By Rev. Andre Johnson, Ph.D.,

I recently attended our Convocation service at Memphis Theological Seminary where we celebrated our 50th year anniversary in Memphis, Tennessee as a seminary. Our president, Rev. Dr. Jay Earheart-Brown delivered an inspiring sermon titled, “Ministry in the Real World.” He reminded us about the decision of the seminary to move from McKenzie, Tennessee to Memphis in 1964. It was a move led in part to the seminary’s vision and mission to teach all people—both women and men; both black and white, all who discerned a call to serve in ministry. In 1964, for a predominately white seminary to move to Memphis during the Civil Rights Movement and Freedom Summer and then to declare that all people should have a right to theological education, needless to say, the decision was not favored by all. However, despite some angst along the way, the seminary followed the call and moved to Memphis—in part to do ministry in the real world.

Dr. Earheart-Brown’s sermon was a reminder to me of what I have been thinking about since the death of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014—that ministry is done not in a Utopian paradise, but in the messy real world. After the aftermath—the protests, the marches, the denials from the police administration—after the riots, tear gas, body armor, rubber bullets and the continued fight for freedom, Ferguson reminded me that something major was happening right in front of me.
In watching the scenes on television and following live streams on Twitter and reading Facebook posts until the wee hours of the morning, I discerned something else was at work here. In my prayer time, my mind and heart kept coming back to Ferguson and wondering how they were doing. I felt called and compelled to look at this, not just as another police shooting of an unarmed black youth, but as something much deeper. In short, Ferguson reminded me (again) that my call as both pastor and professor is to do ministry in the real world.

So as a pastor, I talk and preached Ferguson at my church. Our social justice ministry keeps us informed on the happenings in Ferguson and any local protests that come up. We have inserts in our bulletins and newsletter that mention the disproportionately way African Americans are harassed, detained, searched, seized, stopped and frisked, arrested, shot and killed by law enforcement officers. We create space for people during our Power Hour classes and other gathering moments to share their own stories about police harassment. One member shared how he was taken to the Mississippi River by three officers threatening to throw him into the river—while handcuffed.

Moreover, as a professor, I changed my syllabi to reflect what I call the “Ferguson Fiasco.” For instance, in my Public Speaking classes, the students will offer three speeches on any aspect of the Ferguson Fiasco and in my African American Studies classes; students will study and examine that Ferguson Fiasco from the lens of both rhetoric and hip hop. In short, I am asking students to apply what they have learned to the Ferguson Fiasco and offer solutions (if any) to the issues and problems they examine.

However, it was in my African American Religious Thought class that Ferguson spoke the loudest. I shared here what I did with the class upon learning about the murder of Michael Brown. Nearing the end of the post, I wrote:

The issues and problems in Ferguson are reminiscent of the issues and problems in the late 1960’s when, according to Canon and Pinn, “ministers and academics took a public stand against injustice and demanded a re-visioning of life in the United States that took seriously the humanity of African Americans” (1). Back then, for many African Americans, the prevailing theology of the day did not speak for or to them. Today, many are asking for a theological response to the unrest and tensions in Ferguson. With this class, I hope to move it from a merely academic pursuit of theological inquiry and place student reflection within a context that begs for a theological response.

Ferguson reminds me of what inspired James Cone to write his seminal work, “Black Theology and Black Power.” When Cone saw all of the protest, violence, riots, murder, and hopelessness that made up the 1960’s, he realized that the theology he learned at Garrett Theological Seminary (now Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary) did not speak to the real world happenings as he saw them. As a Barth scholar, Cone wondered what Barth had to do with the folks he saw struggling each and every day. Moreover, he also lamented why theology turned a blind eye to the misery
suffered by African American as a result of racism. In writing about the key motivating factor in his writing Black Theology and Black Power—the “black insurrection” of Detroit in 1967, Cone wrote:

_I remember the feeling of dread and absurdity as I asked myself, what has all this to do with Jesus Christ—his birth in Bethlehem, his baptism with and life among the poor, and his death and resurrection? I intuitively knew that the responses of white preachers and theologians were not correct. The most sensitive whites merely said: “We deplore the riots but sympathize with the reason for your riots….I knew that that response was not only humiliating and insulting but wrong. It revealed not only an insensitivity to black pain and suffering but also, and more importantly for my vocation as a theologian, a theological bankruptcy. The education of white theologians did not prepare them to deal with Watts, Detroit, and Newark. What was needed was a new way of looking at theology that must emerge out of the dialectic of black history and culture (6). It has been over 45 years since Cone wrote Black Theology and Black Power and as Cone did back then in response to the riots in the 60’s, I suggest that Ferguson has become a site of theological reflection and inquiry for us today. As I reflect on Ferguson, I am reminded that my task as a seminary professor is not only to change a couple of syllabi. My task as a pastor is not only to talk and preach about Ferguson. I must take part in Ferguson and my call as both pastor and professor is to contribute to the (re) envisioning, (re) imagination, and (re) thinking about this travesty by offering in some measured way, a theological response._

I have always contended that we must both proclaim and do theology in public. For theology to mean something, it must become a public theology. In proclaiming and doing this type of theology, one need to use words or demonstrate some action. This is why I also maintain that good theology—and indeed all theology is rhetorical. Theology is not some innocent discourse that someone pronounced on high and it fell from the sky. It is a discourse that people construct and many times perform within the communities people find themselves. In short, theology is God-talk—a rhetorical dynamic constructed by humans as we discern the will of the Creator in our lives. It is into this discussion I would like to add my voice.

_God of grace; God of glory; grant [me] wisdom, grant [me] courage; for the facing of this hour, for the facing of this hour._[1]

_To be Continued........._

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