

What "we" shall overcome?

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

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Last night I stood at a vigil proclaiming “Black lives matter.” Ours was an interfaith and intergenerational crowd, but we sang the gospel protest songs of generations past. I stumbled when we got to “We Shall Overcome.”

I stumbled for a couple reasons. First, the song makes me cry, cry, cry. I weep that there remains cause to sing it. But I also stumbled because I have remarkably little, personally, to overcome in my life. I wondered if it was fitting, in all my abundant white, educated, and employed privilege, to sing, to claim to be a part of the “we.”

The “we” is important. As a preacher, I use it *all the time*. In interfaith groups, I am increasingly aware of what I claim for “all of us in attendance here.” As Americans talk about race, it’s important to note who is included in the “we” and what experiences we share, and don’t. For one thing, I’ve never been harassed by police.

I did sing, finally, because the problems of institutional racism, of white privilege, of the shooting deaths of unarmed civilians—by police or vigilantes or gang members or gunmen in movie theaters in schools—are things that we all need to overcome, everybody who lives in Chicago or Missouri or the United States. Our world is rendered worse for their continued existence.

I was glad I had sung when a colleague lamented later something a parishioner had posted on Facebook, a photo captioned, “I thank you Officer Wilson for doing your job to help the community. I don’t care how much these people riot and act like

animals.”

We have a lot of overcoming still to do, we all do, when comments like this continue, not just on social media but in conversations among white folks about people of color. There’s an echo of this even in Officer Wilson’s testimony about Michael Brown: “When he stopped, he turned, looked at me, made like a grunting noise and had the most intense, aggressive face I’ve ever seen on a person.”

The Ferguson story is rife with victim blaming. *He had committed a robbery! They are destroying property.* This is how we discourage people from speaking out against injustice. A recent story notes that perhaps the accusations against Bill Cosby failed to gain traction because the women were [“imperfect victims, as victims so often are.”](#)

This week I’ve been thinking about the notion of perfect victims alongside the Christian claim that Jesus was without sin. Such a claim is not a denial of the fullness of Jesus’s humanity, but simply a distinction: he was the only perfect victim. The rest of us, should tragedy befall us, will always be imperfect victims.

It’s human to try to make sense of the world, to make meaning out of tragedy, but blaming people for the injustices wrought on them isn’t a morally neutral thing. It’s sin. Imperfect or not, people of all sorts are our brothers and sisters, created in the image of God and not to be disdained as less than human, as beasts.

Jaywalking kids don’t deserve to be shot dead in the street, just as women who drink alcohol don’t deserve to be raped. One pastor’s prayer last night mourned the fact that in too many places, the only “imperfection” one must exhibit in order to be victimized is to be black.

Earlier yesterday, I was driving on the campus where I work when a whole group of young men spilled out into the street, jaywalking, blocking traffic. I didn’t say anything. I rolled my eyes and made sure not to hit them. Jaywalking isn’t meant to be a capital crime.

That’s privilege: the knowledge that your crimes, however small, will generally be put in the proper context, if not simply ignored. This [Washington Post report](#) encapsulates what I’ve known since watching lousy students from my affluent high school succeed and, later, watching my husband’s brightest students on the south side of Chicago face no future at all, despite their natural talent and hard work.

We have to wonder how this can be so, and how it can be tolerated. People of color have lived this reality for far too long, and white people have largely ignored it.

The featured speaker at the vigil last night was Timuel Black, a 95-year old community leader and part of all the great civil rights efforts in Chicago for seven decades. He spoke of how his family fled the South, fled the terror there—and of how there is yet change to be made in our segregated city, all these years later. Still, he was hopeful.

We are in this together. We have to be. It's really the only way that we shall overcome, someday.