**Preaching about the shooting of Michael Brown**

These notes are based on a scripture lesson that is coming up in the lectionary on August 31, 2014, but I am posting them now so that those who wish to address the situation from the pulpit immediately may find some guidelines. May God’s peace, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the power and boldness of the Holy Spirit be with you all as you step on to holy ground this Sunday.

*Dr. Dawn Chesser*

**Romans 12:9-21**

Sometimes I’m amazed at how the lectionary seems to always speak to whatever the needs of the moment might be. In this case, reading this passage from Romans, I can’t help but think about the situation unfolding as I write this in Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis.

On August 9th, 2014 Michael Brown, an 18 year old citizen of St. Louis who was visiting his grandmother in Ferguson, and who had recently graduated high school and was bound for trade school at Vatterott College this fall, was shot and killed by a police officer sparking racial tension, riots, demonstrations, looting, and national outrage.

Brown was initially stopped for jaywalking. Although the police said the young black man attacked the officer and tried to grab his gun, further investigation suggests that he was unarmed and had his hands up in the air in a position of surrender.  Still, the autopsy showed that Brown was shot at least six times, twice in the head, in the middle of the street in broad daylight.

Protests, both violent and non-violent, erupted almost immediately. The suburb is home to a 67 percent black population, but its mayor, the majority of its city council and school board, and the bulk of its police force, are white. (Only three of the fifty -three officers employed at the Ferguson police department are white.) The governor has deployed the National Guard to maintain order and declared a state of emergency as of this writing.

It is unclear at this point whether Mr. Brown had, in fact, participated in a robbery prior to the shooting. What is clear, however, is that even if he was guilty of that crime, it didn’t have anything to do with what happened to him. The officer who shot him had no knowledge of the alleged robbery when he stopped Brown for jaywalking. Rather, the officer seemed to be responding to a perceived slight from Brown and his friend after being ordered to stop walking across the middle of the street.

Whatever else has happened by the time you are reading these words is, in my mind, immaterial to why I bring this up in the context of this scripture lesson from Romans. Even if it turns out that the officer was fully justified in his actions, it doesn’t change the difficulty of how we interpret passages like this one when things like this happen in our world.

What are we to say about Paul’s admonition to “hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good,” to “out do one another in showing honor,” “be patient in suffering,” “bless those who persecute you and bless and do not curse them,” and “live in harmony with one another,” not being haughty or claiming wisdom? How are we to preach this scripture in light of these recent events? How are we to respond to his advice to the members of the church in Rome to “not repay anyone for evil, but take thought for what is noble in sight of all?”

And especially, how are the folks in Ferguson to follow Paul’s teaching that they are to “live peaceably with all” and “never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God” and instead, feed their enemies, give water to the thirsty, and overcome evil with good?

Paul’s advice is good and doable on a personal level, but once you move it to the corporate level it becomes much more complicated. Trusting in the actions of governing authorities requires that we trust the government, and that has become difficult in a place like Ferguson, where lack of representation by the majority in the government and unjust targeting of minorities is part of the everyday reality of life. Furthermore, acts of corporate vengeance, however justified they might be, always seem to spiral out of control.

Jesus taught that to suffer innocently and not retaliate is a greater victory than vengeance.

And it seems pretty clear that while protests may well be in order, looting, burning stores, and engaging in other acts of vengeance are not. Likewise, while a peacekeeping “force” is certainly needed in this situation, police appearing on the scene of the protests in armored vehicles and riot gear and employing tear gas, smoke bombs, and rubber bullets in response to the public outcry reads more like retaliation than simple crowd control.

·      How are we who call ourselves Christians and who sit on the sidelines of this crisis and watch it unfold to respond?

·      How are we to conduct ourselves when faced with these situations?

·      Do we not have a Biblical mandate to at least comment upon not only the plight of our brothers and sisters in this particular situation, but the plight of all who suffer at the hands of their oppressors?

·      What are we to say about it from our pulpits, be they in communities who identify more with the actions of the police, or they identify primarily with those who have threatened to continue protesting until the system of unjust representation in Ferguson is finally addressed?

·      How do we advocate for all involved and support just resolution and not supporting acts of vengeance, while at the same time not abandoning God’s call upon us to care for the lost and the least?

I don’t pretend here to have any answers. And I thank God that since my role is only to offer preaching notes and helps, it is not up to me to bring this sermon to resolution for every person in every place, but rather to simply raise the questions brought about by the scriptures as they are confronted with the situations of our shared life.

But please know that I will be praying that you who are preaching know your community and will know best how to bring closure to this particular conversation, at least for today, even while knowing full well that the conversation is not over when the crisis in Ferguson comes to an end.

In the meantime, as you sort through your own ending, let me offer you what I hope will provide some helpful insight from Eleazer S. Fernandez writing in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*:

Against the culture of conformity and acquiescence, those who live in the power of the crucified Christ embody virtues and practices that promote life-giving relations. They engage a way of being and acting that seeks to embody genuine love, mutual regard, humility, solidarity, peace, and harmony. It is a way of being and acting that cares not only for members of the faith community but also for the wider society, particularly the strangers in our midst. The Christian tradition has called this practice hospitality.

Hospitality is a distinctive mark of the church, which was born out of hospitality and spread because of hospitality.

If, in the spirit of the Reformation, justification by faith is the article by which the church stands or falls (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*), hospitality is the practice by which the church stands or falls. Hospitality does not mean simply welcoming newcomers into our congregations and doing charitable acts, important as they are. We must move beyond hospitality as charity to hospitality as an act of justice. Hospitality as charity offers crumbs from our tables; hospitality as justice offers a place at the table. In the context of our predatory global market, hospitality involves transformation of the system that is inhospitable to many.