

NFL Pro Bowl Player-Turned-Pastor Urges 'Not to Take Sides' in Ferguson

Uncertainty and unrest linger in Ferguson, Missouri—a community inflamed and scarred by pending questions after an unarmed black teen was fatally shot by a white police officer.

“All of a sudden you’re thrust into something that you wouldn’t have volunteered for,” says Aeneas Williams.

Williams is one of St. Louis’s most beloved sports figures. The former eight-time Pro Bowl cornerback has lived in the area since his trade to the Rams in 2001. He now pastors at a vibrant, neighborhood church in Ferguson.

“As tragic as this is, it’s exposed a tension that’s been there for quite some time,” says Williams. “Two people (stand) on separate sides of the street. There are narratives on both sides—what it’s like to be a police officer. Also, what’s it like to be in different parts of the community.”

Just one week before the Aug. 9 shooting, Williams was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. His induction speech is best remembered for this:

“I’ve got two statements, if you don’t remember anything I say. Begin with the end in mind, and die empty. Begin with the end in mind, and die empty.”

Williams explains what he meant: “Begin with the end in mind simply means live a life of intention. What you believe God has put in your heart. And then dying empty, overcoming fear. Overcoming the challenges. Having exhausted all of the gifts and potential that the Lord had given me. I truly believe the greatest amount of wealth you could find is at cemeteries. I

believe most people die with their potential. Potential books, potential cures for cancer, just so many things.”

Just 2 1/2 miles down the road from Williams’ church, 18-year-old Michael Brown died. A makeshift memorial covers the blood-stained street.

“I looked up the name Michael; I looked up Darren, the officer’s name. Michael means, ‘who is like God?’ The name Darren means ‘agent of change.’ Wouldn’t it be the enemy himself to take these destiny names and bring out something just horrendous through it? So what I want to do is take the original purpose of the names and bring the focus to it. Who is like our God, but to bring reconciliation and healing in something that has been going on for years. And who is like our God except to allow anyone one of us that decides to be agents of good, to bring about good in the midst of something bad,” says Williams.

It is fitting that a former defensive back like Williams is one to champion reconciliation, much like those interceptions, it’s a principle that brings dramatic change.”

“When the ball’s in the air, I’m not looking at the ball,” says Williams. “I’m looking at the point on the ball. When your vision is right; your hands automatically adjust to catch the ball. In terms of the hands and feet of Christ; the hands and feet of Christ I found in my own life, are always right when my vision is right.”

A vision to see clearly and a memory that quickly forgets. Williams knows what separated him from his peers on the field.

“Without hesitation, the ability to overcome a bad play and to learn from the bad play. And why that fits in this moment. So many people I meet they talk about things that happened 15 years ago, negative in their life, as if it just happened. And as a cornerback, if Randy Moss caught a touchdown, they didn’t stop the game. I had to go right back out. So the ability to

immediately, intentionally forget something, but having learned from it, and to be able to move on.”

For now, the fresh wounds have slowed any potential for prompt healing. Protesters line up roadside peacefully during the day. Many are residents from the immediate vicinity. But at night, the north St. Louis suburb draws confrontational agitators who trash streets and businesses, using Ferguson as the stage to aggressively vent their resentment.

“That’s one of the things I learned in football,” says Williams. “You have to be able to divorce yourself of emotions. Not that the emotions are not real. But be able to bring your emotions in and go after an accomplishable goal, because God has given us responsibility to solve these issues. And part of that reconciliation is getting both sides, the police officer, the mayor; getting all the parties that be a in a calm environment and share, independently, what are the practical experiences, and challenges from all sides.”

The urgent incentive for reconciliation carries the hope it will gift the next generation.

“I’ve run track before. The person handing off the baton bears the greatest responsibility for the exchange. They’re not to let go of the baton until the next runner has it firmly in place. We’re not going to pass this baton off the same way we got it. Let’s do what we need to do, have the difficult conversations so we can find a resolve, a reconciliation, and get this thing right and then pass it on to this next generation.”

Williams continues, “That is reconciliation. The ability to look at and own it. When you look at the film, you look at the plays, there are no excuses. If you see it, it didn’t go right and you are the responsible party, the great ones that I found, you owned it! When I think of what Christ did, what the ministry of reconciliation is, He’s called us as believers to

be ambassadors. And ambassadors go in with a mission. Not to take sides, but to reconcile different parties together.”