

Black Lives Matter, part 1

“Colorblind No More”

Dumbarton UMC

Black Lives Matter. A movement that started as a hashtag on twitter in the wake of Trayvon Martin’s killer being acquitted. (wikipedia)

Black Lives Matter. A call to end police brutality.

Black Lives Matter. A reminder that racism persists.

But... But...

I can hear her now, my good friend I’ll call Q. Q with a heart of gold and stubborn as all get out. Q who truly believes in Martin Luther King’s dream of a world of equality. Q who sincerely believes she is not racist. Q who befriends everyone she meets.

I can hear Q saying — it should NOT be “Black Lives Matter.” It should be “All Lives Matter” because if you say Black Lives Matter you are focusing on the differences not the commonalities Lots of people are saying that it should be “All Lives Matter.” Many from sincere visions of a world where race no longer matters.

But that’s the problem — it is a vision of a world where race no longer matters. A vision which is not today’s reality. Today, race does matter. Today, race makes a difference in people’s lives, day in and day out.

African American students comprise 14% of Pre-K enrollment and yet account for 48% of out-of-school suspensions of Pre-K students. (

<http://www.thenation.com/article/14-disturbing-stats-about-racial-inequality-american-public-schools/>)

African Americans comprise 13% of the US population, and are 14% of monthly drug users and yet African Americans are 57% of the people in

state prisons for drug offenses. (<https://www.dosomething.org/facts/11-facts-about-racial-discrimination>)

An Urban Insititute data analysis found that mortgage denial rates from government-sponsored servicers are higher for black applicants with bad credit than for white applicants with bad credit.

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/02/civil-rights-act-anniversary-racism-charts_n_5521104.html)

Young white men with felony convictions are more likely to get called back after a job interview than young black men with similar qualifications and clean records, a 2003 study published in the American Journal of Sociology found. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/02/civil-rights-act-anniversary-racism-charts_n_5521104.html)

Applicants with white-sounding names get one callback per 10 resumes sent while those with African-American-sounding names get one callback per 15 resumes, according to a 2003 National Bureau of Economic Research report. "Based on our estimates," the researchers wrote, "a White name yields as many more callbacks as an additional eight years of experience." http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/02/civil-rights-act-anniversary-racism-charts_n_5521104.html)

In New York City, 80% of the stops police made were blacks and Latinos, and 85% of those people were frisked, compared to a mere 8% of white people stopped. (<https://www.dosomething.org/facts/11-facts-about-racial-discrimination>)

In analyzing the US Department of Justice's report on racial profiling, the American Civil Liberties Union makes these observations:

The report found that blacks and Hispanics were roughly three times as likely to be searched during a traffic stop, blacks were twice as likely to be arrested and blacks were nearly four times as likely to experience the

threat or use of force during interactions with the police. AND missing from the Dept of Justice report is the fact that though blacks and Hispanics were searched more frequently, they were less likely to be harboring contraband.

(<https://www.aclu.org/news/department-justice-statistics-show-clear-pattern-racial-profiling>)

For as long as these inequalities exist, there is partiality and privilege for white people in our country. For as long as these disparities exist, it is disingenuous to say All Lives Matter. For as long as there is inequity between people of color and white people then we need “Black Lives Matter.” We need this movement.

As we heard in this morning’s scripture lesson from the book of James: we are exhorted to not show partiality. The author was addressing a particular situation that was developing where the young church was following the same patterns of the surrounding culture by valuing rich people more than poor people. James was speaking to economic inequality and how we allow that inequality to shape how we treat people. Yet the same holds true for racial inequality and gender inequality and cultural inequality. Essentially scripture is calling us to an understanding of radical equity where all people are valued equally. As the above statistics show, there is significant disparity between people of color and white people. White people are the beneficiaries of partiality, which makes it all the more difficult for those of us who are white to understand the devastation racism causes for people of color.

