

**“Know Justice, Know Peace”**  
**Psalm 85 (+ Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8; 2 Peter 3:8-15)**  
**Rev. Chris Mereschuk**  
**December 7, 2014 (2d Sunday of Advent)**

*Prayer...*

Many of us here were disturbed and devastated when Michael Brown was shot and killed by a Ferguson, Missouri police officer back in August under what - - again, to many of us - - seemed like suspicious and racially motivated circumstances. The wound was ripped back open last Monday night when a Grand Jury found that the officer’s lethal actions were entirely legal.

And again this week, as if watching a rerun of a bad TV show, we received news of a Staten Island Grand Jury clearing the police officer who choked Eric Garner to death. And now we wait for the outcome of the shooting death of 12 year old Tamir Rice in Cleveland.

Few of us here are legal or law enforcement experts, and none of us were eyewitnesses to these event, except for video. We may also hold a range of opinions about the initial use of force against Michael Brown or Eric Garner or Tamir Rice and of the finding of the Grand Juries. Regardless of that, perhaps we can agree that there is something fundamentally wrong with the system and the culture that allowed such things to happen, and that further allowed such an outcome to be deemed legal. It might be legal, but it is not just. And the issue here is justice.

There are actions and policies both historic and current that are legal, but are far from just. It used to be legal to own people, but it was not just. It used to be legal to ban certain citizens from voting, but it was not just. It is still legal in some parts of the country to explicitly discriminate against a person because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, but it is not just.

The issue here is justice. The issue here is that we are entrenched and embedded in a culture and a system that still allows injustice to flourish, yet is entirely legal. And as long as there is injustice, there will be no peace.

There are many people calling for peace in Ferguson, Missouri. I am as committed to peace and non-violence as I possibly can be, but I am compelled to examine what the call for “peace” really means. Is the call for peace simply a call for protests and looting to end? Is it that we cannot take the assault of violent images, the reports of injury and injustice any longer? Is it that we cannot face the reality and legacy of centuries of oppression against people of color? Is it that we are fearful of looking at ourselves and discovering our own racism? Is it that we just want it all to go away and wish everyone could get along? You good people know that these things are not real, enduring peace. And this false peace would fail because it lacks justice. As many before me have said, there is no peace without justice.

Peace is not simply the opposite of or absence of violence, and certainly not the absence of violence under the threat of greater violence, as in the case of the Pax Romana of Jesus's time. Peace is the presence of love, righteousness, and wholeness. Peace is the result of confession, repentance, and reconciliation. Peace is the result of and presence of restorative justice.

I am Euro-American, a white man. Why does justice for people of color concern me? What business is it of mine? It is my business because I am a disciple of Christ. It is because I believe that all of humanity is created in God's image. It is because, as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere<sup>1</sup>." It is because, to paraphrase the Indigenous Australian activist, Lilla Watson, my own liberation is bound up with the liberation of others, and so we must work together<sup>2</sup>. Or simply, it is my business because no one is free when others are oppressed.

There are some who will want to say that the issues here are not about race, and that even suggesting such a thing is "race baiting" or "playing the race card." I am not a legal expert, but I am an armchair sociologist. Looking at other well-publicized violent encounters between citizens and law enforcement, there is, to my mind, a clear pattern that points toward racial bias - - and I am not the only or first person to suggest this.

Consider the 2012 Aurora, Colorado movie theatre mass shooting by James Holmes - - a white man armed with multiple firearms. James Holmes was arrested without incident or the use of force. Now consider Michael Brown, an unarmed black man who allegedly had an altercation with a police officer who ultimately fatally shot him 6 times. Tell me race was not a factor.

Consider accused cop-killer Eric Frein - - a heavily armed white man in Pennsylvania who eluded capture during a 48-day manhunt. He was arrested alive. Now consider Eric Garner, a black man in Staten Island accused of illegally selling cigarettes. He was killed during his arrest by a law enforcement officer placing him in a prolonged chokehold, despite that restraint tactic being prohibited, and despite Mr. Garner's pleas that he could not breathe. Tell me race was not a factor.

Consider Frazier Glenn Miller, a white supremacist who killed 3 people near a Jewish Community Center in Kansas. He was arrested without incident. Now consider 12 year old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, a young black male who was playing with an airsoft replica pistol in a public park, shot dead by police within mere seconds of their arrival on the scene. Tell me race was not a factor.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

<sup>2</sup> Lilla Watson: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting our time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, let us work together."

There are further examples of lethal encounters between law enforcement and black males in particular, resulting from, what seems to be, less-than-lethal imminent threats to the officer's lives or the lives of others. These incidents appear to be disproportionate to not only similar but even arguably more lethal imminent threats involving white suspects.

Obviously, this is not always the case, every single time. There are black suspects of minor or major crimes that are taken into custody without incident. There are white suspects of minor or major crimes who are killed during apprehension.

And we can argue, case by case, the role that the victim played in the lethal encounter: did Mike Brown assault Darren Wilson and was he preparing to charge at him? Did Eric Garner resist arrest? Did Tamir Rice make an unimaginably bad choice to brandish a very realistic toy gun? But all of these questions only serve to diminish the responsibility of the law enforcement officer and bring us some false sense of comfort that these men - - or in the case of Tamir Rice, this child - - somehow deserved to die. It ignores the specter of racism that might have caused these officers - - consciously or subconsciously - - to view these individuals as a threat based solely on their skin color.

