

## Talking Race with Youth: Ferguson, Eric Garner, and #blacklivesmatter

### Introduction:

In the wake of events in Ferguson, Staten Island and around the country, passionate demonstrations about racial injustice have emerged. Social media has been peppered with the hashtags #ferguson, #icantbreathe, and #blacklivesmatter. As youth ministers who journey with youth and young adults, how do we facilitate meaningful conversations about race? What constructive theological framework exists to begin a potentially charged dialogue with young people? How do we worship and journey with youth in communities that are broken or indifferent? In this month's issue of *Engage*, find theological frameworks, starting points for conversations about race and identity, and a litany for worship.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Talk about the social and racial context of your church or group. Are you in an ethnically diverse or homogenous context? How does your situation form your perspective(s) on race?
2. What are the implications of incarnational ministry as we enter conversations about race and identity?
3. When you think about the Michael Brown and Eric Garner cases (among others), are there people whose perspectives are difficult for you to understand? Who do you relate to most easily and why?
4. How can compassion transform conversations we have about race? What spaces exist, or could we create, where these conversations can safely happen?
5. What is your story? What pieces of your identity shape your story?

### Response: Nathaniel Brooks

*Rev. Dr. Nathaniel Brooks is currently the Youth & Young Adult Pastor at Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church in Herndon, VA. He is a sought after ministry practitioner with passions for youth ministry, urban ministry, race, theology, and leadership.*

The Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, MO, has caused an upwelling of emotions throughout our communities and the world. Brown's death became a boiling point of resistance, civil disobedience, and mass protest to an unquestionable pattern of violence visited upon unarmed black males by police officers and armed vigilante citizens. Ferguson is not just another police shooting of an unarmed black youth, but is something much deeper and theological. Briefly, Ferguson reminded me (once more) that my call as pastor is to do ministry in a perilous world.

What theological implications does Ferguson point to as it relates to youth ministry?

- **Ferguson points us to reconnect with social justice ministry:** The protesters seen in the media are not the faces of the "baby boomers" (who undoubtedly knew about protest) but the millennials

who have decided “to take arms against a sea of troubles.” Jesus of Nazareth, demonstrated on countless occasions His zeal for social justice ministry by including the excluded (Matthew 8:1-3); challenging cultural practices (John 4:1-42); confronting the dominant culture (Luke 6:1-11); and advocating for the oppressed (Luke 14:12-14). As ministry leaders, we must find ways to discuss social justice issues with our youth and within our ministry contexts. Social justice ministry empowers our youth to realize their potential in society where they live - and affords them a chance to do something about it.

- **Ferguson points to the dire need to revisit incarnational and relational youth ministry:** Relational youth ministry seeks to communicate Jesus’ love simply by building relationships with young people through which they can experience the love of Christ (Matthew 19:14). Amidst the peaceful protesting around the country as a result of Brown’s death, there are a handful of people who saw this as an opportunity to loot and plunder. This begs several questions: Who do they turn to when their voices are muted? Is God still on the side of the oppressed? Who is standing in the gaps to hear their stories? Who is giving them hope and reinforcing their significance? Instead of dismissing them as menaces to society, Ferguson affords us (the church) a chance to reconstruct our youth ministries to be more vigilant and relational to our youth and their communities.

I have always contended that the church must both proclaim and do theology in public before people and with people in mind. In short, Ferguson isn’t an opportunity to nullify the apparent effects it has on one particular culture or to raise our collective biases based on a sea of unknown facts. Rather, Ferguson gives us an opportunity to examine and mend our fragmented relationships with our youth, families, and communities. Let us never believe that God has left us without hope and new revelation when crises arrive. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “*The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.*”

### **Response: Mayra Lopez-Humphreys**

*Dr. Mayra Lopez-Humphreys is Associate Professor and Director of the Master in Social Work at Nyack College, New York, New York. She’s a native New Yorker, with a fondness for sidewalk treks and people watching.*

“Why should I get out of the game (i.e. selling illegal drugs) if all I’m going to be seen as is another black body? They (i.e. community police officers) treat us like we are not even human. It’s not just here ... you saw what happened with that court case. They just don’t care about what happens to us.” These are the words of “Kenroy,” an anguished 16-year old boy who shared his plight with a social worker friend of mine.

