

Thinking about justice two years after Ferguson

By [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

August 8, 2016

I reported for jury service on a Monday morning. I had just returned to town after a week away, and there was a lot to catch up on in the office. But I wasn't worried. A clergy friend assured me that when the attorneys learned that I'm a pastor they would probably let me go. I also had a backup plan: if it looked like I was about to be selected, I would mention my concerns about the prison-industrial complex. Surely then I would be released from service.

My plan was foiled by the fact that I was assigned to juror selection for a civil case, not a criminal one. By the end of the day I found myself sitting in the jurors' box with 13 other people. We were sternly warned that if we didn't show up for any day of the trial we would be subject to arrest and imprisonment. And so for the next week and a half I reported for duty at the court. The daily routine felt like a liturgy: the standing and sitting at appointed times, the hand gestures and vows recited in unison, the word-for-word readings from depositions. A robed leader led us in discernment as we evaluated the tangible details of life through a set of larger principles given by an external source and interpreted through the ages.

But it was the jury, not the judge, who would decide the outcome. And the case wasn't clear-cut. Eyewitness reports, photos of the scene of the incident, and details about the rule of law merged as the trial unfolded. Yet the picture of what had happened and who was responsible was, in the end, still murky. The plaintiff had clearly suffered tremendous and lasting injury, but it wasn't clear who was to blame for the misfortune. My desire for an obvious answer was unmet. The meaning of justice in the case wasn't transparent.

As we commemorate and lament the two-year anniversary of [the killing of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri](#), I'm reminded again of just how elusive justice is in our broken world. The actions of a single moment can be analyzed and critiqued and justified—and even punished—for days and months and years following. But in the end a life is still destroyed. A family is still irreparably

incomplete. The precise meaning of justice in the aftermath of such violence is hard to pinpoint. Punishment and reparations don't bring back the dead or reconcile fractured communities.

Serving on the jury at a civil trial reminded me that we live in a world marred by contingency, finitude, mistakes, and transience. My fellow jurors and I experienced an ethical *gravitas*, convicted by the fact that justice eludes us in our fallen state. We were experiencing what Luther called the theological use of the law.

As the jury deliberated and rendered our verdict, I realized that what I really wanted in those moments was to go to church. Not because church would correct the plaintiff's suffering, and not because church would provide any clear answer about what had happened. But church gives voice to brokenness and our complicity in it. Church opens up space for a lament that isn't necessarily tied to punitive measures. Church says: *Yes, you have suffered great pain. Yes, it's unfair. And no, you are not alone in it.*

"There was a time when I believed there was loss that could not be defined," writes Jacqueline Woodson in *Another Brooklyn*, "that language had not caught up to death's enormity. But it has." If there is a space where language has caught up to the enormity of loss, surely it is in our faith communities. If there is a place where love and justice intersect, surely it is in Christ. But exactly what that looks like in practice is still ours to discern.