The point is this: there are enough of these incidents of lethal force being used against black male suspects that a statistically significant pattern seems to emerge. In fact, a recent study by the non-partisan journalism research group, Pro Publica, has determined that black males are 21 times more likely than their white counterparts to be shot and killed by a law enforcement officer<sup>3</sup>. The majority of these shootings involved white officers, while about 10% involved black officers. From the most recent data available, 62% of these incidents occurred as a result of an "officer-under-attack" situation<sup>4</sup>.

Clearly, I am not a law enforcement officer, nor do I have a desire to be one. Clearly, not all law enforcement officers jump so quickly to lethal force, nor do they hold explicit racial bias. I think we could all agree that the job of a police officer is far from easy, probably with few moments of joy, renewal, or inspiration on the job. You go to work daily with the understanding that you might not return home. Police often see people at their worst. I would imagine that, for many, it is a fast and easy transition from public-service-minded, fresh-faced rookie to jaded-and-suspicious street-hardened authoritarian. And I would imagine that it would be easy to develop - - consciously or subconsciously - - a biased perspective based on repeated encounters. I have witnessed it firsthand with 2 members of my extended family.

But through statistical and anecdotal evidence, there is a real, engrained, and lethal bias on the part of law enforcement against not only black citizens, but black males in general. What is it that causes certain law enforcement officers to see a potential

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.propublica.org/article/deadly-force-in-black-and-white>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

threat when they see a black male? Now, I have singled out law enforcement officers, but the plague of racism extends deep into the general public. I believe the statistical and anecdotal evidence we see of law enforcement racism is simply the manifestation of our society's deep racism.

Again, it is a reality in this country that we are deeply embedded in a culture and system that perpetuates racism, prejudice, and discrimination against people of color. Despite gains made from abolition, to the civil rights movement, to affirmative action, to the two-time election of a president of African descent, we are not in a "post-racial" or "color-blind" society dripping with equality. In fact, we are dripping with a toxic mix of racism and injustice.

My colleague the Rev. Dr. Da Vita McAllister shares an allegory that makes clear the legacy and longevity of racism in America. In her role as an Associate Conference Minister for the Connecticut UCC, she facilitates discussions for the "Sacred Conversations on Race" initiative, and often opens with this story, which I'll paraphrase:

Imagine you own a farm. Let's say your family has been growing corn on that farm for generations, for hundreds of years. And during that time, farmers have been pouring toxic chemical on the crops - - fertilizers, pesticides. But then you decide to stop using those toxins. What do you think the soil is like? Still toxic. You've been growing crops in the toxins, ingesting the toxins, selling toxic corn for other people to eat. How long do you think it's going to take that soil to become free and clear of toxins<sup>5</sup>?

And that is some truth: that for centuries, for generations our society has been planted in and fertilized by the toxin of racism. We have ingested the toxin of racism. We have been poisoned and permanently mutated by the toxin of racism. Some people will refuse to see it, or refuse to leave it behind, because - - to return to the farming metaphor - - it has allowed some crops to flourish and be protected. But I promise you, there is no personal bodily harm that you will suffer if you acknowledge the reality of systemic and cultural racism, or if you acknowledge and examine the systemic and cultural privilege you might enjoy. What you might feel, if you are in a place of comfort, is discomfort. Use that discomfort to compel you to work for justice, which, in turn, means working toward peace.

Justice requires repentance on the part of those who are complicit with injustice. I, myself, must examine, confess, and repent of the ways in which I benefit from, contribute to, and perpetuate the system and culture of racial injustice, inequality, oppression, and fear. I have been doing that, I am doing it now, and I must continue to do it.

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<sup>5</sup> Rev. Dr. Da Vita McAllister, Associate Conference Minister, CTUCC. Story used by permission, paraphrased.

There are some people who may think that this message should not be delivered from the pulpit or discussed in church, especially during the Christmas season so filled with joy - - and I am again reminded how grateful I am to be serving a congregation where the opposite is true. But let me tell you a bit about why it is not only appropriate to preach about racial justice, but it is absolutely necessary, and biblically grounded.

I am compelled to preach on racial justice because I preach Christ incarnate - - God made flesh among us, Emmanuel. Because I preach Christ crucified - - an innocent man put to death by corrupt and oppressive authority. Because I preach the Christ resurrected - - the promise of liberation, reconciliation, and salvation for those who are oppressed. I preach the Christ who commands us to “keep awake.”

We cannot close our eyes and harden our hearts to this matter. And the sin of racism must be brought to justice not now, but right now. We cannot leave it for the future. We cannot keep feeding present generations and generations to come this toxic brew. We must create a world that is nourished by justice, or in the words of the author of 2 Peter, “a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness is at home<sup>6</sup>.” We must, as in the words of the prophet Isaiah and the author of Mark, be a voice “crying out in the wilderness<sup>7</sup>” for redemption and reconciliation.

There must be justice. This is how we prepare the way for the Lord. This is how we welcome the coming Prince of Peace. We must work toward the day when, as the Psalmist writes, “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other<sup>8</sup>.”

But we will not know that steadfast love and faithfulness until we know justice. We will not know justice until we know confession, repentance, and reconciliation leading to righteousness. This is what we must undertake before that holy moment when “righteousness and peace will kiss each other.” And when we know justice, we will know peace.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Peter 3:13b

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 40:3-6; Mark 1:3

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 85:10