

## **“Banned Books and the Bible: ‘The Hate U Give’”**

On the Friday of Memorial Day weekend, I was coming home from working an evening visitation at Gunderson Funeral Home in Monona, I was stopped by a McFarland police officer for speeding. When I asked why the officer pulled me over, he informed me that I was driving 40 miles an hour as I entered a 30 mile an hour zone.

Have you ever been stopped by the police for any reason? Speeding? Running a stop sign or stop light? A broken taillight? Or just because you looked like you and because you looked like you, the police or others were suspicious, thinking perhaps you were up to no good? Then again, I am white, why would I worry about these things?

When the officer pulled me over, I didn’t think that I might be shot by the officer, though as I sat waiting for him to write the ticket, I thought about something one of our McFarland students, Emmanuel “Manny” Barber-Thomas, said at an all-school assembly.

Manny, was a classmate of Sam’s. He was the president of the McFarland Black Student Union. Speaking at our Challenge Day Assembly, Manny talked about the chances of his being shot and killed during a traffic stop because he was black, as opposed to Sam, who is white.

The memory of Manny’s words was probably on my mind as I was rereading Angie Thomas’ book, ‘The Hate U Give’.

In her book, a black teenager, Khalil, and his childhood friend, Starr Carter, are pulled over by a white police officer for a broken taillight. As the officer goes back to his vehicle, Khalil reaches for his hairbrush as he turns to ask Starr, who is scared, to ask how she is doing?

The officer thinking the hairbrush is a gun, shoots Khalil four times, killing him. Starr in shock, screams for the officer to help him, but the police officer instead points his gun at her, telling her to be quiet as he realizes his mistake, and then calls for backup.

What follows is what we know too well, the police officer is acquitted of any wrongdoing in his shooting and killing Khalil, a young black man. The black community’s cries for justice for Khalil, turn to anger, protests, and violence erupts between the police and the community.

You don’t have to read Thomas’ novel to know this story, because it is one all too familiar in our nation with the countless shootings of young black men, like by the police.

According to a report in the Washington Post, **“Black people, who account for 13 percent of the U.S. population, accounted for 27 percent of those fatally shot and killed by police in 2021, according to Mapping Police Violence, a nonprofit group that tracks police shootings. That means Black people are twice as likely as white people to be shot and killed by police officers.”**

We might, as a white congregation, hearing this, hold in our hearts and minds, and even in our conversations, a judgement about why black people are twice as likely to be shot and killed by police. That is called “White Privilege” and it exists here this morning, because, well, we are white and it is important for us to acknowledge as we reflect together on this book.

I am sure my talking about Angie Thomas’ book makes some of us uncomfortable, and it should. Her story invites us, as white people, to do as Jesus would do, or as she would say, Black Jesus would do, and yes, Jesus was dark skinned, to consider the other person, as our neighbors. To see the other person and to learn their story of life, love, pain and sorrow, and the pain we have caused others, sometimes in God’s name.

Angie Thomas invites us into the lives of Starr Carter and her family. She wants us to see and understand their lived experience.

‘The Hate U Give’ is at times raw and challenging as it deals with racism, drugs, gang violence, white privilege, and police brutality. But Thomas also shows us a people of strong family and faith; they pray together, laugh together, love each other, have dreams and hopes, work hard, care for and help their neighbors, and are concerned about the same issues we are concerned about. She wants us to see them as human beings, yes, and as human beings who are black, which means their experiences with the police and the legal system are not the same experiences as yours and mine.

As followers of Christ, we should care deeply about the experience of others, since, as Paul writes in Philippians 2:3, we are called to consider others as better than ourselves. So, as one person wrote: “How can we do that if we ignore or deny the lived experience of others?”

As a Matthew 25 congregation, we are called to see the Christ in others. This asks us to be open to seeing others not from our own point of view, and judgement, but to listen to their story, to hear their pain, sorrow, and in doing so to come to understand the ways we as individuals and as people have caused them harm.

Brian Gault, writing in his review of Angie Thomas’ banned book, ‘The Hate U Give’ says: **“It’s hard to put yourself in someone else’s shoes and see the world from their perspective. You don’t know what you don’t know. We often cram the details of someone else’s world into our categories. We simplify their complexity.”**

As followers of Jesus, we are commanded to do justice, show mercy and kindness, which also means to confess when we do not do these things to others, which includes acknowledging the systemic racism that still exists in our nation and in our churches.

'The Hate U Give' has shown me how little I know about why Black Lives Matter, and why they do matter.

When I first read this conversation between Starr and her father, I almost cried because of the truth of God's Word in their words.

Yes, it is challenging, and includes some language that we would not necessarily use in church, but we hear out in the world. It is a powerful, moving, and deeply meaningful conversation between Starr and her father.

As your pastor, as a person of faith, and a follower of Jesus, it is a sermon we need to hear on hearing the cries of the oppressed and the injustices black people have long experienced in our nation. I thank Angie Thomas for sharing it with us. The conversation about the late rapper Tupac Shakur, whose music was the poetry of the streets speaking to the lives of many black people.

