

Hope in a Hurting World (On Ferguson)
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“Hope in a Hurting World (On Ferguson)” Pilgrim Church UCC, November 30, 2014—First Sunday of Advent (Mark 13:24-37)

It's the First Sunday of Advent—a season where we prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ in the “already, but not yet” way of the Church. It's a holy season that marks a new year in the liturgical calendar as we contemplate God's promise to be with-us. Peace is at the heart of Advent. Yet we also hear calls to repentance and forgiveness, watching and keeping awake. Advent demands deepening and paying attention, opening up our lives with renewed hope for what God can do.

On Monday night, I prayed for peace in Missouri. And I thought of the twelve year-old boy, Tamir Rice, killed in Cleveland as he was playing with a bb gun and a rookie police officer shot him twice in the chest.[1] I prayed for police officers and families who face tragedies, still thinking of those four rabbis killed while worshiping in Jerusalem. My only sibling, who's also one of my best friends, is a Prosecutor before some may write me off as “just another liberal” who doesn't understand anything. So I called Maureen late that night to talk about the Grand Jury's decision, prosecutors having to respect those decisions, who's on that kind of jury, and police officers' use of excessive force.

At the end of the day, Michael Brown is dead and Officer Darren Wilson killed him and will not face criminal charges. This Grand Jury decision, whether correct or not, has wounded many. The Missouri Prosecutor referenced the NAACP and Clergy specifically as folks who should be talking about Ferguson. We can't pretend that racism and white privilege and the deep distrust between minority communities and the police officers who serve those communities aren't real issues. What Maureen and I spoke about was what justice looks like within our legal system and how can the Church mend societal and spiritual wounds?

Do I have ready answers? No. Yet it would be misguided to not have the conversation simply because it's uncomfortable. The very fact that I had a moment of doubt about preaching on Ferguson this morning shows my white privilege. As Christians, as Americans, as people who, God willing, have empathy for people in pain—we have to engage with issues of race and how this Grand Jury decision looks and feels to people.

We've participated in the YWCA's Stand Against Racism at Pilgrim Church, and our United Church of Christ advocates for justice and peace and sacred conversations on race. I wonder what more we can do as a congregation? Perhaps listening to peoples' stories and experiences with respect and open minds and hearts is where we start. For we know that every life matters.

In thinking about Ferguson as we begin Advent, we are being called upon to pay attention to how we respect every life, no matter a person's race or religion or sexual orientation or gender or occupation or physical ability. We live in a world so rushed and self-absorbed. We often don't take the time to get to know our neighbors and just be with each other. The call of Jesus in Advent—to keep awake and pay attention is vital now.

If we spent less time focused on our busy lives and more time on cultivating deep and meaningful relationships, especially relationships with people who are different from us, maybe it would strengthen our communities. There's a fantastic article by Omid Safi, the Director of

Duke's Islamic Studies Center, called "The Disease of Being Busy." Safi describes meeting a friend and asking how she's doing. Her response is an immediate, "I'm just so busy." His family moves to a friendly neighborhood and tries to find a playdate with a neighbor's daughter. The mother pulls out her calendar on her phone and says that her daughter "has a 45-minute opening two and a half weeks from now. The rest of the time it's gymnastics, piano, and voice lesson. She's just . . . so busy." [2]

Safi wonders about the toll this takes—that we seem to be human doings not human beings anymore. When he asks how someone is, he wants to know: "How is your heart doing at this very moment, at this breath? . . . Tell me you're more than just a machine, checking off items from your to-do list. Have that conversation, that glance, that touch. Be a healing conversation, one filled with grace and presence." [3] We can ask ourselves—how is the state of my heart today?

If we asked one another and ourselves—how is it with your heart, would it make a difference? Would we be kinder and more open to each other and to God? What would happen if we asked these questions of people not just in our inner circles? Or what if we expanded our circles of care and concern? Here in Lexington, we have the Lexington Interfaith Clergy Association. Our Clergy Association is so rare as we have rabbis, ministers, priests, and folks who represent Hinduism and Islam who are active participants. Even among Christians, we have Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Mainline Protestants, and Evangelical Protestants. So when I hear about violence in Israel for instance, my heart goes out to Howard, Jill, David, Michael, and their congregations. People of other faith traditions aren't just nameless groups—not when I have clergy colleagues who I respect and like as people and hang out with every month.

