

Revival in the white church

What would it mean for us to be filled with the breath of God again and come to life for the sake of racial justice?

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I attended a rally last week in Athens, Georgia, expressing unity with the protestors in Ferguson after the failure to indict Darren Wilson. People gathered peacefully, even quietly, and held up signs. The protestors stood in quiet conversations, some with candles, some with children in arms, a mix of white and black and Latina/o.

The first speaker to address the crowd was Alvin Sheets, president of our local NAACP chapter. He thanked us for standing with the people of Ferguson and reminded us of the plight of black Americans, both recently and throughout U.S. history, and the great poverty that many in our own community face. As Sheets's speech drew to a close, he turned to religion: he expressed his belief that the church needs revival.

I thought of the classic revival text Ezekiel 37. The prophet imagines Israel as a valley of dry bones, a nation long dead. God asks Ezekiel whether these bones can live, and Ezekiel is reticent: "O LORD, only you know." God instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, and when he does the bones come together and flesh comes upon them—but, like Adam formed from the ground, they do not yet live. And so God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath, and breath comes into Israel *revivodus*. There they stand, a vastly great army.

What would happen to the white churches in the U.S. if the events in Ferguson led to revival? If our preachers, in essence, preached to the bones and preached to the breath? How could we become a living army, ready to stand alongside our black sisters and brothers in the fight for justice? What would it mean for us to be filled with the breath of God again and come to life for the sake of this urgent cause?

I believe we would first of all become angry. It's important to deter violence in the streets, to work against the loss of more life and the destruction of communities. But we should also ask ourselves, "Where is the white rage?" Where's the anger at the loss of another young black brother at the end of a white officer's gun?

At the Atlanta airport last week, I watched a young black boy with his backpack and his little suitcase wheeling along. All who saw him smiled as he went by. What is the fate of that little boy? Do we see his beautiful face and wonder if he will end up dead like Michael Brown? Does the image of this little boy passing by, while the TV shows Michael Brown's image, urge us to work for a better justice system, a better police system, a better community system? Are we angry that children are dying? Their blood cries out from the ground. When we in the white church hear this call, do we faithfully respond with our own outcry?

Love is a great biblical virtue, and I'm all for it. But the Bible is also filled with anger—because God's deep love issues in a deep anger when those whom God loves have their heads trampled into the ground. The prophet cries "woe"; Jesus overturns the tables. A white church revived by prophetic preaching will look like a church filled with righteous indignation.

A helpful response to the broken criminal justice system will not be a reactionary one, a response dictated by exterior forces. When the people of Ferguson finally all go home, the resulting outer tranquility may deceive us into trusting that things have returned to some positive sense of "normal." Indeed, things will be normal—and out of that normalized injustice will eventually arise another death, another mother's tears, another demonstration, another fearful white community, another longing to return to normal.

What we need is righteous indignation that demands a new normal. This is the fire that burns from within, not from without. It might enable us to face the pain and suffering of our black sisters and brothers head on—to take it in, all of it, and to share in the suffering of Christ. Let it burn inside, make us angry at injustice until we rise like a great army to stand in the cause of justice with all the people of God.

Can these bones live? Only God knows.