Opening Prayer

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because the Lord has anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.” (Isaiah 61:1)

Excerpts from Michael Eric Dyson’s TEARS WE CANNOT STOP: A SERMON TO WHITE AMERICA

In the first chapter, “Call to Worship,” the author says on p. 6 “what I need to say can only be said as a sermon.” He is qualified to do just that since he’s been an ordained preacher for more than 35 years and is currently a sociology professor at Georgetown University. I take him at his word, so much of what I’ve gleaned from the book draws on Chapter V, “Sermon.” In Chapters II “Hymns of Praise” and III “Invocation” Dyson introduces his personal life as a black man through his three children: Mike, Maisha, and Mwata.

During an evening drive to his office, his son, Mike, puts up a fuss which is disturbing enough so that he stopped and gave his son a licking. The event is witnessed by a white man who calls the police department for what he sees as child abuse. The six police track the car and pull him aside. When Dyson identifies himself as a professor, the police drive off.

In Chapter III, “Invocation,” daughter Maisha, six years old, is invited to an ice skating party by a dear white friend, who had moved to the suburbs. Three white girls yell “move niggers.” The episode was her introduction to racism against her. Dyson points to a second racist encounter involving Maisha when she was older. She was an attractive young woman with light green eyes, believed to be white, who was followed by a white male, an instance of a black person mistaken for a white.

The third family incident involved his oldest son, Mwata, an anesthesiologist. Mwata is stopped and pulled over by a police officer. The office claimed he was violating the law for talking on the cell phone while driving and ticketed. Mwata then saw the same officer stop another black driver.

A quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. fits the previous stories: “Do you know that a lot of the race problem grows out of the … need that some people have to feel superior. A need that some people have to feel … that their white skin ordained them to be first.”

Chapter V, SERMON

p. 44 “Whiteness is an advantage and privilege because you have made it so, not because the universe demands it.

THE FIVE STAGES OF WHITE GRIEF

First stage (page 74): “the first stage of white racial grief is to plead utter ignorance about black life and culture.” “It is not unlike those explorers and pilgrims who ‘discovered’ America, that is, discovered a land full of native people. Native lives stopped mattering before they even began to count.”

“The second stage (page 78) of grief flashes in the assertion “it didn’t happen” (page 79) “It was my ancestors, not me, who did this to you.” (page 79) “When it comes to race the past is always present. What Jim Crow achieved in the past through, say, redlining—where services like banking, insurance, health care and supermarkets are denied to specific racial or ethnic groups—continues to this day.”

“The third stage (page 81) of white racial grief, appropriation, looms everywhere.” “White America loves black style when its face and form are white.”
“The way of the (fourth stage) of the racial revisionist, when it come to black life and history, is, simply, to rewrite it. Their motto is, “it didn’t happen that way,” (page 87) “Slavery is rewritten too. Some white Christian apologists contented that black folk needed slavery to save their souls, or to rescue their cultures.”

The fifth stage of white racial grief (page 88) is when it comes to race, to dilute it. “Bad stuff happens to everyone.” (page 90) “You’ve been handed a history where you got most of the land, made most of the money, got most of the presumptions of goodness, and innocence, and intelligence and thrift, and genius—just about everything that is edifying and white.”

**THE PLAGUE OF WHITE INNOCENCE**

(Page 96) “Any criticism of the nation is heard as an attack on your identity.” “But, my friends, your innocent whiteness is too costly to maintain. We are forced to be gentle with you, which is another way of saying we are forced to lie to you.” (page 98) “White fragility is the belief that even the slightest pressure is seen by white folk as battering, as intolerable, and can provoke anger, fear and yes, even guilt.” (page 100) “Justice is what love sounds like when it speaks in public.” (page 104) *Beloved, to be white* is to know that you have at your own hand, or by extension, through institutionalized means, the power to take black life with impunity. It’s the power of life and death that gives whiteness its force, its imperative. White life is worth more than black life.” (page 115) “I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” (James Baldwin)

**Chapter VI, BENEDICTION**

Dyson closes his book with a “few practical suggestions” to his white friends “to make things better” (page 197). First, “you must make reparation.” Reparation can take many forms: “Hire black folk at your office and pay them slightly better than you would ordinarily pay them.” Or you can assist deserving black students in your community with scholarships. (page 199) “Beloved, you must also educate yourselves about black life and culture. (See pages 199-204). (Page 204) “Beloved, your participation in protests, rallies, local community meetings, and the like makes a huge difference.” (Page 206) Make new black friends. Finally, (pages 211-212) strive to become empathetic by walking a “mile or two in the boots of blackness. “The sieve of hate will not end until white folk imagine themselves as black folk—vulnerable despite blackness.” “Do not tell us how we should act if we were you; imagine how you would act if you were us.”

**IX Closing Prayer**

Oh God, the hour is dark. The suffering is great. But we will not give up. We will not surrender. We will not surrender because we have endured the lash of spite and the whip of hate on our backs.

We will not surrender because our mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers, too, believed in you, believed in us, believed that no obstacle put in their way could stop them. They believed that the grace you gave them for their journeys would outlast any challenge to their hearts and minds.

We will not surrender because your enduring and indestructible Word feeds the souls of our people. We will not surrender because blackness is a gift that has blessed the world beyond compare. Our minds and hearts, and our tongues and bodies, too, have made Earth a better place to live. We will not surrender because we have survived.

Oh God, we are not naive. We know, just as white America knows, that our legion, multiple, complicated, adaptable, triumphant blackness threatens whiteness.

Oh God, you placed a paradox in our midst like a rainbow at the end of a storm: if we are to understand America we must understand blackness.

Oh Lord, black folk are everything; we are every possibility of American, even human, identity made real. That means we are everywhere, just like our white brothers and sisters.

We are going nowhere. We are your children too. We will survive. We are America.