There was an article in The Atlantic about self-segregation and why it's so hard for white people to understand what's happening in Ferguson. If we only connect with people who are the exact same race, religion, sexual orientation, age, education level, physical ability, political party—how will we ever hear the stories of people who are different from us? How can we expand our worldview if our focus and our social circles are so narrow?

There's a division among white people about whether the shooting of Michael Brown was an isolated incident or whether it's part of a broader pattern in the way police treat black men in America. With that Atlantic poll, 39% of white responders said that this shooting was part of a broader pattern. When this same question was posed to black responders, 76% believed the shooting of Michael Brown was part of a broader pattern. [4] Why the disparity? Often because of personal experiences. Have we taken the time to sit down and listen, not talk, but listen to the experiences of folks who have faced racial discrimination? If we haven't, perhaps we shouldn't judge. The social networks of white people are 91% white. Some white folks aren't often socially positioned to hear from folks of other races. This disconnect hinders how we can empathize with others.

I took an African American history class at Elon and our professor assigned us a book and cd set called Remembering Jim Crow. It was an oral history project out of Duke to record the experiences of African American men and women across the South, to ensure that their personal stories of racism weren't lost. One man, Arthur Searles, born in 1915 in Albany, Georgia, spoke about a run-in he had with the Klan after he spoke out against the lynching of a young black man by the town's sheriff. Arthur Searles said, "They threw a brick up there with a note on it. It said, 'Tend to your own race and tend to your own business or else you're going to have yourself killed.'" [5]

Hearing and reading those stories in Remembering Jim Crow about life in the segregated South caused the historical material to come to life. After listening to the personal experiences

of others, it's impossible to read about Jim Crow from a historical perspective and hear it on a purely intellectual level. These are personal stories told by human beings who were impacted by these terrible laws. It's also impossible to pretend that racism doesn't linger in this country. And that when a white police officer shoots an unarmed young black man, no matter what the specific circumstances happen to be, whether in Ferguson or Cleveland or New York or Chicago, there are issues of race and violence and justice that cause so much anger and sadness.

As Christians, no matter what color our skin happens to be, we can't ignore a hurting world. We can't bury our heads in the sand and pretend that these issues don't exist. Not when Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Mark, "Beware, keep alert . . . keep awake. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." [6] That's not just some apocalyptic future prediction about the end times, it's about paying attention to what goes on in our communities all the time. Don't we also live in days of suffering? Doesn't it seem like there are days when the sun is darkened and the moon gives no light and the stars are falling from the heavens and the powers in heaven are shaken? [7] It sure must feel like that in Ferguson, Missouri.

If there's any glimmer of hope on this First Sunday of Advent, it's that we know that nothing separates us from the love of God. Because of this deeply-held belief, we can give witness to our broken world that hopelessness and heartache will not be the final words in God's story. We can witness to hope. With acts of charity and courage in the struggle for justice and peace, we can foreshadow a world free from violence and suffering and despair. And we can help God create it. [8] May it be so, Amen.

[1] Jane Onyanga-Omara and John Bacon, "Police: Video clearly shows shooting of Ohio boy, 12" USA Today, November 24, 2014, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/11/24/cleveland-shot-boy/...>

[2] Omid Safi, "The Disease of Being Busy," (Article feature on ON BEING with Krista Tippett), November 6, 2014

[3] Ibid.

[4] Robert P. Jones, "Self-Segregation: Why It's So Hard for Whites to Understand Ferguson," The Atlantic, August 21, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/self-segregation-why...>

[5] Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South, Eds. William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, 29.

[6] Mark 13:33 and 37.

[7] Mark 13:24-25.

[8] Hans Schwarz, "Eschatology" in The New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology, Eds. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, Eds., 169.