

Blood Cries Out from the Ground: Reflections on Ferguson

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I know Ferguson, Missouri. St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, a parish of the Diocese of Missouri, is there, and as Bishop of Missouri, I have been in and out of Ferguson more times than I can count. Founded in 1888, the parish is mostly middle-class and working people, not unlike the surrounding community. Settlement in Ferguson began in 1854, and the town incorporated in 1894. An inner-ring suburb, the city early on became one of the first bedroom communities around St. Louis, with easy rail access into the city. Major industry did not come to the town until the 1940s, when Emerson Electric, then the largest manufacturer of airplane armaments in the world, moved to Ferguson from St. Louis. Emerson provided good work for the residents of Ferguson and helped the community thrive. Now, however, and despite being number 121 of the Fortune 500 Companies, it is as if Emerson were not there. Corporate headquarters remain in the city, at 8000 West Florissant Avenue, the street made famous for protests and riots in the aftermath of Michael Brown's shooting death on August 9, 2014. But manufacturing jobs have mostly moved offshore, a common tale for any working-class community in the United States. Few people living in Ferguson work at the company, but Emerson has at least increased its involvement in the community in the months following August 9.

As recently as 1970, Ferguson's population was almost entirely European-American, and in 1990, that portion was still 74 percent. By 2010, however, the population had shifted to 67 percent African-American, with 29 percent identifying as European-Americans. Ferguson's demographic began to change when more affluent residents, mostly European-Americans, began to move west in St. Louis County and then into St. Charles County. Again, here is a pattern common throughout the nation, and "white flight" does characterize

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the changing demographics in many cities in the United States. A closer reading of the particular history and politics of St. Louis, not drawing solely on general trends, will help make clear why the place where I live is one of the most racially divided in the country.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, in 1764, a group of French and Creole settlers came to a place some twenty-five miles south of the confluence of the two great American rivers, the Missouri and Mississippi. The iconic arch on the grounds of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial marks the site of the trading village that these settlers established. Pierre Laclède, his common-law wife Marie Thérèse Chouteau, and stepson Auguste Chouteau led this endeavor. Thus began St. Louis. By the time of Auguste Chouteau's death in 1829, the family had accumulated thirty-six slaves, all of African descent. So began the long disparity in power and privilege enjoyed by European-Americans and African-Americans in St. Louis. The disparity dates from the time of the region's beginnings, but it continues in later chapters of the region's history. Understanding the strength of slavery's hold on the region's economy, politics, and identity is key to making sense of the present racial crisis.

Both leaders of the Corps of Discovery, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, were slave owners. This expedition, leaving St. Louis in 1804 to find the headwaters of the Missouri and a path to the Pacific Ocean, included Clark's slave named York, a bondservant since childhood. William Clark was territorial governor when Missouri became a state—a slave state—in 1821. Reaching statehood became possible because of the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which defined how slavery might spread, or not, in the huge territories of the West. It is interesting to note that Clark, though not an Episcopalian, was a charter signatory for the founding of Christ Church, now our cathedral, in 1819. Slavery continued to define the places for blacks and whites in Missouri history, a fact deeply rooted in the region's DNA.

Slave labor accounted for much of the region's wealth gained during the heyday of the steamboat years, roughly 1820 to 1860. St. Louis became the nation's second-largest port during this era. The narrower and shallower Mississippi River north of the city accommodated only small ships, whereas the deeper and wider channel to the south required large ships for the sake of economic scale. The transfer of cargo from one size to the other happened at St.

Louis, where the ships would line up for almost two miles at wharves along the riverfront. The backbreaking work of the transfers fell to slaves, and the weight of the cargo sent upriver as far as St. Paul, downriver to Memphis and New Orleans, on the Illinois River almost to Chicago, on the Ohio River all the way to Pittsburgh, and into the greater West via the Missouri River made the dominant culture a wealthy one.

