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The Violence of Demanding Peaceful Protest: The Missteps of Clergy in Ferguson

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Robert Cohen/Post-Dispatch

“We don’t want anyone getting arrested or lashing out in anger. It is your job to keep people calm.” These are the words that a local clergyperson shared with me before I traveled to West Florissant Ave. to participate in demonstrations in Ferguson. Throughout the night, clergy consistently congratulated each other that everything seemed to be going according to plan. On multiple occasions, I heard clergy shout down a young person for getting too angry or confrontational. I grew increasingly uncomfortable with the clerical collar on my neck. I wanted to be with the people not above them. While not every clergy I encountered acted like this, I felt like many of the clergy I encountered functioned as appendages of the ruling class. I was not interested in being anybody’s appendage except God.

“If we remain peaceful then we will get what we want!” I will never forget those words. The statement struck to the core of my pacifist ideals and caused me to question the very nature of why I was even in Ferguson. I was told that clergy were needed to help calm the crowds. I saw what clergy being a voice of calm in the crowds meant first hand...clergy controlling the crowds. When people have every right to be angry, there is nothing of God about squashing their ability to exercise their birthright to civil disobedience. Clergy in Ferguson consistently tried to control the protest and steer it away from any civil disobedience. This consistent attempt to exercise power over a vulnerable group of people was an injustice and made me very angry.

I am not sure that these clergy in Ferguson would have let Jesus demonstrate in the temple. The false promise that **“peace will get what you want”** is absurd. Sometimes you have to shut things down in order to bring about justice. The work that I do is to ensure that acts of civil disobedience remain nonviolent not that they remain nonexistent. We must not forget that civil disobedience is an unpeaceful act. Civil disobedience is not intended to create situations of calm. Civil disobedience escalates situations to a point where people have to pay attention to injustice. To try to squash civil disobedience in Ferguson is to try and squash a movement for racial justice in our nation that is long

overdue. Anger must not be extinguished for the sake of maintaining calm. Anger should be utilized to create a racial revolution that brings all people in this nation and perhaps even around the world to the table for an honest conversation and a subsequent reformation.

I don't think you can have an honest conversation about race in our nation when you are always telling people to calm down. If peaceful protest is about controlling people's emotions, then I believe it to be violently taking away the agency of people who have every right to be angry and engaged in resistance. I am for nonviolence. I believe it is by far the most effective and moral way to confront injustice. I am not for the violence of clergy-controlled protests in a space where people have every right to exercise their anger. If we as clergy want to do something to change this nation, then we need to get up and capture the spirit of these angry demonstrators and nonviolently make life intolerable for those who want to keep perpetuating injustice.