

Sanford, the peace of Christ and our birthright gift

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A UMNS Commentary

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The county seat town of Sanford, with a population of about 50,000, lies in the heart of the Florida Annual (regional) Conference, between Orlando and Daytona Beach.

Ordinarily, Sanford would be of little interest to the major media markets of the United States. All of that changed with the death of Trayvon Martin and the trial and subsequent not guilty verdict for George Zimmerman, which has sparked reflection, debate and outrage across our nation over the past weekend.

One can set aside the verdict of the Trayvon Martin death, giving the jurors the benefit of the doubt, and still find the events in Sanford deeply disturbing.

One man is dead, another is free.

The deceased was an unarmed young black man. The killer was armed and claimed self-defense, against the background of Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law. The toxic brew of economic scarcity, racial profiling, escalating violence and community destabilization is at the heart of the experience.

We dare not waste the moment

What we make of this event is likely shaped by the media source that has crafted the narrative of this human drama for us. Regardless, I would invite my fellow Anglo citizens to listen to the voices of our African American neighbors — they will hear lamentation, unbelief, rage, pathos and resignation.

This is a teachable moment, and we dare not waste it.

Beyond the civic conversation, United Methodists are called to reflect on what this means for disciples of Jesus Christ who are called to transform the world.

We can return to the core teachings of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and explore the roots of our own inner violence.

We can read the passion narratives and recall that we follow a Lord who was non-violent.

We can listen again to the last words of Jesus, about the gift of peace that he would leave with us.

We can rediscover the teachings of this Jesus who inspired Mahatma Gandhi and E. Stanley Jones, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the women of Liberia.

The peace of Christ is, in the words of Parker Palmer, our “birthright gift,” and if United Methodists are to make a difference in a violent and fractured world, we will learn again, in a countercultural way, what it is to be his disciples.

Claiming the source of our hope

On the Sunday morning following the George Zimmerman verdict, I asked the pastor of First United Methodist Church in Sanford to read a letter that I had written to the congregation. I wanted to encourage them, and I wanted to remind them of the connection that we have as United Methodists. But in a deeper way, I wanted to claim the source of our hope, expressed in Ephesians 2:13-16:

“Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross.”

I am praying for people of The United Methodist Church in Sanford. I am praying that they will be an outward and visible sign of God’s peace, justice, reconciliation and healing in the days ahead. I am praying that they, and we, do not waste this teachable moment.

My own commitments are these: to encourage the many congregations in the Florida Conference that reflect the multicultural diversity of their communities, and there are many; to question more publicly the “Stand Your Ground” law of our state and its incompatibility with our General Rule to “First, Do No Harm”; and to bear witness to the cross, which has broken down the dividing wall of hostility that is between us.

This is the peace of Christ, which the world can neither give nor take away. This is our birthright gift. The world is in need of it now.

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