

Do justice

Last night, a Missouri grand jury returned its long-awaited investigation results in the August 9 shooting death of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown. After examining all of the evidence available to them, members of the grand jury concluded that “no probable cause existed” to indict white police officer Darren Wilson.

Many are outraged at the grand jury’s conclusion and see it as a miscarriage of justice. Others affirm that only the grand jury saw and heard every piece of evidence and its conclusion is to be trusted and honored

What is indisputable, however, is that a community has been torn apart, the Brown family is devastated, Darren Wilson must live with the fact that he fatally killed another human being, and a nation is confronted once again with the deep intransigent legacy of our racist past and present.

I believe in and experience daily the power of prayer to guide, to heal, to transform, and to restore right relationship with God and neighbor. So I join many others in encouraging all Dakotas-Minnesota Area United Methodists and citizens to pray for the Browns, Officer Wilson, the healing and return of peace to our communities, and the will of our nation to deal with the unresolved issues that are the seedbed of violence, mistrust, and racism, such as underemployment, access to quality education, inequalities in our justice system, family breakdown, white flight, fear of one another, and the growing militarization of our police.

The role of the church and all who follow Jesus is to be purveyors of peace and justice. The sin of racism, and all its attendant causes and results, must be addressed, but not through violence. Violence rights no wrongs, heals no wounds, and leads only to more violence. Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”

And, there is no peace without true justice. For God, justice literally means returning things to their rightful owners or rightful place. Justice is an act of reconciliation; justice is an act of restoration; justice is an act of “returning.” It is this understanding of peace with justice that informs our United Methodist witness in this case and all others.

We speak up for those who are denied basic civil rights on the basis of their color, age, or sexual orientation because justice means **returning** dignity and equality to all of God’s people.

We speak up for those who are persecuted or demonized as a result of their faith practice or heritage because justice means we **return** to a state of loving one another as God loves us.

We speak out against the death penalty because justice means those who are imprisoned will be **returned** to a right relationship with their victims, not executed.

We speak up for the immigrants and sojourners in our midst because justice means the spirit and practice of radical hospitality must **return** to this country.

We speak out against the expansion of gambling because justice means we will **return** to paying for the services provided by good government and not preying on those least able to afford it.

We speak out against payday lending and other forms of economic exploitation because justice means we turn away from placing persons and families in financial bondage and **return** to providing persons with financial security.

We speak out against unregulated exploitation of our natural resources and for responsible stewardship of the earth because justice means we **return** balance and shalom to God's beautiful, life-giving creation.

We speak up for millions of children and youth enslaved in sex trafficking or sexually abused in their homes because justice **returns** all our children to safety, security, innocence, and hope.

We speak out against war and violence as a means to resolve disputes among nations because justice means rejecting our penchant to repay evil with evil and **returning** to a culture and commitment of peace-making.

We speak out for civility in our political campaigns and processes, and our theological debates, because justice means **returning** respect, integrity, and truthfulness to our civil discourse.

The psalmist, praying for the restoration of God's favor, gives us a wonderful image of justice—the kiss of righteousness and peace. I have shared this powerful image in other settings; it is one of my favorite scriptures.

“Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.”

Psalm 85:10-11

Let us commit anew to praying and working for that day when God's vision of justice is fulfilled—when righteousness and peace kiss; when faithfulness springs up from the earth and righteousness looks down from the sky; when everything is returned to its rightful owners and to its rightful place. May it be so in Ferguson, Missouri, in each of our communities, and throughout the earth, as it is in heaven.