is the “rehearsal for the divine drama that occurs in heaven.” There is often a fixation on the heavenliness of liturgy that minimizes the fact that liturgy must be nuanced in ways that minister to the hopelessness and desperation of our private and collective experiences on earth. In [Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration](#), Luke Powery engages the common fear among Christian preachers to “lament and engage in the sighs of the Spirit” within the contexts of their sermons.¹ **Could it be that the entirety of our liturgies suffers from the same trepidation? That our words, songs, displays, and embodiments are so tailored towards celebration and/or prosperity that they scarcely invite us into spaces of collective mourning and grieving, unless we are at a funeral?** When it comes to the public and liturgical allowance for grief, have our sites of worship become just as gated as The Retreat at Twin Lakes?

In [Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence](#), Judith Butler offers a penetrating proposal to those of us who are concerned with the holistic efficacy of our liturgies: “I propose to consider a dimension of political life that has to do with our exposure to violence and our complicity in it, with our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows, and with finding a basis for community in these conditions.”² If one were to replace Butler’s verbiage of “political” with “liturgical,” then they may be on to the liturgical significance of Hoodie Sunday.

Services may have also included special presentations of liturgical arts. Charlton Jelks, 17, and her brother, Charlton, 15, contributed their ministries of spoken word to the services at Trinity United Church of Christ, an experience that enabled them to “tell our side of the story of the Trayvon Martin case because he was very close to our age.” When asked about their hopes for their ministry on “We Are Trayvon Martin Sunday” at

Trinity, they responded that they aimed to inspire people “to take action to get justice for Trayvon Martin and also to show that racism still exist despite the [culture’s] sense of it’s over.” In this congregation and in many others, this occasion afforded African American youth the opportunities to integrate their voices into the worship experiences.

Many of the sermons from Hoodie Sunday included the stark facts of Trayvon’s killing. Preachers traced his walk from the corner store with his Skittles and Iced Tea, his conversation with his girlfriend and his assailant’s stalker-like pursuit. Texts ranged from the Hebrew to the Christian Testaments. However, it was the homiletical *grappling* that occurred that sets this set of sermons apart. Black preachers have long “grappled” with our collective existential realities through hermeneutical lenses such as outrage and anxiety. Yet, this set of sermons grappled with this event through the lenses of twenty-first century loss and bewilderment, and allowed for a unique vulnerability on the parts of many preachers. For example, in his sermon “A Rizpah Response,” Rev. Dr. Howard John Wesley named a “complexity of emotions, thoughts and feelings”:

“In one sense, Saints, I’m outraged. There’s a part in me that is angry to the core of who I am. I am scared. And I am terrified. And I’m hurt. And I don’t know where you stand today, but I come to this place wrestling with God, asking the Lord, *What should I feel and say and think in this moment?* I tell you, when you’re angry and outraged and you’re hurt and scared, It’s hard to hear the voice of God.”

One way that preachers “grappled” was to locate this moment and this young man in a long continuum of unjustly murdered black men, women, and children. In the same way that testimonies serve to encourage discouraged spirits, it seemed as if the historic memories of past tragedies serve as agents of meaning-making in these sermons. On one hand, this history was unsettling in its generational repetition, as Moss expressed in his sermon “We Are Trayvon Martin.” Citing books such as The New Jim Crow, Slavery by Another Name, and The Condemnation of Blackness, he detailed the criminalization of black males from slavery, through reconstruction, and into the present. On the other hand, the history seemed to soothe because it recalled the legacy of nonviolent hope that current African American Christians have received from generations passed.

In his sermon “Stuck in Traffic,” Rev. Dr. Raphael Warnock preached, “we could’ve grown cold toward America, but we wrapped ourselves in the warmth of a hoodie that no hatred could penetrate. Don’t become cold and bitter. Don’t become cynical and ugly. Put on your hoodie and protect your spirit!” In other words, the history was a means of articulating disgust *and* determination.

Overall, these sermons, and the surrounding liturgies, attempted to discover who we are without Trayvon and every other youth who has died similarly senseless deaths through acts of violence. They provided spaces for public grieving that could occur within the safety of community. They allowed for the transformation of despair into hope, and for the transmission of hope into changed future.

And, just what might this future entail? Will the African American Church, or the Church universal, be at the center of this future?

A Changed Future: Long-term Implications

The profound paradox of grief is that our willingness to embrace and engage it signifies our willingness to embark upon journeys of restoration and wholeness.

How will we ensure that Hoodie Sunday wasn't a one-time engagement? Here, I am not suggesting that we should have more Hoodie Sunday services. Rather, I am wondering how did these services *incite* us with *commitments* to love, activism, and justice?

It's one thing to wear a hoodie on a designated Sunday. It's something very different to continuously *struggle* into new realities and social paradigms. If these Hoodie Sunday services failed to inspire attendees to meet this mark, then they were fleeting trends that are ultimately subversive of any directed action towards justice. I do not mean to undermine the prophetic powers of our tears, our angst, and our prayers. However, I do mean to suggest that liturgical experiences that *leave us at grief* fail to propel us into action. In Butler's words, "one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation ... the full result of which one cannot know in advance."³

Perhaps in this changed future, church leaders will recognize and deploy the liturgical value of discomfort. Jermaine Manor, Vocal Choir Director at Covenant Church of Pittsburgh, witnessed the shock that infiltrated his multicultural congregation when senior pastor Bishop Joseph L. Garlington called the congregation into a time of intentional contemplation. Although no official "Hoodie Sunday" was observed, Garlington played the 911 tapes of Zimmerman's calls to the Sanford Police Department just prior to Trayvon's killing. Garlington followed the recordings with the question, "What if Trayvon was white, Hawaiian, or Hispanic?" Within this context, Manor noted, "I watched the white folks begin to squirm and fix their clothes in the same places in the sermon where I heard the black folks shout 'amen!'" This suggests that perhaps a little discomfort in worship may unmask the polarities we disguise with our kind countenances and visions of fictionalized racial utopias. Perhaps a little liturgically induced discomfort is useful for truth-telling and justice-provoking dialogue and service.

