

**Fear not!**

John 12:12-15

November 30, 2014

Last Monday evening, St. Louis County prosecutor Robert McCullough announced the decision of the grand jury: Officer Darren Wilson would not be indicted in the shooting death of Michael Brown. And then, on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, all hell broke loose.

Now the story is about broken windows and burned-out buildings and National Guard troops. Now the story is about incredulous protestors and distraught business owners and apprehensive citizens caught in the middle, sad and angry and hurt and wondering about the future.

Can their town survive? Can our system of justice function in the face of enormous social pressures and still be just? Can the festering wounds of America's original sin -- racism -- ever be healed?

What do you think? How do you feel?

Do you throw up your hands? Do you thank God you don't live in Ferguson? Does your mind spin and your heart ache trying to make sense of what happened three months ago and what is happening now? Do you simply turn it off, because it is just more bad news, bad news on top of bad news?

Do you blame the people, do you blame the media, for making such a fuss? Or do you blame the people and the media for taking sides, for pointing fingers, without first taking a long hard look in the mirror?

What comes next? For Ferguson? For all of us? Can we emerge from this dark place, this dark time, any wiser, any better, any more whole? Or will our future be more of the same: more distrust, more division, more violence, more hurt?

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair ...*

That's how Charles Dickens begins his story of Paris and London in the late 1700's, at the time of the French Revolution, his tale of two cities caught in the crosshairs of powerful social forces. Two cities engulfed in struggle and turmoil and uncertainty. Two cities balanced precariously at the cusp of possibility

and peril. Two cities facing the advent of unimagined freedoms and unimaginable horrors. His words fit well the story I want to tell you. It is also a tale of two cities, the story of two cities engulfed in turmoil and uncertainty, and balanced at the turning point of history. I want to tell you the story, not of Paris and London, but of Ferguson and Jerusalem.

Jerusalem's story begins with a mass demonstration, a public protest. It was not violent and not quite a riot, but it was spontaneous and unorchestrated, the impassioned response to an event that touched a nerve, that crystallized the hopes and dreams and fears of a dispirited people. Jesus was riding into town and it was the time of the annual Passover festival. Emotions were running high anyway and the people crowded into Jerusalem that day had heard enough about this small town preacher and his message of a God ready to act that they rallied to him and made him their emblem of hope: "God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! God bless the King of Israel!"

It was a volatile moment for the people living in Jerusalem. They had already suffered long: exploited subjects of one regime or another for centuries, politically disenfranchised, socially marginalized, and with a faith, a faith that had always been central to their identity, seemingly out of touch and impotent. They were a people caught in the middle, caught between Roman security guards and Jewish zealots, between corrupt tax collectors and overbearing religious elites. They were oppressed and abused and afraid: afraid of the empire, afraid of their own leaders, afraid of God, afraid of losing what little they had, and afraid of a future that held little promise for them or for their children.

But Jesus was coming! He became in that moment their emblem of hope, a man who seem to answer only to God, unafraid of the Romans, unafraid of the Pharisees, a friend of the people, a friend of God.

*Do not be afraid, city of Zion! Here comes your king ...*

Do not be afraid, city of Ferguson. Because it's all about fear, isn't it? Why did Officer Wilson shoot and kill an unarmed teenager? Because he was afraid.

Why have people taken to the streets in protest, not just in Ferguson, but in Los Angeles and New York and Atlanta and Boston? Because they are angry, and afraid.

Why has a single violent incident in a small midwest suburb captured the attention and imagination of a whole nation and left us all in anguish? Because we feel helpless, and afraid.

We are afraid. That is the larger context, the bigger story, the common denominator. We are afraid of what we don't understand and can't control. We are threatened by people who are different from us or who we think are different from us.

White people are afraid of unfamiliar young black males, armed or not, threatening or not, just because they are young, just because they are black, even when, most of the time, this fear is unwarranted.

Black people are afraid of white cops with guns, threatening or not, just because they have guns, just because they are white, and, sometimes, though certainly not always, this fear is warranted.

Fear is the context for justifying what Officer Wilson did and fear is the context for justifying whatever it takes to denounce what he did, fear bred from perception and from prejudice, from painful history and reasonable suspicion and unreasonable ignorance. Fear is the context for a society divided, a nation torn apart. Fear is the common denominator. Fear is the default.

Kit Novotny, a young minister currently serving Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ in Des Moines, made that claim in a sermon she preached last month at the Iowa Conference annual meeting: fear is the default, the default human response, the default human attitude. Default means "normal," "usual," the way things are unless they are consciously changed, intentionally reset. So when Kit says fear is the default human attitude she means that we do and will respond to the circumstances and challenges of our lives out of fear, unless something is done -- intentionally, purposefully, proactively -- to change it.

Fear not! Do not be afraid!

The command comes from prophets and angels. The command comes from the Lord. "Fear not!" This is the lever that can change the default: the word of the Lord. "Fear not!" "Do not be afraid!"

*Do not be afraid, city of Zion! Here comes your king, riding on a donkey.*

Here comes your king, riding on a donkey. Isn't that a mixed message? No, not at all! This is the message: your king comes to you riding on a donkey. He is a king, he is the king, but he rules in a way different from every other king. He comes riding on a donkey. He comes to you humble: not above you, but with you; not lording it over you, but serving you; not coming to destroy your enemies, but coming to destroy enmity itself.

Jerusalem, do not be afraid, but instead follow your king who will show you another way, the way not of fear, but of love, the way that leads to life.

Do not be afraid, city of Ferguson! Here comes your savior, riding on a donkey. Do not be afraid, but instead follow the one who will show you another way, the way not of fear, but of love, the way that leads to life.

Does love shoot to kill? Does love loot and burn? Does love pre-judge? Does love judge?

That's what we need in Ferguson and in Waterloo and throughout our nation: a different perspective, another way. We need to change the default, from fear to love, love for those who are unfamiliar to us, love for those who are different from us, love even for those who threaten us, love even for those who are our enemies.

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ... it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness.*

Is Advent a season of light or a season of darkness? Both! It is a season when we acknowledge that we do live in darkness, but when we wait and pray for the coming of the light, when we wait and pray and give God thanks for the light that has come, the light that shines even now showing us the way through the darkness. We do live in darkness, amidst turmoil and upheaval and fear, but God's light breaks in telling us: "Fear not!"

Fear not. Your king is coming, coming to show you the way, coming to show you another way.