

**Testimony of the Right Reverend Mariann Budde,  
Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington  
Before the Committee on National Resources,  
United States House of Representatives**

**June 29, 2020**

Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Mariann Budde. I serve as Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington and as the spiritual leader of the Episcopal Church in Washington D.C., which counts among its parishes St. John's Episcopal Church in Lafayette Square. I appear today to express my deep concern about the events of June 1, 2020, when our government resorted to acts of violence against peaceful protesters and prevented clergy and lay members of the Church from exercising their ministry on the St. John's grounds and in surrounding areas.

We, in the Episcopal Church, believe that the issues of racial and social justice are core tenets of the Christian faith. The Bible teaches that all human beings are created in the likeness and image of God. As children of God, all must be treated with equal dignity and respect. Embedded in our nation's history and institutions is the shameful abuse of Black Americans and other persons of color justified by the sinful notion of white supremacy—that whiteness is the human standard from which all other human beings deviate or are deemed less than human, less worthy of equal treatment as the beloved children of God that they are. As Christians, we are called by God to rectify that injustice. Our faith compels us to join the hundreds of thousands of people across the country and around the globe who have engaged in non-violent protests to call for an end to racist policies and practices, and to say clearly, with one voice, that Black lives matter.

For Episcopalians, the issue of racial justice is a shameful part of our history, for we were once the church of slave holders. St. John's Lafayette Square was built with enslaved labor. Yet, throughout our history, our noblest members have fought for the liberation and full inclusion of all people. We have and continue to struggle to come to terms with our racist past and legacy, and that of American society as a whole. As we grapple in these times with this complicated history, we strive to be a voice for peace and the fundamental dignity of all humans, knowing that, at our most faithful moments, we have stood on the side of justice.

And so we stand today, at this critical moment. When non-violent protestors began to gather at Lafayette Square, as a Church, we decided to establish a presence at St. John's Lafayette Square to add our voice to the call for justice and to stand with and minister to all other peaceful protestors gathered there. This was, and is, for us an act of faith. But our ministry was suddenly and forcefully interrupted by government officials—first on June 1, when the government violently cleared protestors and clergy alike from the area surrounding St. John's Lafayette Square, and then in the coming days, when the government denied us access to the church to conduct a vigil.

These actions, and in particular the use of violence against peaceful protestors, were antithetical to the teachings of the Bible and what we stand for as a Church. When our government announced its intention to use military force against American citizens in the Rose Garden that day, it struck me as an escalation of violence that could cause unnecessary human suffering. Then

to see the government carry out that threat moments later—tear gassing Americans engaged in peaceful protests—I was horrified. It was dehumanizing, and in violation of the protestors' right to be in that space. Then, when the President held up a Bible outside of our church, as if to claim the mantle of spiritual authority over what just transpired, I knew that I had to speak out. Nowhere does the Bible condone the use of violence against the innocent, especially those who are standing up for justice. This was a misappropriation of scripture, and a usurpation of our sacred space.

I raise these issues to call attention to an abuse of power on the part of our government. While it is true that there have been instances of vandalism at St. John's in recent weeks, we will not let these events and others overshadow the fundamental cause of justice. Never before in the history of this country have we been so united in recognizing that the way we police our communities needs to change. The way we treat people of color in this country needs to change. It would be unforgivable to allow this moment to slip away because our building was damaged. We care deeply about our churches—many of which are older than our nation itself. But in the end, buildings can be re-built. Windows can be replaced. Pillars can be re-painted. We can never bring back the lives that have been lost due to senseless police violence. George Floyd. Breonna Taylor. Elijah McClain. And so many others. Their deaths are the true outrage, and I don't want anything that has happened at St. John's—either before the protests or in the weeks since—to distract us from that fact. Black lives matter, and our faith compels us to seek equal justice for all people.

I look forward to answering your questions.