One example of wealth built by slaveholding comes in the story of Henry Shaw. Born in Sheffield, England, in 1800, Shaw came to St. Louis in 1819, nearly penniless. For twenty years he ran a hardware store and sold high-quality knives and other utensils sent by an uncle from his native Sheffield. He accumulated large real estate holdings along the way, allowing him to retire from active work at age forty. In 1859 Shaw opened what remains one of the jewels of St. Louis, the Missouri Botanical Garden. As it happens, Shaw was also a slave owner, though the details are sketchy. We know this much clearly, that his slave Esther tried to escape into Illinois, only to be captured and returned to her owner. Shaw was also an Episcopalian, and he was instrumental in building a cathedral for the diocese, which was completed in 1867; the neo-Gothic structure remains in use today. At the time of his death in 1889, Henry Shaw was the cathedral's warden.

In 1846 the slave Dred Scott filed suit for his freedom in St. Louis Circuit Court, on his own behalf and that of his wife, Harriet. The Scotts had lived for some years in Wisconsin Territory, free soil according to the Missouri Compromise. Scott argued that he was a free man, and his wife a free woman, because they had lived in free territory. It took eleven years for the litigation to run its course, and in 1857, the Supreme Court of the United States decided, 7–2, against Scott. The Court ruled that not only was Scott not free, but because he was of African descent he could never be a citizen. Thus the Court overturned the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The body of Dred Scott lies buried in Calvary Cemetery, on West Florissant Avenue in St. Louis City, only three miles from the burned-out QuickTrip in Ferguson, called “ground zero” during the protests and much photographed in recent months. That convenience store is also on West Florissant Avenue.

The constitutional end to slavery, the granting of voting rights to ex-slaves, and the clarification that they were in fact citizens brought a season of hope after the Civil War ended. The end of slavery, however,

gave way to other ways of keeping people of African descent down. Various means of voter suppression; limited or no access to public education; extreme enforcement of segregation, including “sundown towns” in Missouri, places which blacks had to vacate before nightfall, or else; discriminatory policing policies; and the numerous iterations of separate-but-equal practices—all these took dignity and power away from people of African descent. The race riots in St. Louis in the 1960s and 70s, relatively small in number and intensity, left our region with a false sense of security. People, especially in the dominant culture, felt safe in assuming that race was not a problem here.

Racism exists in an endemic form in the region of Missouri where I live. From a European-American perspective, it may seem like a chronic disease for which coping is as good as a cure. That perspective, however, is one of privilege. African-Americans typically live with the daily indignities of endemic racism that are mostly invisible to the dominant culture. Not long ago I heard an African-American pastor tell about a question he liked to ask other students, white students, during his seminary days: How often do you think about being white? The invariable answer was, “I never think about being white.” The existence of privilege is almost imperceptible to people of privilege, and the basis of that privilege never needs bringing to awareness. My friend, however, emphatically says that, contrary to the typical and parallel white experience, he thinks about being black every day of his life.

The political organization of St. Louis City and County is peculiar, and it also contributes to the particular expression of racism in the area. In 1876 St. Louis City removed itself from St. Louis County, retaining for itself all the functions belonging to any Missouri county. For example, there is a St. Louis City sheriff and a City courts system. At the time the County was rural and underdeveloped and a tax burden to the City. Over the succeeding century and more, population growth in the County exploded while the city began to contract, both in proportion to the County and in real numbers. The City’s population peaked at 897,000 in 1950 and had shrunk to 318,000 in 2013. The salient feature of both City and County lies in a balkanization of political units. The City has twenty-eight wards, within the bounds of which each alderman or -woman wields enormous and largely independent local power over City services and building permits. The County in 1930 had thirty municipalities, which in the next twenty

years grew to eighty-four in number. There are currently ninety. The political fragmentation of St. Louis City and County effectively prevents the pursuit of a commonweal for the region. It also provides the structure to support one of the highest levels of racial segregation in the country. Moreover, this fragmentation allows small cities, like Ferguson, to maintain separate police forces and courts, and to fund operations by adjudicating excessive fines for minor offenses, especially traffic offenses. Some cities in the County fund 40 percent or more of their budget by these means, and the burden falls disproportionately on African-Americans. Ferguson raised about \$2.5 million in its last fiscal year through fines and court fees.