Perhaps in this future, the current generation of prophetically inclined African American Christians will become the creative voices of the movement—or perhaps not. Courtney-Savali Andrews is a PhD Candidate and a United States Fulbright Fellow at the Centre for Pacific Studies at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. As a burgeoning scholar of music history, she muses on the "rich canon of music" that came out of the Civil Rights Movement and wonders how the African American Church is musically participating in current justice-oriented movements. "What is the current liturgical canon that represents these issues?" she asks. Citing an unfortunate move away from grassroots musical innovation, she says, "With everything having become so concertized, the tradition becomes increasingly inaccessible."

The Rev. Nolan Williams Jr., one of the senior liturgists for the African American Lectionary, who also teaches at Dartmouth College, suggests that the current canon is coming from “the streets, which are a different kind of sanctuary.” In this regard, several hip-hop artists have recorded and released songs pertaining to Trayvon’s killing, including Jasiri X, whose song “Trayvon” was set to the instrumental of Jay-Z and Kanye West’s duet “No Church in the Wild” from their *Watch the Throne* album. “Made You Die” was recorded by hip-hop veterans Yasiin Bey (Mos Def), Dead Prez, and Mike Flow, to the instrumental of Nas’s “Made You Look.” These and many others were released within weeks of the event, signifying an urgent impulse throughout the hip-hop community to *exhaust* its resources to respond to Trayvon’s murder.

This being said, though grief and disbelief may have prompted the response of Hoodie Sunday, the opportunity to liturgically gather around this event should propel us forward, in the same way that such gatherings propelled our forebears. In the words of Professor Barbara A. Holmes,

As with all great social justice movements, there came a time when worship practices and communal resolve coalesced, and an interfaith, interdenominational, interracial community formed. . . . It was in many respects similar to the *communitas* gathering that Victor Turner’s research revealed. A community is not always an intentional gathering of like-minded people who munch on coffee and donuts as they assess issues of common concern. Sometimes communities form because unpredictable events and circumstances draw people into shared life intersections.⁴

Here, I am suggesting that perhaps this future will call for the end of the love affair between the African American Church and the safe covering of her beloved sanctuaries. Gone are the days where special thematic services will suffice in quieting all of creation’s groans. These groans must be met by a response that is equally urgent and thunderous, meaning that no outlet, no alliance, and no opportunity to *publically* embody and enact the justice of God must go untapped.

In conclusion, while this beckons us to look beyond the walls of our churches for possibilities for this changed future, it also beckons us to look within and to explore the ways that our liturgies can provoke justice and understanding. And although it would require creative courage and “liturgical risk,”⁵ it wouldn’t be the first time that we met the God of Justice through worship:

. . . The spark that ignited the justice movements did not come from the hierarchical institutional black church. Rather, it was the quixotic and limber heart of that institution, its flexible, spiritually open, and mystical center, that ignited first the young people and then their elders to move their symbolic initiatives from ritual ring shouts to processional and contemplative marches.⁶

In the case of our brother Trayvon Martin, this may mean that indeed we *will* need to leave the edifices like Pastor Delman Coates and the Mt. Ennon Baptist Church did for their “Justice for Trayvon” Rally. Maybe this means that we should *keep on* wearing hoodies to worship until Trayvon receives whatever justice God has “laid up” for him. This may mean that, in the words of Charles Cotton, Jr., Minister of Worship & Arts at Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, and young adult lectionary liturgist, we must do the work to discern how we are *each* called and equipped to be “practical and relevant” for the sake of reaching this generation: “if ‘to serve this present age is our calling to fulfill,’ perhaps we need to rethink when we will employ our traditions and when we will do something altogether new.”

In this spirit, in great hopes in the power of the Spirit of God, and most importantly, in memory of Trayvon Martin, I offer the following song lyrics as a charge to look deeper and longer at our social conditions through the eyes of worship:

*don't close your eyes
until you see what I'm feeling.
don't let me slip from memory.
Memory.⁷*

On behalf of the entire African American Lectionary Young Adult Liturgists’ team, (Charles Cotton Jr., Courtney-Savali Andrews, Jermaine Manor, myself, and Brandon Boyd), we give special thanks to *all who participated* in the preparation of this article, including our mentor, the Rev. Nolan Williams Jr., progenitor of the Million Hoodie Cyber March, our pastors, colleagues, and ministry partners.

Notes

1. Powery, Luke A. Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. p. xiii.
2. Butler, Judith. Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence, 2nd ed. London: Verso, 2006. p. 19.
3. Butler, Precarious Life, p. 21.
4. Holmes, Barbara A. Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press: 2004, 139.
5. This is a reference to a lecture delivered by Dr. Brad A. Braxton to the first-year PhD Hermeneutics course participants at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, on Wednesday, November 9, 2011.
6. Holmes, Joy Unspeakable, p. 140.

7. Glasper, Robert. "Don't Close Your Eyes." On Mood. New York, NY: Fresh Sound New Talent, 2002.