

Let's Go Deeper...

Wednesday, June 13, 2016

The events of last week are yet raw in my heart. They haven't made it all the way into my mind yet, so these reflections are not "going deeper." Rather, they are surveying the terrain and scratching the surface.

Last Friday, I was wrestling with whether I ought to shelve the sermon I preached Sunday on gratitude and address the situations in Dallas, Louisiana, and Minnesota, but it takes me a *long* time to develop a sermon and nothing half-baked would have been appropriate for the events of last week.

In e-mail correspondence with members of our Progressive Christianity Sunday School Class, several of whom offered thoughtful reactions to the myriad volatile issues that surfaced yet again last week, I offered an initial response.

I assured them Pastor Jan Ehrmantraut would lift up the week's violence and mourning in her Pastoral Prayer on Sunday morning. She did so, leaving intervals of silence during which we could add our silent petitions... *if* we could articulate them. Recognizing how tragedy can leave us mute, Jan referenced Paul's promise that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26).



I've sighed a lot these past several days. My prayer time has been more sighs than words. I'm praying for how to pray. I do this quite a bit. Often, when I first write a person's name or a church issue or in this case, a national crisis, into my journal, that's all I write at the moment. I then proceed to pray about what I should pray about. So it is with last week's news. I'm asking God what I ought pray for and what I ought to do.

One thing that has come out of my pondering over the past few days has been the phrase "Perfect love casts out all fear" (1 John 4:18). As I've meditated on that verse, I recognize the events of last week were rooted in our most visceral emotions, including fear and anger. Both emotions boiled over last week and triggered (literally) the string of deadly acts that have left the nation sighing. Fear and anger are powerful emotions lodged deep in what is called "the reptilian brain." Instigated oft-times by neither truth nor reason, anger and fear deceive us into seeing the worst in others and bring out the worst in us. John names "perfect love" as the sole (and soul) restraint and antidote to the irrational fear and hatred that trigger violence against other human beings because of the color of their skin or uniform.

Given that recognition, I'm praying that I will be able to perceive, name, and confess the fears and angers that are rooted in the cracks of *my* heart, that the Holy Spirit of the risen Lord would cleanse me of such unrighteousness with a refiner's fire, and that I will yearn and learn to love in a way that casts out such sinful passions.

I also reminded the Progressive Christianity Class that gun violence, as well as the cauldron of distrust that exists between many African-Americans and law enforcement, long preceded Louisiana, Minnesota, and Dallas. One of my personal awakenings to the reality of the animus that exists between African-American men and police came when Jennie and I had several of my African-American colleagues and their wives over for dinner last year during the week leading up to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Worship Service held in January at Central. At one point in the dinner conversation, our dinner guests told about when and how they had had "the Talk" with their sons.

"The Talk?"

Not the talk about "the birds and the bees," though all parents can tell that story (or should be able to, anyway). My colleagues that night introduced me to "The Talk" peculiar to African-Americans—"The Talk" about how to comport oneself if and when one encounters law enforcement, for whatever reason. I never had such a conversation with my son, nor was I on the receiving end of such a talk with my father. I didn't have to. The fact that my dinner companions—each of them law-abiding, God-fearing, law enforcement-respecting men—had both received and given "the Talk" to their sons opened my eyes.

If you've not seen it already, watch our own Rev. Hank Sneed's compelling testimony to his brothers in Christ at our January Men's Breakfast. Hank's words fell close upon the MLK, Jr. dinner conversation with my colleagues and further heightened my sensitivity. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHcoE4NRRFg>

Lastly, I told the Progressive Christianity folks I met with Adrian Wallace of the Bishop and Chase Foundation <http://www.bishopandchase.org/> prior to last week's events to learn more about what he is doing in Lexington to address the social ills that plague communities. Adrian is an African-American man who belongs to a Church of Christ in town and has a constructive relationship with the Lexington Police Department. Also, thanks to my introduction two weeks ago to Anita Franklin, whose son was killed by gun violence at Duncan Park two years ago, I personally plan on walking in the Peace Walk at Duncan Park this Saturday, July 16.

I'm not going deeper this week. I'm just scratching the surface. I'm sighing. I'm praying about what to pray about. I'm doing my own self-examination. I'm building relationships. I'm pondering what it means to say "Perfect love casts out all fear."