

Meaning of Sonya Massey's near-last words

July 27, 2024

(RNS)—As video footage of the fatal police shooting of Sonya Massey, a 36-year-old Black woman who lived in Springfield, Ill., circulates online, many viewers are [memorializing](#) her near-final words: “I rebuke you in the name of Jesus.”

Massey initially called 911 from her home on July 6, citing concerns of an intruder. The body-camera footage, which was [released Monday](#) by the Illinois State Police, shows sheriff's deputy Sean Grayson shooting Massey in the head following a brief exchange over a pot of hot water.

Grayson since has been fired and charged with first-degree murder, aggravated battery and official misconduct, and the U.S. Department of Justice has opened an investigation into Massey's death.

According to some faith leaders and scholars, Massey's near-last words, spoken twice in an even voice to the deputies before her death, carry a spiritual and cultural weight specific to Black church communities.

What the rebuke means

“Every person raised in a certain kind of black church knows the power and gravity of those words,” Womanist biblical scholar Wil Gafney wrote on her website on [Tuesday](#).

“Those are the words to be said when facing the evil that has walked in your door and will soon take your life. It is not a prayer to save one's life or for God to come down and prevent the flagrant act of violence to come. It is

something between a benediction and a malediction, laying bare the wickedness of the soul encased in human skin standing before her.”

In an [Instagram Live](#) on Wednesday night, author Austin Channing Brown noted her own “churchy” background before providing context for the rebuke, which she said was not in any way a threat.

“Because white people think they have the corner market on what is normal, we are misinterpreted all the time,” she said.

The phrase has begun to take on a life of its own, becoming “memeified” and posted by [faith leaders](#) and others, including *Essence Magazine*, whose [post](#) about Massey and her parting phrase has been shared over 12,000 times on Facebook.

“It’s becoming—whether it’s on T-shirts or bumper stickers—that statement is flowing through everywhere,” said the Rev. T. Ray McJunkins, a pastor at Union Baptist Church in Springfield, Ill., who has been serving as an informal liaison between Massey’s family and government officials.

McJunkins agreed the phrase is a cultural one that’s especially common in Black charismatic church contexts. He said it’s typically invoked when something feels out of one’s hands, and certainly when there’s a sense of the demonic.

“We understand and we believe the Bible as it relates to there being power in the name of Jesus,” McJunkins told RNS.

Massey’s Christian faith

Massey, who leaves behind two children, was a member of Second Timothy Baptist Church in Springfield. Cary Beckwith, a pastor at nearby Springfield Grace United Methodist Church, was asked to officiate the July 19 funeral service, which included a sermon on Psalm 46 and a soloist

performing Yolanda Adams' anthem, "The Battle Is the Lord's." Several family members who spoke at the service remarked on Massey's Christian faith.

"The darkness of that day cannot and will not extinguish the light of Sonya Massey," Beckwith said to the packed funeral home.

Speaking to RNS, Beckwith provided his own explanation of Massey's near-last words.

"For Sonya to say that I rebuke you in the name of Jesus, she, in that moment, saw something demonic in the eyes of that officer," he said. "She felt something in her spirit that did not line up with the love of Jesus Christ."

Some news outlets [report](#) Massey had been managing a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia with medication. Massey was several feet away from the deputies when she was shot. She was not in a position to harm them, Beckwith said. He added, her mental illness "was not justification for her leaving this earth the way she did."

Seeking and doing justice

In the days since the funeral, Beckwith told RNS local faith leaders have responded to the tragedy by "taking cues" from local community groups, including the local Black Lives Matter chapter and Intricate Minds, a grassroots harm-reduction organization, which have organized peaceful marches and community events.

At a news conference on Monday, Ben Crump, a nationally recognized lawyer representing Massey's family, spoke to reporters after the release of the video footage.

"Until we get justice for Sonya Massey, we rebuke this discriminatory

criminal justice system in the name of Jesus," he said. Crump has handled several other notable cases, representing the families of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and Trayvon Martin.

McJunkins, who co-founded the faith-based social justice group [Faith Coalition for the Common Good](#) in 2008, has been working behind the scenes in recent weeks, connecting Massey's family with decision-makers and advocating on their behalf, particularly in conversations with Sangamon County Sheriff Jack Campbell.

Earlier this week, Massey's father, James Wilburn, and others began [calling for Campbell's resignation](#) following news Grayson had two prior DUI convictions and has worked at [six different law enforcement agencies](#) since 2020.

McJunkins hosted conversations between Massey's family and Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker and Illinois Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton at his church on July 22 and is teaming up with the Department of Justice to hold a community listening session at the church July 29.

"My community needs to heal," said McJunkins, who added Massey's death has hit close to home for many in Springfield.

"Whether they know it or not, we're going through the five stages of grief. As a community leader and religious leader, I'm not doing justice if I don't step up to bring the community together, to walk them through a grief process."

Amid that process, McJunkins said, Massey's rebuke will continue to be a focal point and a rallying cry.