Imagine, if you will, that we are walking through a neighborhood and we see a simple house with a yard and a door and windows and a roof: just a simple house in a simple neighborhood. As we approach the house we walk down the sidewalk and we see that it is quite tidy and beautiful on the outside. We knock on the door and we are welcomed inside. We meet the kind and lovely people within. Our host shows you around the place. We see that the furnishings aren’t super fancy but everything is well-maintained and everyone we see seems happy and well cared for. As we are led toward the kitchen we walk by the back window we see a large yard covered in nothing but trash. Whoa. What is going on here?

Onward on our tour of the house, our host takes us from room to room. Most of the rooms are beautiful and inviting. Then we are encouraged to hurry past one room at the end of the hall and as we peek through the doorway we see that there are a cluster of people huddled in the corner, clearly in pain, appearing as if they do not have enough food or clothing or healthcare or something. You are shocked. There are people in the house who are content, sitting at the dining room table relaxed, as if there is nothing is amiss. This is about the time that we’d probably wonder: Who is running this place? What in the world is going on here?

Do we walk through the house politely smiling not even commenting on the trash in the yard because we don’t want to offend our host? Do we walk through without looking through the doorway, without noticing that there are human beings suffering in the corner? If we don’t see these people does that mean we are innocent? Are we the ones starving in the corner? Are we the host?
Now let’s go continue on our tour and walk down the block and take a look at the house of God. In this neighborhood God happens to live three houses down, and in God’s house there is enough for all, enough food, shelter, work and health care, and because there is enough for all, the whole house is glorified by this accomplishment, and by this state of being.

We want to be keeping up with the Joneses here, we want to look down at the house of God and say, “Man, I want some of that!” There is equity down the block at God’s house. There is balance. There is peace.

Peace. The Hebrew word for peace is ‘shalom’ which means fullness and well-being and this well-being is not for a few but for all. This is the kind of peace that is happening in the house of God. Shalom. Peace with a capital P Peace.

A while back there was a call from Ferguson organizers for clergy of all stripes to preach on a text from the Hebrew prophetic tradition from Jeremiah 6:14 where the prophet declares: "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace."

The wound is there because there is no justice and the people who have been suffering in the corner are standing up and coming out. The people refuse to live hidden away in a negative peace, a peace of denial, a peace of submission, a peace of subjugation, a peace of silence, a peace of resignation, a peace of hopelessness, a peace of surrender, a peace of oppression.
Here’s Martin Luther King Jr.’s talking about this negative peace: "I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a “more convenient season.”

He talks about the positive peace which is the presence of justice and the negative peace which is the absence of tension. The absence of tension is negative peace. We need this tension to make the positive peace. We need the tension between the power and the people. We need that tension to make positive peace. Tension is an essential ingredient when it come to peace and justice. When that tension is not there, when the tension is not allowed or not tolerated or when the tension is not desirable, then there can easily be an abuse of power, not just from law enforcement but from Wall Street, the military, schools, medicine, the church. We need the tension and perhaps the realm of God. Without it we humans can easily grow into nothing but corrupt power structures on one side, and on the other, silent suffering.

"They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace."
When I was in Ferguson in August I stood among over a thousand people who chanted, “No Justice, No Peace. No Justice, No Peace.” The march went down Canfield Avenue, the street where Michael Brown was killed. There in the middle of the road the dried blood of Michael Brown was still visible even while covered with flowers, candles, teddy bears. We all circled around. And when the march moved on, I stayed behind with a few dozen others; we stayed in the street.

It was loud. I remember a woman kneeling next to the memorial singing Amazing Grace and right behind me was a boom box playing the 70’s disco tune “Ain’t No Stoppin Us Now...We’re on the Move!” People were talking and others were crying, some were laughing and others were praying. There was no single focus to the group. People were doing their own thing, but what we all had in common is that everyone clearly needed to be near this spot.

At that moment a woman came up to me and asked me (probably because I was wearing my clerical collar), “What are you thinking? Where is God?”

And I pointed toward the lamenting praise of the hymn Amazing Grace next to blood stains and the flowers and then pointed back toward the toe tapping boldness of “Ain't No Stoppin Us Now”. All this beauty and all this horror blaring at us all at once. The tension. God lives and thrives in this tension. Right here. This cacophony is the sound of churning hell into beloved community.
Frederick Douglass said that power concedes nothing without a demand. And the people are demanding that the power structures awaken to their exploitative ways.