Along about now, you may be thinking, yes, preacher. We get it. There are still systemic race issues in our country. We know this. But we aren’t racist. We are good people who do not use the “n” word, good people who are nice to anyone who is nice to us, good people who are committed to inclusion, good people who believe that Black Lives Matter, and Gay Lives

Matter, and trans lives matter, and blue lives matter. We are good people and surely if we could all just be nicer to each other all this racism would end!

Certainly being nice to everyone is decent and civilized, but in the case of racism, it is not enough. This approach perpetuates the idea that racism is simply unkind acts and words performed by individuals who should really know better. And as long as white people BELIEVE that racism is only an expression of individuals, then we fail to grasp and understand that our entire existence as people of privilege in this country is founded upon and sustained upon the bodies of Black people whom we have de-valued and killed and beaten and blamed. This heritage continues to this very day.

In his recently released book, “Between the World and Me,” Ta-nehisi Coates vividly describes how our country has been built only through the enslavement, exploitation, and oppression of Black people. While at the same time, Coates contends, that white people live in the “Dream” of our inherent nobility, freedom, worth, and goodness. Coates quotes Solzhenitsyn, “To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he’s doing is good, or else that it’s a well-considered act in conformity with natural law.” Coates goes on to say:

This is the foundation of the Dream — its adherents must not just believe in it but believe that it is just, believe that their possession of the Dream is the natural result of grit, honor, and good works. There is some passing acknowledgement of the bad old days, which, by the way, were not so bad as to have any ongoing effect on our present. The mettle that it takes to look away from the horror of our prison system, from police forces transformed into armies, from the long war against the black body, is not forged overnight. This is the practiced habit of jabbing out one’s eyes and forgetting the work of one’s hands. To acknowledge these horrors means turning away from the brightly rendered ver-

sion of your country as it has always declared itself and turning toward something murkier and unknown. It is still too difficult for most Americans to do this.

1

We have believed that this is greatest country on earth. We have believed that we are the shining example of democracy and honor and nobility. We claim that we have gotten where we are through our own individual hard work and determination. Refusing to see how the plundering of black bodies built much of this nation. The War on Drugs and privatized prisons means that black bodies are still exploited in order to pad the profits of mutual funds invested in the prison system. Believing in the myth of the individual shaping their own destiny, we in the Dream believe that if kids would just stay in school and pull their pants up then they would fit into this world. Refusing to see how inadequate education and under-funded schools push kids back to the streets to become fodder for the Drug War. And even when black children also believe in the Dream, and buckle down, work twice as hard, keep their hands clean, follow all the rules, it does not guarantee that they will be treated fairly or equally or with respect or even survive to old age. You may be a top notch tennis player waiting for your ride at the front of respectable hotel, as James Blake was on Wednesday of this week. When with no warning, no identification, no explanation, a plain clothes cop tackled him to the ground the hard, concrete sidewalk and handcuffed him. (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/12/nyregion/video-captures-new-york-officer-manhandling-tennis-star-during-arrest.html?_r=0) This does not happen to white people waiting for rides in front of their hotels. You may be moving to take a wonderful job that you are excited about and eager to begin, when you

¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Between the World and Me." New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015, p.98.

make a lane change and do not use your turning signal, only to be found dead in a jail cell three days later. As happened to Sandra Bland in Waller County, Texas. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/07/21/much-too-early-to-call-jail-cell-hanging-death-of-sandra-bland-suicide-da-says/>) White people are not arrested for failing to use a turn signal. White people do not sit in jail for three days following an arrest for failing to use a turn signal.

Black Lives Matter.

Black Lives Matter.

We have to wake up from the dream of our American exceptionalism. We have to understand that the racism which is flourishing in our country is far more insidious, evil, and complex than simply individual bigots being mean. We have to stop washing our hands of any responsibility because we personally, individually are nice to black people.

There is no simple solution. There is no easy fix. I can't give us answers. We have to take a long, hard look at our country and the experience of Black Americans under the status quo. And we need to be horrified, outraged, appalled, despairing. And we need to sit with this reality and these emotions until convicted. And we need to be a witness that Black Lives Matter and are precious in the eyes of God.

Black Lives Matter.

Mary Kay Totty

Sept. 13, 2015