

Voices: Atatiana Jefferson matters, and so does the church's response

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Atatiana Jefferson, affectionately known by her friends as “Tay,” was a 28-year-old African American woman who was shot and killed by a Fort Worth police officer before dawn on Saturday, Oct. 12, while she was inside her house with her 8-year-old nephew.

What happened to Atatiana Jefferson matters

A concerned neighbor, after he noticed the Jeffersons' front doors were open uncharacteristically—though the screen doors were closed—called the Fort Worth Police Department's non-emergency number to request a welfare check.

The police arrived on the scene, parked around the corner from the Jefferson residence, approached the house as if they were responding to an intruder call, bypassed the front door and went to the dark backyard. When Atatiana looked out the back window, one of the officers shot her through the window.

News of Atatiana's tragic death spread like wildfire across Fort Worth's African American community.

Who Atatiana Jefferson was matters

Atatiana was a young woman full of possibility and potential. She graduated from Xavier University in New Orleans, where she was a biology major. She was gainfully employed as a pharmaceutical equipment salesperson.

Atatiana was so dedicated to her family that she moved back home to help care for her ailing mother.

Her life was cut short by a person whose job it was to “protect and serve.”

How we feel about this matters

The person who killed Atatiana no longer is on the police force. He has been arrested, charged with murder and is out on bond.

His arrest and the charges leveled against him do nothing to assuage the grief or mitigate the angst of African Americans, not just in Fort Worth, but across the length and breadth of America.

Why we feel this way matters

As I write this, I’m in Chicago, and throughout my stay here, I’ve heard and engaged in numerous conversations about the killing of Ms. Jefferson. As an African American pastor, I have been asked by white pastors and laypersons why there is so much anger, even after the arrest of the former police officer who pulled the trigger that ended Atatiana’s promise.

One response I have given to those well-intentioned inquisitors is: African Americans are informed by a hermeneutic of suspicion. There is versed skepticism in my community regarding the American justice system, skepticism born out of experience. We have been here before.

It's important to pay attention to these matters

Atatiana's death at the hands of police has brought into the open the exasperation, frustration and distrust that has been seething just below the surface of public awareness. Her death brings to the fore so many inequities.

We perceive a willful indifference on the part of many in the white community about past and present inequities and racist practices that militate against so-called minorities, particularly African Americans. We perceive resistance to us receiving adequate education, economic opportunity and equal justice.

What we feel and our perception of Atatiana's untimely death is built on the cumulative impact of the intense racial violence visited on African Americans since before the Mayflower.

The killing of Atatiana is another "last straw" that contributes to the stress on racial relations in this country.

Atatiana matters, who she was matters, what happened to her matters, how we feel about this and why matters, and inasmuch as the church is the earthly representative of Atatiana's Creator, what the church does matters. The church cannot afford to sit this one out.

The church has a role in this that matters

What can the church do in these situations besides pray and host periodic interracial worship services?

There are many Jesus strategies the church can employ to help move us away from current racial tensions. One strategy is to learn about race. Books by [Robin DiAngelo](#) and others are good starting places for those willing to learn.

Beyond reading, there is one thing the church must do if America is to reclaim its prophetic voice. The church must emulate Jesus Christ and speak up for the marginalized, the underserved and those who are excluded systematically from full participation in the American dream.

If the church chooses not to confront a culture of inequity, it runs the risk of becoming increasingly irrelevant.

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