

HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

May 31, 2020

Dear Members of the HLS Community,

In a time of great pain and loss in a nation and world beset by a deadly pandemic, the senseless killing of George Floyd on Memorial Day brings yet another appalling and devastating tragedy. It is, horrifyingly, not the only terrible racial incident that we have witnessed in recent weeks—the killing of Ahmaud Arbery, the dangerous and false accusations against Christian Cooper—and these, no doubt, on top of countless other incidents, past and present, that no cell phone was there to record. I know that this is a wrenching and painful time for so many in our community, especially African-Americans, who, because of the color of their skin, continue to endure racism, injustice, inequality, and the fear that a routine police encounter might escalate into a fatal one. As a community dedicated to equal treatment for all, we stand against discrimination and all the harms that flow from it.

These recent incidents, tragically too familiar, remind us of the crucial role of our profession and the work we do at Harvard Law School. The law, at its best, provides frameworks for fairly ordering society and government, for resolving our differences peacefully, and for making progress against the persistent evils of racial inequality and injustice. The law is only as good as the lawyers who work within it. And, as these recent tragedies demonstrate, our work has only begun. What happened in Minneapolis, Glynn County, and New York City reminds us that we must never take for granted, and must always fiercely protect, our commitments to equal justice under law, the rule of law, and the principle of accountability that underlies it—that no one is above the law. As a law school, we can and must further these commitments not in the abstract, but through our research, scholarship, teaching, and clinical work.

We also further these commitments through the new lawyers we send each year into the world, as we did just last Thursday. On that day, our graduation speaker, Bryan Stevenson '85, told the Class of 2020: “My message to you is that I hope you’ll keep your eyes on the prize of doing justice and hold on. In these strange times, we need a generation of lawyers, like you, who commit to doing the things that are uncomfortable, that change narratives, that sustain hope, and that require proximity [to the poor, to those who suffer, to those who are marginalized, to those who are excluded].” Let each of us, with courage and dedication, work to make a world where all people, regardless of their race, enjoy the safety, dignity, equal treatment, and justice that is their right and where none have to fear that they will be the target of hatred or violence.

Sincerely,

John Manning