

“Let's Go Down to Ferguson”

**Let's go down to Ferguson,
and see what happened there today.
I've heard it said: "A boy is dead!"
A cop has had his way!**

On Saturday, August 9, Officer Darren Wilson of the Ferguson police department encountered Michael Brown and Dorian Johnson as they walked down Canfield Drive in Ferguson, Missouri. Sadly, the incident resulted in the shooting death of Michael Brown.

Further complicating the situation is a significant measure of racial tension around this tragedy, which has led many to presume that Brown's death is the result of a crime in which racial motivations will prove to be evident. A grand jury will ultimately consider all of the evidence that has and continues to be gathered, and it will be incumbent upon them to discern whether or not a crime was committed.

This situation naturally draws into its ever-expanding narrative the hearts and minds of those for whom Jesus' command to be peacemakers rings loud and clear (cf. Matthew 5:9). In times like these, the impulse is so strong to “go there” either emotionally or spiritually, perhaps even physically, as many have already done; indeed, in whatever form our journey takes, it is one in which our actions, as well as the words we choose to speak, will be carefully observed.

**As quickly speeds the day and days,
the streets compose their dirge-like song
of justice's role in racial woe;
of how to right the wrong!**

It's not surprising that people have strong and differing opinions about the events that took place that day in Ferguson, MO. Given the muddled and conflicting stories that have collided one with another, not to mention the aforementioned racial tension, it's no wonder that sides are quickly taken and premature conclusions are drawn. Many of the ensuing gatherings throughout the city have reflected such underlying emotion and conviction. People continue to grapple with the situation and try to make sense of things as well as deal with their grief and anger and seek justice.

Now, while I may not personally be convinced that race was the determinative factor in this situation, it is altogether appropriate for us to take heed to the issue of racism in our culture and the role it may have played in this terrible series of events. Moreover, to deny that aspect of the debate is to minimize both the significant element of self-identified communal struggle in Ferguson as well as the societal mechanisms of segregation that exist in our society today.

The Rev. Dr. E. G. Shields of the Missouri Progressive M.B. State Convention recently and brilliantly put a reverent spin on the rallying cry: "Hands up, don't shoot!" which is what some people believe Brown was doing and saying at the time he was shot. Shields effectively offered a helpful word of peace when he imagined the raising of one's hands both as a veritable song of praise and a sign of entrusting our plight to the God who loves us and will always be with us, the One who is both our Judge and our Redeemer!

**Yet indistinguishable it seems to me,
the Pastor's and Panther's oft-used rhetoric.
When ill at ease while teaching peace,
their actions smack of antic.**

**The voice more measured; indeed, slow to speak
such truth in tones of love held dear
will desire not to stir the pot
nor incite the racist ear,**

On the eve of Michael Brown's Memorial Service there was an ecumenical service of worship held at the Greater St. Mark Baptist Church, St. Louis, MO. At one point in the service a woman named Merdean Gales commented favorably upon the gracious and measured words which had just been spoken by another religious leader by saying: "What grows on the inside shows on the outside!"

To be sure, there are a great many people who, throughout this process, have born witness to the peace in their hearts with actions very much consistent with that virtue. They are the ones who have managed to allow the fear and anguish that resides in their souls to be in a conversation with a presiding sense of peace; but, more than that, they have accepted the call to work against violence and to actually be peacemakers.

And goodness knows, we don't have to be in Missouri to bear witness to such a divine attribute and live into that calling. Indeed, ours may not be

a literal trip to Ferguson as much as it is a trip to the proverbial office water cooler whereupon hearing a colleague express criticism about officer Miller's actions we might choose to say: "It seems to me that there is enough pain to go around right now, and, until the justice system does its job, I'm not going to lay blame at anyone's feet"; it may not be a letter to the editor as much as it is a carefully crafted email in response to a friend - one who may have been overtly critical of the people rioting in the streets - in which we might choose to say: "I can't imagine things getting to that point either. I did hear that most of the folks doing the looting were not from Ferguson and that the townsfolk have denounced those actions."

By responding in similar ways to those listed above, we will testify to the fact that being peacemakers is not simply the job of some premier social advocate, nor is it solely the responsibility of some influential political figure. Instead, it will prove to be the very single step that an individual can take which serves to upbuild and by no means contributes to the brokenness that already exists.

**but will rather speak of dreams soon lost
when deafness marks the souls of men.
For when these truths demand more proof
that young boy bleeds again.**

Nearly two weeks ago a friend shared a post on Facebook in which a Huffpost article stated: "Ferguson-Florissant School District announced Wednesday that, due to safety and security concerns, classes would not resume for the school year on Aug. 14 as planned. ...The first day of classes has been moved to Monday, August 18."

The article went on to highlight the plight of students who benefit from school lunches, and how that benefit would now be delayed in Ferguson. While there was clearly a hopeful message in that a significant amount of money had already been raised to support the St. Louis Area Foodbank, I was nevertheless struck by the residual effects of violence.

I dare say that when peacemakers are hard at work, by God's grace, the world will experience it, for such cycles of violence can most certainly be broken. But know this, it is not easy. Peacemaking requires more than a drive-by commitment, the kind which, due to a lack of attention to detail, often results in partial truths, or, no truth at all, in some cases. On the contrary, peacemaking requires an attentiveness to the underlying causes of the violence as well as the courage to speak the truth in love.

An advocate in Ferguson (who's name I don't recall) recently addressed a sanctuary full of people and talked very little about what had happened, but instead chose to talk about what could happen. He talked about voter registration, voter education and voter participation, which was his way of looking ahead at the things that could be done to make a difference in that particular community; the things that could be done to help bring about peace.

Here again, we don't need to take the highways northwest of here for some eight hours in order to be a witness for peace. Our conversations may likely happen in our driveway, or via Facebook, or perhaps on the phone with our friends; nevertheless, our witness as peacemakers can be just as profound and is just as necessary, for they will be taking place on the highway of the human heart.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9).

(In response to Christians in peril of persecution and other recent expressions of violence in the world, SHPC has set apart a “Day of Prayer” on Wednesday, September 3, from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. in the chapel. You are welcome and encouraged to join us. There will be resources available to help aid you in your prayers.)