I don’t work in law enforcement and I have great respect for those who who aspire to be highly effective in the work while doing it with poise and restraint. I’ve heard stories of protesters in Ferguson who have stood face to face with the police line and certain officers have quietly said under their breath, “Keep doing what you are doing. Don’t give up.”

When we are asking for an indictment, we are not actually asking for guilt. Indictment does not mean guilt. An indictment just means that there is enough evidence to warrant having a trial, to hear all of the evidence, that’s all. But it seems to me that what we really need is not a trial for an individual officer, we need a trial for the entire judicial and law enforcement system, to present the evidence for racial profiling, for mass incarceration, for the training that officers receive in the use of deadly force. We need a way to hold the entire system on trial, for the benefit of all who serve the system and all who would be served by the system.

But as summer 2014 turns into fall and into winter, It doesn’t look like we can have one trial that will improve the whole system and right this terrible wrong. Rather, it looks like we are all going to have to fight this locally, from all the corners of this country simultaneously, to shine a right light upon the abuses of power that keep us all from being the kind of community and the kind of nation that we say we are. And it occurs to me that his might be how the Black Lives Matter movement today is different from the Civil Rights movement of the 60’s. There is not one charismatic personality at the center of this thing, the way that Dr. King was. Michael Brown’s death was not just a moment, but a movement and the movement is shaped by ordinary people bacting together to draw attention to local injustices and abuses of power.

We need the tension. We need the police to speak their truth and we need the people to speak their truth. We need the tension on the way to positive peace. We need a way to hold the tension that exists between the power structure and the people so we can find our way toward justice.
This is what it is to wake up. It is like we are living in a dream world and when the light of day pierces through the window, we wake up. We see with our well-rested eyes the truth that was not seen before. “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

When have you woken up to such a truth in your personal life? For many people it is what happens in relationships, believing that your partner or your parent had an idealized place in your life, only to wake up and see things with clarity, that person was not the perfect person, that person may have knowingly done harm. The trust is broken. Perhaps waking up means that you see that you are the person who has done harm, that you are the person who is not the idealized innocent you always imagined.

Just know that it is the privileged people of the world who are waking up, ok? The people in the corner are not waking up because they have never slept. While we dream, generations have cycled through and all the while the people in the corner have been living this nightmare in silence, confident of one thing only: that no one wants to hear their sob story.

We are harmed. We cause harm. We are human. Meg Riley says “We are all such a mix of stardust and broken glass. “And we treat the wounds carelessly saying ‘peace, peace’ when there is there is no peace.” (Jer 6:14)
We could say that true peace, positive peace, Shalom is of the realm of God. This is the Peace of God, the peace that passes all understanding. Yet if this peace of God is to come to us, it will ironically not come to us from the house of God.

Peace will only come into our world by of that other house, from the troubled one you saw. That’s right. Peace is being born from that shadowy room: from the neglected, forgotten, left to rot corner. Peace is being born from the tension. Peace is being born through the street memorials, the protests, die-ins, marches, mall closures, traffic blockades. Peace is being born through the black mothers who labor and scream: “Enough!” Enough of mistaking order for peace. Enough of saying peace, peace, when there is no peace.

We lament through our days asking, “Just how long must we wait? How long must we pray for peace in blood stained streets? How long must we walk in the valley of the shadow of death? Be with me, the voices cry out, be with me Lord. I am afraid and I am waiting, so be with me and anoint my head with oil, and prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Just be with me. Do not abandon me. Be with me until I remember once again what you promised me: how goodness and mercy will follow me for the rest of my days and I will walk in the house of God forever."
The tension is real and we are wrestling through it, led by visionary youth activists of color around the country. And the wrestling may sound like civil disobedience for some, but for people of privilege the wrestling might sound like wondering if racism even exists. Wrestling can sound like worrying about the safety of police officers and the fear of black people’s rage. The wrestling can sound like wondering if resisting arrest is justification for the use of deadly force, wondering if they deserved it. The wrestling can sound like wishing all this tension would just be orderly again. These are not views that I agree with, but I’m glad to see so many people wrestling with racism and trying to make sense of it all. I’m glad to see that these deaths that have been newsworthy for decades are finally making the headlines.

Desmond Tutu said that “If we are neutral on situations of injustice then we have chosen the side of the oppressor”. So let us not be neutral. Let us wrestle with racism like Jacob wrestling with the angel on the riverbank all through the night until the morning light comes and he can finally get the blessing of his new name. In the morning Jacob will now be called “Israel”, he who has wrestled with God.

Let us wrestle until we are living on the right side of history, wrestle until we overcome, until we make hell into beloved community, until we are given a new name. Let us be hungry for Peace and worthy of the blessing.