

“The Work of God’s Hands”
Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
November 30, 2014 Advent 1B

Isaiah 64:1-9 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Last Monday, during our Interfaith Thanksgiving Service in Leonia, the St. Louis County prosecutor announced the decision of the grand jury not to indict police officer Darren Wilson. Wilson, who is white, shot and killed an unarmed black teenager, Matthew Brown, during a fight last August. For some people the decision was enough to end the matter. Others felt it should have gone to the more public venue of an actual trial, where the evidence would not be filtered through a prosecutor, who was perceived by some to be a friend of the police.

Brown’s parents released a statement expressing their “profound disappointment” in the decision. But they added, “While we understand that many others share our pain, we ask that you channel your frustration in ways that will make a positive change. We need to work together to fix the system that allowed this to happen.”

Still, that night Ferguson broke out in a wave of looting, rioting and arson. And this was followed by protests and boycotts throughout the United States.

I don’t believe violence makes any situation any better. Jesus said, “Those who take up the sword will die by the sword.” (Matt. 26:52) But I am also amazed and disappointed in the reaction to this unrest by a number of white people. I read a few posts on Facebook. Someone wrote, “OMG, people die everyday. Whoever is protesting just wants attention,” and someone added “and a new flat screen TV.” Another post said “Law enforcement should back off and stay safe, and let them burn it down.” And one more said, “After all the news of turmoil, ... rioting and violence for no good reason, I sit here truly thankful for all that I have in my life...”

Is there “no good reason” for the turmoil? Does this anger and grief come out of nowhere? Regardless of whether or not the police officer was guilty or innocent in this particular case, and I don’t believe *any of us* have enough information to make that call, this incident has clearly touched a nerve. There is a history here, and it’s still alive today. People of color have experienced disrespect and discrimination from local law enforcement, and not everyone believes that our justice system is fair.

White, middle-class heterosexuals are often unaware of what other people have to put up with in this country. Just last Sunday our friend John Stanger, the director of Presbyterian Welcome, was in Penn Station. When he walked past four National Guard soldiers in uniform, one of them muttered at him, “f-ing gay.” Richard Hong, our Presbyterian pastor in Englewood, who happens to be Korean American, says he was crossing the street one time, when a truck driver leaned out of his window and yelled, “Move it, chink!” Rude, lewd and disrespectful comments like that can shake you up and

wear you down. It may seem like a little thing. “Just get over it.” But little things like that add up and create a hostile environment.

One of our black pastors in Paterson, David Thornton, told the Presbytery how he had to be careful when he went out running. He wasn't afraid of hoodlums or robbers. He was afraid as a black man someone would think he was running from a crime and shoot him. So he had to watch what he wore and where he ran. This is a daily reality for people of color. And when someone is actually killed by a white person, anger rises to the surface, no matter what the circumstances.

Now I'm not saying that white people are a bunch of malicious racists. Most people in this country are people of good will. But all of us have some unconscious prejudice. I read an article recently* about a study that analyzed a video game where the player takes on the role of a police officer. On the screen is a series of images of white or black men variously holding either guns, or innocent items such as a wallet or a cell phone. The object is to shoot anyone holding a gun, while refraining from shooting in other cases. And the result? Whether the players were black or white, liberal pacifists or conservative hawks, all categories of players routinely shot more quickly at black men than at white men. And they were more likely to mistakenly shoot an unarmed black man than an unarmed white man. All of us are prone to racial stereotyping. And these unconscious prejudices can result in discriminatory behavior and policies.

For example, even though surveys show that both blacks and whites use marijuana at about the same rate, black people are almost four times more likely to be arrested for it. Black men are six times more likely to be incarcerated than whites. One black person is killed by police, security guards or vigilantes nearly every day in this country. Ferguson is not an isolated event and that's why people are angry.

So how are Christians to respond? In his letter to the Romans (12:15) Paul tells us to “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.” Our job is not to tell people how they should feel. We are called to listen and learn, to try to understand and have compassion.**

Anger is a normal and healthy response to injustice. We may feel uncomfortable or defensive when people are angry. But anger itself is not a sin, as Paul wrote in Ephesians (4:26), “Be angry, but do not sin...” When someone expresses anger at injustice, the worst thing we can do is to belittle it, or write it off as unimportant. We don't have to accept violence, but we need to take the feelings behind it seriously.**

The first Sunday of Advent often falls on Thanksgiving weekend. Thanksgiving is a time to sit back and enjoy the blessings of this life, with an attitude of gratitude. If you are blessed with friends, or a loving family that lives close enough to get together, it's a wonderful thing. But that does NOT mean we should be complacent or self-satisfied. When we are comfortable and happy, it's easy to forget the suffering of the world. But as we enter into the time of Advent, we are called to be awake, to see and feel what is happening in the world, and tune our lives to the one who is coming.

David read Isaiah's prayer this morning, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down (O God), so that the mountains would quake ... (and) the nations would tremble at your presence..." This is a passionate prayer for things to be right in the world, written when Jerusalem lay in ruins and the people had been scattered throughout Babylon in Exile. And the people cried to God, come and help us! Open the heavens and come down! They confessed their sins to God saying, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our ...deeds are like filthy cloth... There is no one who calls on your name..." Still, they argued with God to save them. You made us, they said. Consider that we are your people and save us!

There's no complacency in this prayer, no self-satisfaction, but rather self-criticism and reflection, a longing for justice, for the end of suffering, and the advent of God's truth, mercy and love. This prayer rises from a deep place, a recognition of the need for God in a world of enemies, hatred and sin. And a recognition that we all belong to God.

Isaiah prayed, "We are the clay and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hands." We are *all* the work of God's hands. We are all in this together, people of all ages, languages, colors, sexual orientations, gender identities, all people the work of God's hands. Each one of us carries God within. And we come before God together praying for mercy, salvation and help.

At Thanksgiving, we feel thankful for the blessings of this life. But Advent is a time to take stock of our lives, to wake up to what is happening in the world, to confess our corporate and individual prejudices, problems and sins, and how our world has fallen short of God's intention for it. In Advent we are aware that all is not right with the world. There is injustice and violence, and real reasons to be upset. And so we pray for God to tear open the heavens and come down. And we do what we can to prepare for the coming of God's reign on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

* Kristoff, Nicholas, "Is Everyone a Little Bit Racist?" *The New York Times*, August 27, 2014, Opinion Pages.

** credit to Evans, Rachel Held, "Not As Helpless As We Think: 3 Ways to Stand In Solidarity With Ferguson," at God's Politics Blog, <http://Sojo.net>, August 14, 2014.