

Black Lives Matter

By Amber Fox

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Our faith is a faith that demands engagement. We are a people who are watching the news, following along. 4th Principle, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, means that you are folks familiar with the newspaper, podcasts, and Google. I am, today, preaching to the choir. Many of you have done a great deal of research leading up to the proposal to, as a church, publicly affirm that Black Lives Matter.

As I have read and digested information, watched the live feeds of major protests and marches in places both far and near to us, and mourned this nation's struggle, I have felt so lucky to have Unitarian Universalists to unpack this movement with.

Still, in this congregation we have been very slow and cautious in our unpacking. Many individual members have been involved or supportive, but as a church we have not yet vocally supported the Black Lives Matter movement and the Movement for Black Lives.

We have processed. We have had four previous sermons on Black Lives Matter and we have read about and discussed this movement in the adult RE classes. But we have been cautious to pick up this movement in our congregation, for a variety of reasons. That hesitancy has done harm. Some people have left this congregation over that pain, or never fully joined. Some sit with that pain, and continue to affiliate.

I do not bring that up to shame, but to underscore that this upcoming vote is very important because it has the ability to help our church stand united on the side of justice.

Downstairs, we often discuss the elevator speech, preparing kids to not only process but also feel comfortable explaining to a stranger or friend what Unitarian Universalism is. Us adults, we not only have to go out into the world and explain what Unitarian Universalism is, but we have to explain why we stand where we stand. On the side of justice.

This, racial justice in the United States, is our evangelism, just as LGBTQ or women's rights are. This is a conversation that we must be having with those around us. For those of you who are not yet having these conversations, this vote next week may change that. For this service I wanted to go over, in essence, a list of Frequently Asked Questions about the Black Lives Matter movement. Not just to you, but also for you.

As you find yourself in these conversations, your answers may be different than mine, as that is how the 4th principle works. But these are my answers, based on my research, reading, and conversations over the last decade.

And these questions, I suspect, are going to keep coming.

I would like to take a moment here to state that all of the information, the insights, and the positions that I am going to share here today are the result of the emotional labor of people of color who have taken time from their lives to explain, to give voice, and to write. The positions I am voicing here are not my intuitions but a result of hard processing on the part of people of color, and for that I am grateful.

Question: What is Black Lives Matter?

Black Lives Matter is a hashtag and a movement. It was created as a vehicle for an intersectional conversation about race, and as a demand and plea. We will watch a short video about the three founders in a bit. It is a movement that campaigns against violence and systemic racism.

Black Lives Matter is part of the larger Movement for Black Lives. The Movement for Black Lives has put out a huge platform calling for system wide reform to allow people of color to experience justice in America.

Question: Are we in the middle of a new civil rights movement?

In the last decade our country has begun a real and concrete transformation into what appears to be a second civil rights movement. In 2008 - Obama was elected. White America suddenly was pushed into a conversation about race. We saw an increase in white supremacy groups, including here in Greene County. 2009 - Henry Louis Gates was arrested. Black people were telling white people that they were being targeted, and this example made headlines. 2010 - The New Jim Crow was published, and a whole lot of the racial disparity of the criminal justice system was suddenly in focus. 2012 - Trayvon Martin was shot. 2013 - George Zimmerman was acquitted.

And suddenly, in a merger of cell phone cameras and social media, white America witnessed the violence that had been occurring in our country, in our name, for generations. Some of these deaths were under questionable circumstances. Should the cop have waited for backup? Would an officer with more mental health training been able to deescalate the situation? Did implicit bias from the officers play a role? And then some of the deaths were clearly wrong. There was no blur. They were people, mostly black men, being killed unjustly.

Simultaneously, we have seen a racially charged change in our political movements in the United States. While people are standing up and demanding freedoms and an end to systemic violence, there are other people creating or holding space for an increase in racial tension. For the first time since the civil rights era a major political party - a party that *put a*

President in the Whitehouse - is openly trafficking off of racial tension and white supremacy.

There is a new civil rights movement unfolding, and Black Lives Matter is the protest/activism arm of that movement.

Question: Why Black Lives Matter? Why not, idk, All Lives Matter?

Because our nation, our community, is a place where the phrase Black Lives Matter is not self-evident. All Lives SHOULD Matter. For Unitarian Universalists it is in our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and it is in our seventh principle, the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. For me, and for many of you, service to the lives of others is our prayer. Yet, in this country currently, all lives are not treated equally. From the moment of birth, the experiences of citizens who are people of color are different than the experiences of white Americans.

The phrase All Lives Matter does not exist in a vacuum. It exists as in opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement. It was a phrase that was picked up by O'Reilly, Breitbart, and the rest. It was a way of saying Be Silent. It was a way of dismissing the Movement for Black Lives, and the push for racial justice in this country. In the same way that I am not going to try and claim to be Pro-Life, even though I am in favor of and supportive of LIFE, I can't say All Lives Matter - that is a phrase that the right took. And dang it, I can love with all my heart, but if I use that phrase, it means something else now.