I wish I could say that Kenroy’s words were an unfamiliar experience of young black and brown men in this country. Similar narratives echo in the lives of parents raising young boys of color. Jasmin Hughs insightfully explores the painful realities of parenting boys of color when she asks, “At what age is a black boy when he learns he’s scary? As a black woman, nothing will stop me from bearing and raising my future child, but nothing will stop me from raising them in fear.”

The dehumanization and disregard of young men like Kenroy and the deterioration of their divine endowment as image bearers of The Creator, is far from God’s intention for humanity. Imagine with me please, “If the world was as God intended, what would relationships between neighborhood police officers and young black men look like?”

Why is this question so hard to answer? Perhaps it's because the evidence around us shows how far we are from God's plan for shalom-relational goodness. Shalom is a wonderfully creative and expansive idea that describes wellness of relationships; it is the perfect webbing together of God, humanity and creation. The relationships that God perfectly created are now fractured. Societies. Families. Neighborhoods. Broken. What is the hope for young men of color who bear the brunt of such brokenness with their very lives?

As image bearers, we are invited to join with God in a magnificent enterprise of repairing and bridging the connective tissues that unravels shalom. This goes beyond mere patch work, but is actually the very incarnation of love. Serene Jones, President of Union Theological Seminary explains, "Justice is what love looks like when it takes social form." This is how we manifest true shalom.

Unfortunately, because we see, read, watch, tweet and participate in the unraveling of shalom every day, its torn seams have become common place and we have the very foreseeable potential of becoming desensitized to suffering and pain that are not our own. We don't connect to Michael Brown's parent as a mother who is mourning the loss of her son. We don't connect to Ferguson as a community in the throes of anguish & sorrow.

How might a shalom mindset lead to a reexamination of national standards on the use of lethal police force?

How might shalom connectedness reverse the probability that [one in three black men](#) will go to prison in their lifetime?

Ultimately, how might shalom reconciliation lead to structures (e.g. public education, housing market, criminal justice system, and labor market) in the United States that serve all people - including black people - equally?

### **Response: Brandon Winstead**

*Brandon Winstead, Ph.D., is currently the director of student ministries at Killlearn United Methodist Church in Tallahassee, FL. He is the author of There All Along: Black Participation in the Church of the Nazarene, 1914-1969 and has written numerous articles and delivered papers in the fields of youth ministry and African-American religious history.*

The Tuesday following the city of Ferguson, MO's decision regarding the death of Michael Brown, I found myself in a cafeteria with throngs of boisterous middle schoolers. Ten minutes in, my appetite was gone (if you've had a school lunch lately then you understand my stomach's reticence), and I was talking to "Chris", a black eighth grader. After sharing pleasantries, I just blurted out, "Has your mom had 'THE CONVERSATION' with you?" He responded by saying, "What do you mean?" The pitch in his squeaky voice and sly smile told me he thought I was talking about the three-letter word conversation.

His smirk quickly withered when I said, "You know the one about what to do when a police officer stops or questions you."

"Oh yeah," he peeped up, "Mom tells me to not say anything bad and do everything they ask you to because, ya know, you never know what could happen ... because I'm black."

I said, “Yep, man. Sadly it’s pretty much true but people are working to change that junk. In the meantime, listen to your mom because she is right and loves you.”

Then I patted his back, let him know God was always with him, and that I would see him soon. I turned to go to another table and as I did, he said, “That’s right B, God’s with me. I’ll see you soon.” I shook my head reluctantly and walked away knowing we had shared a very brief moment of existential and divine truth amidst the sordid mess of U.S. race relations.

Sobering as that moment was, truth was shared because we named how race negatively shapes the identity of young people amidst the mire and monotony of daily living. I think these moments need to happen like Donald Trump buys property and like churches have council meetings – in other words, all the time. We must enter cafeterias, sanctuaries, restaurants, or wherever we find ourselves with young people and name the racial powers that unjustly shape their lives. It can be downright tough at times but part of their knowing that God is in the madness is for us to name “the Powers,” even in lunchrooms, and proclaim that God’s people should change them because they are damaging God’s children.

