

How pastors talk about Ferguson

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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We're listening in on Edward J. Blum and Leslie D. Callahan, as they talk about preaching and teaching in midst of Ferguson's unrest. I'll answer Ed's questions tomorrow.

Ed: After years of wrestling, I settled in a predominately white church. My logic was this: if every white person concerned about racial justice leaves white churches, then there will be few women or men there to help. This Sunday, I worried that Ferguson or other police shootings of African Americans would once again go unmentioned in the sermon or a prayer. Sadly, this was true again. I marveled at the absence. What animated so many Thanksgiving Day conversations seemed off limits in church. What was unsaid seemed to mark whose bodies mattered (our white ones) and whose did not (their black ones). I imagined confronting the pastoral staff, telling them how wrong they are, and demanding racial consciousness. My life experience, however, suggests this approach backfires. As a lay person, I'm not 100% sure how to discuss such issues with our pastors. I decided to ask two ministers whom I respect deeply: Carol Howard Merritt and Leslie Callahan. I hope they could guide us in how to approach our churches about issues of racial justice.

Should pastors of predominately white churches address issues of racial violence today?

Leslie: To bear faithful witness to the transformative and saving power of Jesus Christ requires all of us, including pastors of predominately white congregations, to speak about and to speak to the violence of world. To fail to comment on, lament, and work and pray for an end to racial violence suggests that those pastors don't believe that we are an interconnected community beloved by God and loving one another.

Ed: When should pastors of these churches bring up these topics?

Leslie: In every sermon we as pastors have the opportunity to analyze the world that we live in through the lens of Christ's gospel, comparing where we are now with the kingdom of God whose coming Christ preached. So the answer to this question is "all

the time." If pastors have not developed their own theological imagination and stimulated their own hope for a transformed world and if that imagination and hope are not present as a part of their normal homiletical conversation, their discussion in times of crisis will be shallow and their witness will appear inauthentic to their congregations.

Ed: What are key points or features would you recommend stressing?

Leslie: I try to stress in my own preaching that our neighborhood is much more expansive than we generally envision it to be. When we are commanded to love our neighbors too often we look for and revel in a conception of the boundaries of our neighborhood. When I was a child, Sesame Street asked the question, "Who are the people in your neighborhood, the people that you meet each day?" This is a great starting point for predominately white congregations. Recent studies have shown that most white people in the United States have no friends in other racial groups. To have a congregation ask themselves who are the people that they meet each day and who is missing from their neighborhood give them the opportunity to be introspective and, I hope, self-critical about the limits that they place on their love of neighbor by making sure that they only regard as their neighbors the people who are most like themselves.

Ed: Is there anything you would avoid saying or doing?

Feel free to take risks. Every good preacher takes risks and pushes boundaries. Don't be afraid to make a mistake and say the wrong thing. The one thing to avoid is making the few minority members you have responsible for teaching the majority congregation. Do your own work. Do your own analysis. Study. Read. Do not make your two black members bear the weight of schooling the rest of the congregation. Don't turn them into representative samples of anything.

Ed: What biblical passages or themes do you find most helpful when discussing racial violence and justice?

I've already alluded to loving our neighbors as a biblical theme that's helpful. Passages that speak about love and justice (of which there are many) are also helpful. Luke 4 where Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah is also helpful. There are many passages biblically that lament violence. The prophet Jeremiah and Lamentations I find useful.

Dr. Edward J. Blum teaches American history at San Diego State University and is coauthor (with Paul Harvey) of *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. He is also an editor of [Then and Now](#) (with Kate Bowler).

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