Starr begins with these words:

"He sings with the chorus about how things will get easier, and I don't know if I wanna cry 'cause that's really speaking to me right now, or crack up 'cause Daddy's singing is so horrible.

Daddy says, "that was some deep dude right there. Real deep. They don't make rappers like that no more."

"You're showing your age, Daddy."

"Whatever. It's the truth...And he said Thug Life meant,"

"The Hate U Give Little Infants F---s Everybody," I censor myself. This is daddy I'm talking to, you know?

"You know 'bout that?"

"Yeah. Khalil told me what he thought it means. We were listening to Tupac right before... you know."

"A'ight, so what do you think it means?"

"You don't know?" I ask.

"I know. I wanna hear what YOU think."

Here he goes. Picking my brain. "Khalil said it's about what society feeds us as youth and how it comes back and bites them later," I say. "I think it's about more than youth though. I think it's about us, period."

"Us who?" he asks.

"Black people, minorities, poor people. Everybody at the bottom in society."

"The oppressed," says Daddy.

"Yeah. We're the ones who get the short end of the stick, but we're the ones they fear the most. That's why the government targeted the Black Panthers, right? Because they were scared of the Panthers?"

“Uh-huh,” Daddy says. “The Panthers educated and empowered the people. That tactic of empowering the oppressed goes even further back than the Panthers though. Name one.”

Is he serious? He always makes me think. This one takes me a second. “The slave rebellion of 1831,” I say. “Nat Turner empowered and educated other slaves, and it led to one of the biggest slave revolts in history.”

“A’ight, a’ight. You on it.” He gives me dap. “So, what’s the hate they’re giving the ‘little infants’ in today’s society?”

“Racism?”

“You gotta get a li’l more detailed than that. Think ’bout Khalil and his whole situation. Before he died.”

“He was a drug dealer.” It hurts to say that. “And possibly a gang member.”

“Why was he a drug dealer? Why are so many people in our neighborhood drug dealers?”

I remember what Khalil said—he got tired of choosing between lights and food. “They need money,” I say. “And they don’t have a lot of other ways to get it.”

“Right. Lack of opportunities,” Daddy says. “Corporate America don’t bring jobs to our communities, and they damn sure ain’t quick to hire us. Then, shit, even if you do have a high school diploma, so many of the schools in our neighborhoods don’t prepare us well enough. That’s why when your momma talked about sending you and your brothers to Williamson, I agreed. Our schools don’t get the resources to equip you like Williamson does. It’s easier to find some crack than it is to find a good school around here.

“Now, think ’bout this,” he says. “How did the drugs even get in our neighborhood? This is a multibillion-dollar industry we talking ’bout, baby. That shit is flown into our communities, but I don’t know anybody with a private jet. Do you?”

“No.”

“Exactly. Drugs come from somewhere, and they’re destroying our community,” he says. “You got folks like Brenda, who think they need them to survive, and then you got the Khalils, who think they need to sell them to survive. The Brendas can’t get jobs unless they’re clean, and they can’t pay for rehab unless they got jobs. When the Khalils get arrested for selling drugs, they either spend most of their life in prison, another billion-dollar industry, or they have a hard time getting a real job and probably start selling drugs again. That’s the hate they’re giving us, baby, a system designed against us. That’s Thug Life.”

“I hear you, but Khalil didn’t have to sell drugs,” I say. “You stopped doing it.”

“True, but less you’re in his shoes, don’t judge him. It’s easier to fall into that life than it is to stay outta it, especially in a situation like his. Now one more question.”

“Really?” Damn, he’s messed with my head enough.

“Yeah, really,” he mocks in a high voice. I don’t even sound like that. “After everything I’ve said, how does Thug Life apply to protests and the riots?”

“A lump forms in my throat as the truth hits me. Hard. “That’s why people are speaking out, huh? Because it won’t change if we don’t say something.”

“Exactly. We can’t be silent.”

“So I can’t be silent.”

Daddy stills. He looks at me. I see the fight in his eyes. I matter more to him than a movement. I’m his baby, and I’ll always be his baby, and if being silent means I’m safe, he’s all for it. This is bigger than me and Khalil though. This is about Us, with a capital U; everybody who looks like us, feels like us, and is experiencing this pain with us despite not knowing me or Khalil. My silence isn’t helping Us. Daddy fixes his gaze on the road again. He nods. “Yeah. Can’t be silent.”

Rabbi A.Y. Kook said: “I don’t speak because I have the power to speak; I speak because I don’t have the power to remain silent”

Black Lives Matter. For the sake of Manny and all my students who are black, for the sake of my neighbors who are people of color, for the sake of our nation and its history of racial injustices, for the sake of Jesus who himself was a person of color, for the sake of God’s command that we do justice, I can’t remain silent in the face of racial injustices. For Christ’s sake, neither should you.

Amen.