This is crucial and it’s not just for the Chris’s of the world. It’s for those young white girls that I spoke with just after sharing eternal truth with Chris. While talking with them, they largely agreed that racism stereotypes youth of color and often has awful effects (Yes, these were young white girls raised in the Deep South. Aren’t you glad the Spirit is still at work!). In their own way, they felt that the absurdity of racism needs to be called out and transformed, and God’s people best be in the fight to redeem it. If not, as one young lady reminded me, can we really say God’s people care about everyone, including Chris?

### **Response: Aram Bae**

*Aram Bae is the Director of Family Ministries at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. She adjuncts at the New York Theological Seminary, teaching courses on developmental theories of faith and curriculum development. Her favorite things include fried chicken, barbeque, and talking about faith matters with teens.*

I have a confession, and it is this: I don’t want to talk about Ferguson. In fact, it’s the one topic I’d rather not share my thoughts about. I don’t want to write about Ferguson because the topic is drenched with landmines. Every conversation is a loaded one: racism, police brutality, violence, injustice, systemic white privilege, looting, murder, delinquency, prejudice, bad cops, good cops, guns, Whites against Blacks, Blacks against Whites, protests, no justice, no peace. The issues are complicated, heated, and emotional. Opinions hit a nerve; CNN is the ultimate drug for news junkies; and everyone has something to say on social media because it’s safer to voice one’s intimate thoughts in the webisphere where comments can be deleted and “friends” blocked.

I want distance from the Ferguson situation because seriously considering the weight of it from all perspectives, including those like Wilson’s fiancé who is also an officer or Michael Brown’s closest friends. That kind of pausing and considering requires a response.

But I need to do something.

I need to respond with compassion, to be someone better than my persona on social media, to be part of the change towards peace, understanding, and justice for *all*.

I need to look at the underbelly of humanity that is within me, that thing we call sin, that thing we all have in common, that thing I like to ignore.

I like to ignore the sin in me. I like to keep it at bay and make no such comparisons with those whom I deem more sinful than me, those who, in my eyes, are identifiably a part of the systemic problem of perpetuating injustice. The sin of the oppressor is not my sin; my sin is far less grand. And that's the problem; it's another confession I have. I have a problem of weighing sin. Yet Scripture tells me that *all* have sinned and fallen short. In fact, this "all" includes both the oppressor and the oppressed for they are both within me. The ugliest parts of humanity coexist within me for I have sinned and fallen short. That's my confession. What's yours?

**Response: Yolanda Pierce**

*Yolanda Pierce is the Elmer G. Homrighausen Associate Professor of African American Religion and Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary. She teaches courses in African American Religious History, Feminist/Womanist Theology, and Religion and Literature. She is also the Director of the Black Church Studies Program.*

**A Litany For Those Who Aren't Ready for Healing**

Let us not rush to the language of healing, before understanding the fullness of the injury and the depth of the wound.

Let us not rush to offer a band-aid, when the gaping wound requires surgery and complete reconstruction.

Let us not offer false equivalencies, thereby diminishing the particular pain being felt in a particular circumstance in a particular historical moment.

Let us not speak of reconciliation without speaking of reparations and restoration, or how we can repair the breach and how we can restore the loss.

Let us not rush past the loss of this mother's child, this father's child ... someone's beloved son.

Let us not value property over people; let us not protect material objects while human lives hang in the balance.

Let us not value a false peace over a righteous justice.

Let us not be afraid to sit with the ugliness, the messiness, and the pain that is life in community together.

Let us not offer clichés to the grieving, those whose hearts are being torn asunder.

***Instead...***

Let us mourn black and brown men and women, those killed extrajudicially every 28 hours.

Let us lament the loss of a teenager, dead at the hands of a police officer who described him as a demon.

Let us weep at a criminal justice system, which is neither blind nor just.

Let us call for the mourning men and the wailing women, those willing to rend their garments of privilege and ease, and sit in the ashes of this nation's original sin.

Let us be silent when we don't know what to say.

Let us be humble and listen to the pain, rage, and grief pouring from the lips of our neighbors and friends.

Let us decrease, so that our brothers and sisters who live on the underside of history may increase.

Let us pray with our eyes open and our feet firmly planted on the ground

Let us listen to the shattering glass and let us smell the purifying fires, for it is the language of the unheard.

***God, in your mercy...***

Show me my own complicity in injustice.

Convict me for my indifference.

Forgive me when I have remained silent.

Equip me with a zeal for righteousness.

Never let me grow accustomed or acclimated to unrighteousness.