

Ferguson, Missouri Statement “Out of a Mountain of Despair – Hope”

For the better part of a week, the streets of Ferguson, Missouri have echoed with hopelessness, despair, grief and anger in reaction to the shooting death of Michael Brown, an 18-year old black man, by white police officers. A fairly unknown suburb of St. Louis, Ferguson will now take its place in the ever lengthening list of cities where black men have died at the hands of police. In the past month alone, the national spotlight has focused on: Eric Garner, who died by asphyxiation while in an illegal choke hold by a New York City police officer; Ezell Ford, a 25-year old who was shot in the back by a Los Angeles police officer while lying on the sidewalk during a traffic stop; and John Crawford of Beaver Creek, Ohio, who was shot in the chest by police in the toy aisle of a Walmart store, while holding a BB gun sold by the store.

In the wake of these horribly repetitive tragedies, we are ever mindful of the deep loss to Michael Brown’s family and the pain this incident brings to their community. We are called to pray for the Brown family, for Ferguson, for St. Louis and for our nation as we continue to search for understanding and reconciliation. We must also pray for ourselves, as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), to strengthen our resolve to be a pro-reconciling, anti-racist Church, to have the courage to face the demons of our past with sincerity and to genuinely reflect on the reality of persistent racial inequality.

The shooting death of yet another young African American man reveals the scar that systemic and institutional racism has covered loosely by legal progress, but never healed. The demonstrations as well as the unfortunate violence and looting that have occurred in the aftermath of Brown’s death are less reflective of the victim’s possible culpability than the reality that has been visited upon the black community as a whole for far too long. The heritage of centuries of racial disparity is fraught with complexities that can lead to hopelessness and despair that manifests in cross-cultural conflict. We must remain vigilant in our efforts to understand and seek understanding of the lived reality of our brothers and sisters across racial and cultural backgrounds. Fortified with an openness to affirm the human dignity of the whole family of God, we can effect sustainable change toward racial justice.

So, what are we doing right now? One of our pastors in the St. Louis area speaks about the privilege she has experienced in this difficult week hearing the stories of community members who have very disparate experiences and perspectives. Such sharing has led to much needed dialogue that heretofore has been difficult. Members of the community have stopped by the church to share their testimonies and concerns as well as their contributions to serve the ongoing needs of the food pantry and school supplies. This tragic event has allowed her parish to be a bridge in the community between people of different perspectives and shared desire for reconciliation.

And what can you do? Our pastors and members of the Ferguson community solicit your prayers for both peace and change. They need the courage to listen to each other and the strength to confront the stark inequalities in their community peacefully, with an eye toward justice. As Christ’s disciples, we stand on the foundation of our faith – hope. Without hope, despair invades our hearts. It is our witness to the broad and expansive love of Christ in our willingness and witness to each other that overcomes the hopelessness in our communities, namely of color. It is our sustained faith and action through our hope in Christ that has brought us thus far on our way and that will lead us on. May it be so in your hearts and your hope.