This new civil rights movement has several slogans. I Can't Breathe. Hands Up, Don't Shoot. No Justice, No Peace. Black Lives Matter is the one that is most common and most inclusive.

Question: What about white people? White people are also killed by the police, right?

There are two simultaneous conversations occurring. One is about the criminal justice system, and the way that a militarized police force impacts citizens. The other is about race and the way that people of color, specifically black people, are disproportionately targeted and oppressed by this system. The reforms to the criminal justice system that are being fought for will help everyone, absolutely. But this is also an issue of systemic racism on every cultural level. In education, in employment, on the street.

Question: We made such major improvements as a culture. We even elected a black President. How much racism still exists today?

The statistics are clear. From the moment of birth, children of color are treated differently than white children. Children of color receive different NICU care than white children, even within the same grade of hospital.¹ It continues through preschool discipline, when preschoolers are more likely to be disciplined when they are black children, especially black boys, and research shows that difference is a result of the implicit bias of the teachers.² As children grow to adults, this continues. Although the data shows that white people and black people smoke marijuana at very similar rates, people of color are arrested at 3.73 times the rate for marijuana possession as white folks.³

We could pull data all day. There are differences in the medical field, in employment, in criminal prosecution. As factors converge, we have a culture that values and protects the experiences and lives of white people in a

¹ <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2017/08/24/peds.2017-0918>

² <http://ziglercenter.yale.edu/publications/briefs.aspx>

³

<https://www.aclu.org/report/report-war-marijuana-black-and-white?redirect=criminal-law-reform/war-marijuana-black-and-white>

more direct way than the lives of black people. The lives of black people are at risk and treated as less valuable than the lives of white people.

It is this systemic racism that leads people to march, to protest. It is this systemic racism that is a direct contradiction to our 1st principle struggle to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Question: But what about how violent the protests are?

The marches and demonstrations that have occurred over the last few years have been, predominantly, peaceful. The organizers of the Black Lives Matter movement are peaceful. Peaceful does not mean passive. They call for clear and deliberate actions. Just as the civil rights movement of the 60s had both peaceful marches and angry protests, the current era has both. People died in the protests of the sixties, and property damage was done. It didn't take away from Martin Luther King Jr's message or the truth of their cause. People are angry, people are scared. But Black Lives Matter and The Movement for Black Lives are peaceful organizations.

In the 1960s, the nation had Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. There is no one clear leader today. It is arguable in a world of social media, that a single person is no longer necessary. The Black Lives Matter hashtag and organization are, however, leaders in this struggle for peaceful justice.

I wanted to take a minute to let the founders of the movement speak for themselves.

[Hashtag Video.]

Question: But as a white person living in a mainly white town, insulated from racism, how am I supposed to help?

Often I hear people say “but I grew up in a tiny mostly (or entirely) white community!” The honest answer is that it doesn’t matter what YOUR experiences were. In the aftermath of 9/11, as wars were beginning, we didn’t need to know intimately a dozen Iraqi children to know that the bombs being sent over were a social justice issue. We don’t need to have drunk from the lead pipes of Detroit or to walk in the militarized police neighborhoods of LA to know that racial justice is worth standing up for.

And while this is a predominately white town, but it does not mean that there are not people of color here. There are people of color in our congregation. There are children of color downstairs. Making sure that those congregants know that they are loved, supported, and safe here is primary.

Also - we are a predominately white town, but we live in a state and a nation that is struggling. The weekly group that meets and holds Black Lives Matter signs at Glenstone and Battlefield are standing in solidarity with Black Lives Matter activists in St. Louis who gather in remembrance and protest of the death of Anthony Lamar Smith and the acquittal of the officer who killed him. That officer, for those of you who are unfamiliar, was videotaped on camera telling his fellow officer that he was going to kill Smith before he got out of the vehicle, and then killed Smith.

I have gone down and stood with them on a Sunday afternoon. People driving past are angry. As angry as I, a kid who came up on protests, have seen folks. They really *really* don’t like seeing a sign that says that black lives matter.

Josh, a member of this church, has been highly involved at those protests. He is going to share some of his experiences at this protest.

[Josh Speaks.]

Thank you, Josh.

Springfield is struggling, folks. We as a nation are struggling.

In 2015 the UUA voted to support the Black Lives Matter movement. Just because the UUA votes for something DOES NOT MEAN that we as a church must do that same thing. That is very foundational to the Unitarian Universalist faith. In this case, I think we should - absolutely - do this thing.

In 2016 there was a meeting where thousands of organizers met and formed the Movement for Black Lives. It includes the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as fifty other organizations. It is their platform that has been widely circulated and studied as a roadmap for this movement.

This is a fundamental civil rights issue, and it is so SO important that we use our voice now. This is not only a struggle forward. We are now at a moment when white supremacy and white nationalism are on the rise.

I would encourage, over the next week, for all of you to take whatever time you need to research this so that you are comfortable with the vote on Sunday. Thank you for taking the time to be here, in this church I so love, today.