



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

2537 Lee Road
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118-4136
Telephone: 216-321-8880
Website: www.COTSumc.org

“Who is Karen?”

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Matthew 7:1-5
Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

You’ll find her on social media feeds and in viral videos. On occasion, she makes the evening news. Though you may never have met her, you know her. *Karen*. As in, “Some Karen is losing her mind that she got a non-fat, half-caf, caramel latte when she clearly asked for pumpkin spice!” Or, “The police responded to a report about kids playing football in the street. You just know it was because a Karen called in a complaint.”

Who is this *Karen* people keep talking about? For some, the stereotype is well-known, especially if you’re tuned in to the meme culture on Facebook or Instagram. For others, the concept may be lesser known; maybe you’ve heard people use the name pejoratively but don’t really understand why. “Karen” is a name used to describe a person exhibiting an explosive temper over a minor infraction, demanding to speak to a manager, or trying to manipulate people through threats of lawsuits or conjured tears.

Advance apologies today to Karen Lewis, Karen Baldwin, Karen Murgiano, Karen Gilmour, Karen Paradise, Karen Reinhardt, and any other Karens listening today who don’t fit the description. Not all Karens are Karens. And you don’t have to be a Karen to be a Karen. (I’ll just let you process that statement for a moment.)

There have been several recent examples of famous/infamous Karens (none of them named Karen, interestingly enough). In 2018, Alison Ettl threatened to call the police on an 8-year-old girl for selling bottled water in front of her San Francisco home¹. That same year, Jennifer Schulte called police on a group of people for using a charcoal grill in a public park in Oakland, California². Three months ago, Amy Cooper called police alleging that a man was threatening her in Central Park. He wasn’t; he was birdwatching and calmly asked her to put a leash on her dog as required in the park³. In all three incidents, the person who called the police was a white woman in her 30s. And in all three incidents, the people against whom the complaints were made were Black.

Where did we come up with this identification of “Karen?” The origins of our present Karen phenomenon can be traced back to a 2010 image of Kate Gosselin (of “Kate Plus Eight” reality TV fame) superimposed with the words, “This is Karen. She’d like to speak to the manager.”

There have been other iterations before now. The NPR podcast “Code Switch” produced an episode titled “What’s in a Karen?” in which they explored the evolutionary chain of entitled white women. In the 1990s, there was “Becky,” cheerful but clueless about her subtle racism. Meredith Clark, professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia traces Karen’s roots back to the antebellum south and a figure known as Miss Ann. “Miss Ann” and “Mr. Charlie” were code names given to white heads of households during slavery and later, during the Jim Crow era. Black people had to refer to white people using honorifics, though no such courtesy was returned. The coded reference was not just an inside joke, but a vital form of protection. The warning, “Miss Ann is stormy today” could save a domestic worker from verbal or physical abuse. Miss Ann was typically second or third in order of position within the household, and she would use her power and status to reinforce her place in the pecking order. She often did this through her own authority, but might also turn to other enforcers when she felt she needed to; namely, to the man at the head of the house, other hired hands, or local civic authorities like police. Protecting the virtue of white women against the influence or threat of Black people has long been a fear-based tactic of oppression, sometimes used with deadly effect, as in the case of Emmett Till or Claude Neal.⁴

Karens aren’t simply people with unacknowledged privilege who feel entitled and behave childishly. They are *keenly aware* of their privilege and exploit it to get what they want. It’s one thing to berate a barista or mix it up with a manager, but another thing to deliberately escalate a situation and manipulate it to your advantage. In the case of the

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-44601668>

² <https://www.newsweek.com/bbq-becky-white-woman-who-called-cops-black-bbq-911-audio-released-im-really-1103057>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/06/nyregion/amy-cooper-false-report-charge.html>

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/14/891177904/whats-in-a-karen>

woman who called the police on a barbecue, she was initially aggressive toward the park guests but burst into tears and claimed to be the victim when police questioned her. And as cell phone video showed of the Central Park confrontation from this summer, Amy Cooper clearly feigned a frantic tone of voice as she called 911. That behavior is especially disturbing in a climate where encounters between law enforcement and Black people too often end with deadly violence.

We're rightly disturbed when we see a Karen acting out in public, chewing out a server at a restaurant or harassing kids riding their bicycles. But we also derive guilty pleasure from identifying and naming a Karen, circulating a video of her outburst on social media, especially if it leads to public shaming. But is the goal to punish the behavior or to change it? It feels really good when a Karen gets what's coming to her for throwing a temper tantrum, but it's just as likely she'll behave the same way the next time. Instead of pulling out a cell phone to record the outburst, maybe what's needed is intervention and re-education.

The public outcry following Amy Cooper's false report that "an African-American man is threatening me," in Central Park was swift. She was fired from her job. The widespread coverage of the incident destroyed her reputation. Maybe that is what justice looks like. But for his part, Christian Cooper, the man involved in the encounter who is no relation despite having the same last name, elected not to participate in the charges filed against her. In a Facebook post, Mr. Cooper wrote, "I must err on the side of compassion and choose not to be involved in this prosecution."⁵ In an opinion piece he later penned for *The Washington Post*, he stated, "I think it's a mistake to focus on this one individual... Focusing on charging Amy Cooper lets white people off the hook from all that. They can scream for her head while leaving their own prejudices unexamined."⁶ Is he right?

