

Whose Lives Matter?

A Meditation for Wednesday evening, 16 September 2020

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Tonight we continue our six part series on the Bible and racism with the question, “Whose Lives Matter?”

Unless you’ve been living in a cave for the past several years, you have heard the phrase Black Lives Matter. It’s a hashtag. It’s a loose and decentralized organization. And, it’s a movement that began in 2013 when a man named George Zimmerman was acquitted in the shooting death of a young black teenager named Trayvon Martin, who was walking home from a convenience store.

The movement has grown with each succeeding death of black people at the hands of police. But as the movement has grown, so has a sort of backlash.

This summer there have been street protests around the country following the killing of George Floyd – an unarmed black man - at the hands of police in Minneapolis, and Breonna Taylor, shot in her apartment in an unannounced police raid. At those protests, it was not uncommon to see counter protesters with signs that read, “Blue Lives Matter,” signifying support for police or “All Lives Matter,” a sort of accusation that the Black Lives Matter movement was exclusive.

Of course it isn’t hard to get into a heated argument in these divided time of our, and often we hear what we have been conditioned to hear. Those who see in the phrase “Black Lives Matter” as a call for equal justice, hear that phrase like this: “Black Lives Matter too!”

But some hear instead, “Only Black Lives Matter.”

In view of the racial animus that has plagued us for so long, it might be good for those of us who are in the white majority to ask ourselves why “Black Lives Matter” seems threatening to some of us. After all, there can be little doubt that in the history of this country, particularly here in the South, black lives have not mattered as much as white lives.

Last year I led a group of people from around our synod to the Equal Justice Institute's National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. If you haven't seen this memorial, you owe it to yourself to see it. It is stunning.

The memorial consists of dozens of steel obelisks, one for each county in which at least one lynching of an African descent person was known to have happened. The names of the victims in that county are etched into the rust-orange metal of the obelisks.

There is one for Williamson County, Tennessee with the names Jim Walker, Calvin Beatty, John Thomas, Amos Miller and Jim Taylor. Five men were lynched here in this county.

Around the walls of the memorial are panels with the names of the victims of some of those lynchings and the nature of their crimes. Here are a few:

In 1898, in Hernando County, FL, Arthur St. Clair, an African-American minister was lynched for performing the wedding of a black man and a white woman.

In 1884, in Calhoun County, GA, after Calvin Mike voted, a white mob attacked and burned his home, lynching his elderly mother and his two young daughters Emma and Lillie.

In 1933, Elizabeth Lawrence was lynched in Birmingham, AL for reprimanding white children who had thrown rocks at her.

In 1948, Robert Mallard was lynched in Lyons, GA for voting.

It goes on and on.

And all the lynching wasn't in the south. In Millerburg, Ohio, a man was lynched for "standing around" in a white neighborhood.

In 1920 in Duluth, MN, three carnival workers, Elias Clayton, Isaac McGhie and Elmer Jackson were removed from jail where they were suspects in an assault case, and lynched by a mob of thousands of people.

In almost none of these lynching cases was anyone ever tried and convicted. In more than a few cases, white families were photographed picnicking at the sites of the lynchings, with the bodies of the victims still

hanging from nearby trees or power poles. Photos of the marred and often burned and mutilated bodies were sold as souvenirs. In one lynching, which took place just a few miles from where I was born, parts of the body of the lynching victim were sold in an Atlanta store.

In few if any of these lynching cases were there any repercussions for perpetrators. In fact, law enforcement and judicial officials often took part.

So you can see why some might think that black lives haven't mattered as much as other lives. Because they haven't. And however much we might like to deny it or ignore it, it is part of our history, a part that continues to this very day.

"Black Lives Matter" may be a word we need to hear. Rather than being defensive about the indefensible, and protesting that all lives matter, maybe we need to acknowledge the reality that, up until now, not all lives have mattered equally.

To say "Black Lives Matter" is not to say that other lives don't matter. It is to say that we are a society which needs to confess and to make amends for a past in which black bodies were not counted for much except for labor. To say "Black Lives Matter" is to say that black lives haven't mattered as much to us as they should have.

Yes, all lives matter. This is most certainly true, but it isn't sufficient to say superficially, "All Lives Matter" when clearly some have mattered and continue to matter more than others.

All lives matter to us who follow Jesus because all lives matter to God who created all those lives and holds them all dear, who, in Jesus, died for the lives of all people.

All lives matter because we were all created in the image of God and called to love one another. And that means that if some lives matter less than they should, then things are not as God intends them and we are called and freed in Christ to acknowledge the wrong and to do what we can to right it.

In Galatians, St. Paul admonishes us who are Christians, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). When our African-American siblings are bearing the burdens of injustice, when their bodies and their lives are devalued and don't matter as

much to us as they do to their Creator, then we who would fulfill the law of Christ must help bear their burdens, take up their cause, come to their defense, fix what is broken in the society that perpetuates this inequality of value.

In his Small Catechism Martin Luther explained the meaning of the Fifth Commandment “You shall not kill,” like this: “We should fear and love God that we may not hurt nor harm our neighbor, but help and befriend him in every need and danger of life and body.” For us now, at this time, in this country that surely means that we ought to work for a time when to say “All lives matter” is a statement of fact and not a way of diminishing the pain some of our neighbors are experiencing.

Whose lives matter? All lives matter. But all lives don't matter as they should until black lives matter to all of us as much as they do to the God who made us all and loves us all.