The history of St. Louis sets a necessary context for making any sense of the shooting death of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014 and the subsequent outrage from the community in Ferguson and elsewhere. The name “Ferguson” has become shorthand for what is wrong with law enforcement and racial politics in the United States. Something about this incident—probably some combination of its violence, the fact that Brown’s body lay in the street for over four hours, and the clumsy efforts of political leaders to control the message—caught the attention of the world. In the ten days after the shooting the hashtag #Ferguson tagged 7.8 million messages on Twitter. The recent deaths of other black males, including Eric Garner, John Crawford, Ezell Ford, Dante Parker, and Tamir Rice, all at the hands of police officers, have extended the resonance for what happened in Ferguson. The various responses to the December 20, 2014 shooting deaths of two New York City police officers, Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos, further demonstrate a cultural polarization around issues of race and law enforcement.

The name of the North County town has taken on an almost mythic quality, and “Ferguson could have happened anywhere” has become a byline. Indeed, racism continues to have its caustic effect everywhere in the United States, and people identifying so closely with Ferguson is an important acknowledgment of this reality. I recognize this fact. But for me, living as I do in St. Louis, Ferguson must first of all be local and not merely general. I never met Michael Brown, but I know some people who knew him well, high-school classmates of his who worship at one of our North County parishes. Ferguson was a familiar place to me before it became a venue for CNN, and the heartache I feel when driving down the burned-out section along

West Florissant is something personal and visceral. Clergy and laity of this diocese have been regulars among the protesters in Ferguson and elsewhere in the area. Some have been arrested, and a few even ill-treated by police. I have protested on the streets of Ferguson myself. Family members have felt the effects of pepper spray and tear gas. Ferguson, like Nazareth of Galilee, must begin as a real piece of geography, an incarnational reality with its maddening particularities, and a back story. Acknowledging these aspects of Ferguson's real life paradoxically bolsters its more general power as a sign of things broken and hope for life restored.

I begin a theological reflection on Ferguson with what I hope is an obvious statement, although I have learned during the past months that it is not obvious to everyone. The end of racism matters to the church. It matters because of the issue of justice, but it also matters because God's intent, at the end of the age, is to build a new world from "every family, language, people, and nation" (Rev. 5:9). The church is to be a servant of that vision, despite its falling far short of it, and any church that does not inhabit the wild diversity of peoples that Revelation describes is incomplete. We the church bear the wounds of racism, every bit as much as the places where we live.

We who are the church do well to learn from the rage present in Ferguson and surrounding communities, a rage which has spread throughout the nation and around the world. That rage did not come from nowhere, and it has something important to tell us all, but especially to those of us living with privilege. We can commit ourselves to honest and difficult conversation, in the presence of the racial wound in our community, made evident in the body of Michael Brown. The One wounded for our sake calls us to accountability and helps us make some sense of a seemingly senseless death.

There are two shrines on Canfield Avenue in Ferguson where Michael Brown died, one in the middle of the street, where he fell from his gunshot wounds, and one on the roadside. The shrines are of the sort not uncommon in American culture, built by the people with what is at hand, not commissioned by the church or the state. They are made with flowers, placards, banners, letters, and balloons. (Another such shrine popped up at the site where Officers Liu and Ramos died in New York.) The compelling draw of the place where Brown died is palpable, and many of the marches in Ferguson have essentially been pilgrimages to Canfield. I must be careful here,

because I am not claiming sainthood for this young man. Unlike Rosa Parks, Brown is an imperfect witness, or at least not a chosen witness. In 1955 black leadership in Montgomery, Alabama, rejected at least two other candidates to begin a bus boycott before settling on Parks. They chose her precisely for her background and her character. No such vetting took place for Michael Brown, and no one even had a choice in the matter. Sometimes the core issues at stake, racism and law enforcement, get lost amid the polarities that people express around Brown's character. Some point to the videotape of him and a friend robbing a nearby convenience store, a few minutes before the shooting, and call him a "street tough" or "thug." Or they rehearse the prosecuting attorney's report of the grand jury's decision, released November 24, naming him the aggressor in the encounter leading to his death. Others describe a different Michael Brown, calling him a "gentle giant" or a "sweet guy" who loved his family. I think that these characterizations, good and bad, are beside the point of an unarmed young black man dying from gunshots fired by a police officer, and all the history and present racisms making that moment possible.

