

Jesus of the resistance: Black Lives Matter symposium

The BLM movement has issued a clarion call to the church, the black church in particular, to affirm a theology of resistance, not respectability. This means reckoning with who Jesus is.

by [Brittney Cooper](#) in the [March 16, 2016](#) issue

The Black Lives Matter movement that has unfolded in cities and on campuses across the nation is writing a new chapter in black people's struggle for liberation. We asked writers to reflect on what the movement has accomplished, where its energies should be focused, and what implications it has for churches. (Read [all responses](#).)

Since residents of Ferguson, Missouri, took to the streets to protest the killing of Michael Brown in August 2014, the Black Lives Matter movement has significantly reinvigorated the national conversation about racial justice. Though many have been reticent to acknowledge that the Black Lives Matter protests constitute a new movement, after 18 months it shows no sign of abatement. There have been over 1,200 Black Lives Matter protests at malls, sporting events, and schools all over the country.

One of the striking things for me on a bus ride to Ferguson with young activists was the number of people who were not only Christians but ministers with theological training and significant backgrounds in ministry. Many of these activists also identified as queer. In that moment, I was forced to rethink my ideas about who and what the church is, and about the variety of creative ways that God might show up in the movement.

On the one hand, young protesters clashed mightily with local ministers who insisted on prayer vigils and a certain performance of Christian piety to legitimate the protesters' demands. The young protesters let ministers know that they were not interested in praying, particularly if prayer was invoked to quell anger and righteous

indignation. Nor did they accept the notion that anger had no place in the face of rage-inducing injustices, or that pulling up their sagging pants constituted an urgent social priority, or that deferring to elders was an obligation.

On the other hand, our Ferguson Ride was saved when Pastor Starsky Wilson of St. John's Church (UCC) in St. Louis graciously hosted our group after plans for using another space fell through. He opened up his church for two days for strategy sessions, for therapy and massage for those who needed it, and as a communal space to rest and regroup.

This movement for the basic respect, dignity, and protection of black lives is not going away. It has led to the arrest and charging of officers in Chicago, South Carolina, and Texas. President Obama met with BLM activists at the White House. BLM protesters have forced a robust conversation about both policing and racial justice onto the national political agenda. In this presidential election year, any candidate who cannot affirm that black lives matter has a poor shot at attracting black voters.

Meanwhile, the movement has issued a clarion call to the church, the black church in particular, to affirm a theology of resistance rather than a theology of respectability. This movement demands reckoning with who Jesus is. Is Jesus only a savior come to deliver us from punishment for personal sin? Or is Jesus a savior who joins with us in the work to end racism, patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia?

On the Sunday that our trip to Ferguson ended, Wilson preached a sermon called "The Politics of Jesus." On that Sunday, many queer and trans black people who had stopped going to church ran down the aisles, thankful to have a pastor who affirmed that their black lives mattered to God too.

On that Sunday, this Baptist girl raised in the Deep South saw Jesus in a new way, too. I was reminded that Jesus took on the Roman Empire because he saw the ways that that militaristic power structure constricted Jewish lives and impeded their ability to be all that God meant for them to be. I realized that Jesus, if he walked the earth today, would probably be out hanging with the homeless youth who kept vigil on the streets of Ferguson in the days after the killing of Michael Brown.

I realized in that moment and in many moments since that if Christians want the church to be relevant, the church must be willing to change. Too many folks believe, for example, that tithing will solve poverty. This generation of activists rejects such

reductive ideas.

Young activists frequently say, “The whole damn system is guilty as hell!” The church is part of the system. The church—and we are the church—must stand up and proclaim without equivocation, “Black Lives Matter!” This is the way. This is the truth. These are our lives.