The unfortunate truth is that there is a little bit of a Karen in each one of us. I find that I'm able to identify no fewer than three dozen things wrong with the people around me most days before lunchtime. And there are times when I would love nothing more than to really unload on someone who has caused me a relatively minor inconvenience. But I'm not so good at exercising the same level of scrutiny toward my own shortcomings, by blindness or by choice. Don't get me wrong; I'm not saying that my failings disqualify me from calling out the world's ills, but that perhaps it would be wise of me to spend at least as much time correcting my own behavior. It would probably be more productive, too. In Matthew, chapter 7, Jesus instructs us:

Don't judge, so that you won't be judged. You'll receive the same judgment you give. Whatever you deal out will be dealt out to you. Why do you see the splinter that's in your brother's or sister's eye, but don't notice the log in your own eye? How can you say to your brother or sister, "Let me take the splinter out of your eye," when there's a log in your eye? You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you'll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother's or sister's eye.

Did you catch that, Karen? There are plenty of splinters to be removed in the world. But there's an awfully big log keeping you from seeing the whole picture. And by Karen, I mean all of us.

James 4:11-12 says, "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. ...There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and destroy. So, who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?"

To label a person is to speak evil of them, because we categorize people in order to dismiss them. When we make assumptions about a person's actions or motives, we put ourselves in the role of judge and jury. But who are we to judge our neighbor? We might think we know the stereotypical Karen so well that we can identify her before she even speaks. But it is no more appropriate for us to assume a woman with a short haircut driving an SUV with a soccer sticker in the back window is a meddlesome snob than it is to assume a black teenager wearing a hoodie walking down the street at night is a threat to public safety.

So, what are we to do? Should we simply mind our own business and ignore the behavior of those around us? I don't think we live in a time that can be considered responsible, if it ever was. But we're not called to *judge* the world; we're called to *reconcile* it to God. That begins by standing with the marginalized and the oppressed. We're called to stand in the gap out of love and de-escalate the conflict around us, not to hurl insults and call people names. And at the same time, we should exercise self-reflection, to check our own biases and motives.

⁵ NYT citation above.

⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/christian-cooper-why-i-am-declining-to-be-involved-in-amy-coopers-prosecution/2020/07/14/1ba3a920-c5d4-11ea-b037-f9711f89ee46_story.html

We live in an incredibly narcissistic society, the byproduct of generations of movement away from community responsibility toward individual rights and achievement. That contributes to a sense of entitlement, that the world owes us something either because of our status, perceived value, or victimhood. All of this has made us more insular, more fearful of those who are different from us, distrusting of anything that threatens the way of life we know. It's no wonder we're so quick to label and judge one another, why some people of privilege are so quick to feel threatened by the smallest perceived slight. When we combine hyper-individualism with rampant polarization and a culture obsessed with violence, we create the conditions ripe for the kind of conflict we now have in this country. We created Karen. We *are* Karen.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we must remain committed to the central values of our faith. That means to follow as closely as we can the life and example of Jesus, to place the needs of our communities over individual desires, to defend the marginalized, and to work to shape our world to resemble the reign of God Jesus envisioned and inaugurated. Faith is the only way to heal the brokenness of the world.

We have quoted often lately from the twelfth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans, but it bears repeating: "Consider everyone as equal, and don't think that you're better than anyone else. Don't think that you're so smart. Don't pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions" (Romans 12:16-17, CEB)

If you catch yourself inclined toward a Karen-like reaction, stop what you're doing and ask yourself some important questions:

- a) Is this situation any of my business? Is this my issue to solve?
- b) Is the thing that set me off really that big of a deal? Or are other frustrations in my life right now fueling my reaction?
- c) Am I using my privilege to create a better situation for those around me, or am I just using it to get what I want?

There are plenty of things that are broken in this world. There are plenty of Karens to point them out, to wage war, though not always on the right things. How we interact with the world is a choice. As followers of Jesus, let's be sure that we're reflecting the love of Christ in what we do, not contributing further to chaos. Maybe if we start with learning to see ourselves more clearly, we'll be in a better position to assess the splinters in the eyes of those around us. Please pray with me:

God of justice and compassion, we see the brokenness of the world and lament it. But we are slow to recognize our complicity in it. We point fingers and lay blame. We make jokes and laugh at insults. We make assumptions about others and excuses for ourselves. Teach us what it means to practice reconciling love. Teach us how to stand on the side of the oppressed as humble companions, not self-righteous saviors. Teach us to use empathy to bring about transformation – in ourselves and in the world you love. We pray these things in the name of Christ, who broke through the world's divisions, who was a friend of sinners, who gave his life in the cause of justice and rose again to demonstrate the power of love over fear. Amen.