

Losing Faith in Ferguson

But tragically, over the past 75 days, that sense of human “otherness” has radically unraveled.

Nearly 300 innocent Nigerian schoolgirls are kidnapped by Boko Haram. A Malaysian airliner vanishes like it’s some kind of prop in a David Copperfield magic show. Vladimir Putin invades the Ukraine. Malaysian airliner No. 2 gets blown out of the sky. Ebola threatens the planet with a plague. A border crisis erupts between the U.S. and Mexico. Hamas shells Israel. ISIS beheads children.

Robin Williams hangs himself.

Now Ferguson.

By the time Michael Brown lost his life, the part of my brain that retains and stores calamity was screaming, “enough already.” But the tragic death of yet another young man, and the ensuing street protests in Ferguson, Missouri, present a different kind of social puzzle for the church because right now Ferguson is about one thing: total confusion. When I listen to the news, I feel both sympathy and suspicion at the same time. Nothing seems right about anything. People are scrambling for cover as Cain hunts for Abel.

Except no one in Ferguson seems to know who is Abel and who is Cain.

Ferguson isn’t a simple story about slurs and solidarity. It’s about the struggle for something far worse. If you believe what you’re hearing and seeing on TV is actually true, then lawlessness and lovelessness is your new compass.

I realize there are no tears in heaven. But if there were, I’m confident Dr. King would be sobbing.

The Scriptures use the Greek word *akatastasia* to describe

confusion: “instability, a state of disorder, disturbance.” It comes from the words of Paul in 1 Cor. 14:33, “For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace” (KJV). In other words, when confusion reigns, we always know the source.

And that is the issue when it comes to racism. Our bigotry, bitterness and rioting will never remove the wedge that divides mankind. High-octane emotions only serve to paralyze our thoughtfulness and restraint.

We—both black and white—have devolved into a fallen species of self-reproach and violent rebuttals instead of becoming the sons and daughters God invented us to be in Eden. Our acts of false justice are carrying us out to sea, especially for those of us called by God to live and lead as peacemakers.

There are fundamental differences between white racism and black racism. Notice I did not say there are fundamental differences between whites and blacks. The difference manifests in our racisms. Prejudices are privately held feelings about human difference. Racism happens when those feelings organize into a measurable system. And certainly not all prejudice becomes racism, yet both are sinful practices. One is an act of the heart, the other is an act of the hand.

Those with more social power wield the greatest potential for racism, but also for the good. In its inception in the North American context, white racism was about superiority, greed and control. Black racism was a response. It was about survival and revenge. Whites fought to maintain control, while some blacks dreamed of retaliation. Each racism fed off the other, yet both never realized they were operating under the same flag—twin pawns of one father, Satan.

Though prejudice and racism have multiple mutations, here’s what I find fascinating after 32 years of pastoral leadership: The white racist believes there’s an inherent virtue inside himself that inherently doesn’t exist inside the untrustworthy

black man. The black racist believes there's an inherent virtue inside himself that inherently doesn't exist inside the untrustworthy white man. In other words, they share the same theory.

Throughout my childhood, racial bias was based on the masterful use of hideous stereotypes. Never underestimate the power of mockery. Iconic childhood stereotypes, such as George Jefferson, Fred Sanford and Archie Bunker kept the black male at bay by displaying him as a caricature of subservience. These nightly images on network TV helped to keep the post-segregation systems fully alive and angled toward white prosperity.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 legally eradicated numerous housing, voting and educational barriers for black Americans. However, just because the deadbolt had been legally unlocked doesn't mean that white America wasn't on the inside of the house (and church) holding the doorknob. Black America was acutely aware that white America was not happy about sharing the house, even though they had helped to build it.

Thankfully those kinds of stereotypes have all but worked their way out of the water supply, but without them it becomes harder to convince people that certain racist systems are still in play. I recently asked a group of younger African-American leaders who serve on our staff here at Real Life Church if they knew who George Jefferson, Fred Sanford or Archie Bunker were. There was little to no knowledge. I asked them who came to mind when they think of the black male. In unison names like Will Smith, Ben Carson, LeBron James and President Obama came to mind—a far cry from those images of the 1970s.

In my experience, the wedge between whites and blacks is neither difficult to understand nor difficult to eradicate on the individual level. As a white man, my imperative is to remain fully engaged in the lives of my black colleagues and

neighbors and resist displaying any emotional ambiguity (becoming dull and disinterested) toward the historical and contemporary narrative of my African-American relationships. I must also commit to living brave and confrontative when racism rears its ugly face. In return, I emotionally need my African-American relationships to acknowledge the progress that has been made in the last 50 years and to celebrate the momentum. I need them to speak into my life when needed, but also to tell me often that my heart and life reflect Jesus' unsuspecting love for people.

When a black American sees my disinterest in their world, they lose heart. When an African-American speaks as though slavery is still the norm, I lose heart.

But when we can together acknowledge the problem and the progress, something powerful and transformative happens to us and through us. Revenge becomes reconciliation. Offense becomes objectivity. From that baseline, there is no mountain we cannot climb nor move.

No one knows the outcome of Ferguson. Judgment is what we do. Justice is what God does. The events are as fluid and combustible as anything I have seen since the Rodney King riots. The potential to polarize, marginalize and pulverize our neighbors is real—not just in Ferguson but also in our own churches and communities.

A precious life made in the image of God is gone. His name is Michael Brown. Sympathies for Michael range from non-existent to irrational. Somewhere in the midst of this chaos are Michael's parents. That has to count for something. There is also a police officer without any track record of wrongdoing. His family, too, will never be the same. He may go to prison. He may not. But we have to trust that God's justice will find its way through the systems of human judgment.

We just spent an entire week losing our faith in Ferguson.

May this next week be different.

I encourage you to look one last time at the picture attached to this post. It was taken last month here at Real Life Church.

For me, it captures the message of heaven. I am praying that the parks and playgrounds of Ferguson, Missouri will soon look the same.

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