Michael Brown is an imperfect or unchosen witness. For many people, however, there still remains a strong compulsion around the site on Canfield Avenue, and I think that *shrine* is the correct word. This is a place recapitulating a trauma that ended in Michael Brown's death, and a trauma endured by the community. People go to that place and weep, or they rage, or they sing, or they stand in slack-jawed silence. The place allows people to express deep emotion, and it lets them hope. Some even pray. The pavement is still visibly marked by Michael Brown's blood. Protestors sometimes paraphrase Genesis 4 in saying that his blood cries out for justice. But the place is also saturated by the anger, the hopes, and the prayers of thousands. It is an important place. Dare I call it a holy place?

One act of protest for which I was present troubled me, and it happened on October 13, 2014 at the Ferguson Police Station. This action was specifically for people of faith and especially for faith leaders. There were probably twenty or so Episcopalians, lay and ordained, in the crowd gathered at a nearby church to learn the protocol before the protest began. I chose not to be among those taking action to be arrested, so I stayed on the sidewalk, a safe zone; my role among Episcopalians was to be the purveyor of bail money! (There were arrests, but no bail required.) The trainers, who are in

fact professional activists, then laid out the script for those confronting the police directly. The script troubled me, and here is what the protesters were told to say to the police: “You are part of a corrupt system. I have already repented of my own complicity in this system, and I now call upon you to repent also. I am willing here and now to hear your confession.”

I could not imagine hearing myself say those words. The script seems an unfortunate mashup of the church’s pastoral and sacramental practices with its prophetic witness. It also appears to come from someone who is unfamiliar with catholic practices, someone who does not hear confessions regularly, or make one. The demeanor which I associate with a good confessor is that of firm gentleness, not one of presumptive judgment. This script taught by the organizers could also have come from an unthinking biblicism, even if of a progressive sort. One of the trainers, in an aside after the training, cited the actions of John the Baptist in confronting those in authority as a model for the protestors in Ferguson, never admitting that the church does not usually take John as a role model for hearing confessions.

Finally, there is the matter of Officer Darren Wilson, who fired a total of twelve shots in his encounter with Michael Brown, fatally wounding him with his last shot, this one to the top of the head. In his controversial testimony before the St. Louis County grand jury, Wilson described a physical confrontation with Brown on the day of the shooting, Brown being the aggressor. Wilson told about fearing for his life in the encounter. That being the case, he leaves unanswered why he did not retreat to the safety of his SUV and drive away from the zone of danger, or wait there for the police backup that was on the way. Some have said that it is part of an officer’s training that, once engaged in lethal response, he or she should aim for the abdominal core of the assailant, fire all the ammunition in the magazine, and never break the engagement. If such is common police training and practice, then this is one of the practices of law enforcement that bears reassessment.

This much is sure: the life that Darren Wilson knew before August 9 and the life that he lives now are very different. He lives in hiding. Anecdotes tell of his appearing in public only in disguise. He resigned his position on the Ferguson police force immediately following the grand jury decision, and it is likely that he will never work in law enforcement again. He remains liable for civil litigation for Michael Brown’s wrongful death, and there could still be a federal

case brought against him on the basis of civil rights violations. Some in the local legal community have called for a special prosecutor to bring the evidence before another grand jury. Anguish and uncertainty await Officer Wilson, and it requires no stretch of the imagination to see that his is the mark of Cain. A reading of Genesis 4 in fact helps interpret what has happened in Ferguson. There is the haunting question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (The unspoken answer is Yes.) Blood from the ground cries out to God. And Cain is left to wander the face of the earth, never again to work as he has before. God then inexplicably puts on Cain a protective mark, lest anyone try to kill him out of vengeance. But people will always know that it is he. This tale from the first few pages of scripture bears revisiting.

I live every day of my life with the privilege that accrues to a sixty-year-old straight man of European descent in a position of leadership. I have known that reality for many years. In the days since August 9, I have learned from African-American friends and allies how important it is for me to talk about my privilege, to acknowledge anew how I benefit from it, and to tell stories arising from it. A corollary to this learning is a realization that conveying the concept of privilege to people of privilege is very hard. Privilege is mostly invisible to those who live with it, and yet I cannot give up on privileged people just because the task is hard. I have also learned that hearing from the African-American community is far more important than anything I might have to say to them. That community probably has heard enough from the likes of me. My discipline has been to show up for meetings, protests, whatever, only when that community invites me. The authority that is not my own matters most of all in these circumstances. Giving over to the authority belonging to the Other matters.

