

Black Lives Matter

Children's Story:

The story of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby, retold from Central African and American Slave stories

Readings:

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37)

"The still pilgrim considers a hard teaching" by Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

I see so many amazing signs at marches for justice and human rights. Here are a few that have stood out to me:

"I am done accepting the things I cannot change, and have begun changing the things I cannot accept"—Angela Davis

This is what Patriotism Looks Like

Science is Real

Respect Existence or Expect Resistance

And

Black Lives Matter

Yes, even at a women's march. Because it doesn't matter what the march is for, or what rights we are hoping to uphold with our activism. Seeking all our rights, we are called to remember and proclaim that Black Lives Matter.

On February 26, 2012, George Zimmerman shot and killed unarmed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in their Florida neighborhood. A year and a half later, Zimmerman was acquitted of murder, and the Black Lives Matter movement was born.

Three African American women created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. Black Lives Matter became a national and then international movement in 2014 when street demonstrations followed the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in New York City, both African American men killed by police. Local chapters emerged nationwide. Black Lives Matter is now a politically active organization with specific policy goals, some of which I'll talk about later.

But I want to start where three powerful and fed up African American organizers began in 2013, and lay out the moral clarity and challenge to white America of this simple, three-word sentence: Black Lives Matter.

I want to start with one particular Black life: Tamir Rice. Tamir was an 12-year-old boy shot by a policeman while Tamir was playing with a toy gun. The officer didn't even hesitate before shooting the boy. Black Lives Matter asks us to feel that, whatever our race, Tamir is our child, and his parents' grief our grief.

Tamir Rice was playing in a Cleveland park with a toy gun, much as my sons or your children might play. The black gun was missing the small orange tab that clearly marked it as a toy. A bystander was concerned, not for their safety, but for Tamir's—if someone thought that gun was real, the boy could be in real trouble! The bystander called 911 and told the dispatcher that a boy was pointing a gun at people in a park—but the caller also said that the boy was young, and that the gun was probably a toy. The caller said that twice.

Dispatch did not pass those details on to two Cleveland police officers. The officers arrived at the park, and within seconds they shot Tamir. He never even knew what had happened. Tamir Rice died the next day.

A grand jury declined to indict the officers, saying that “Given this perfect storm of human error, mistakes, and communications by all involved that day, the evidence did not indicate criminal conduct by police.” The city must have realized that justice was needed, however. Tamir’s family brought a wrongful death lawsuit against the police, which the City of Cleveland settled for \$6M. Despite this, the officers were not held accountable for their killing of an innocent child.

Feel this grief. An innocent child was killed thoughtlessly by a police officer, sworn to serve and protect. This child is like all our children. Feel this grief.

It is so clear to us that this one Black life matters. So why is the simple, moral statement Black Lives Matter such a challenge to White America? Black Lives Matter brings the racism of our society right in front of our eyes.

Black Lives Matter ought to be easy to affirm. It's right there in our principles that every person has inherent worth and dignity. Our country is founded on the belief that each person has an inalienable right to life. We know that each life matters. We know our own lives matter. Some of us in America and in our churches are Black. So Black Lives Matter. It's so obviously true.

Yet it is just as obviously divisive and provoking for White America. Black Lives Matter signs are defaced or torn down. Black Lives Matter protests spark rage. Some White people would rather say, “All Lives Matter,” as though that’s not already part of what Black Lives Matter is saying. The reaction to this simple, clear, moral, three-word statement shows us how

complicated and terrible the problem of racism is in our society. It shows us that racism is a paradox.

I led a race and racism book and movie discussion last year which learned about this paradox. On the one hand, we found, differences in skin color and culture are visible, and people use those differences to divide themselves and others into groups. Those divisions, combined with historical patterns of power and privilege, create prejudiced feelings and oppressive public policy.

On the other hand, once a person begins to examine race difference, she sees it is an illusion based on tiny differences of skin color and culture. If you lined up everyone in the world by skin color, from the darkest South African or South Indian on one end to the palest Icelander on the other, you would find that you could not determine where one “race” ended and another began. You would not be able to find physical traits that meant one race and one race only. Scientists have found that there are no meaningful genetic markers for race, and that superficial differences like skin color or eye shape change in only a few generations, and have no relationship to ability or character. Race difference is an illusion.

So this is the paradox: racial difference doesn’t exist, and yet racial difference is one of the most violent fault lines in our society.

Those of us who want to overcome racism are caught in this paradox. We think it ought to be a problem like the Good Samaritan, where all we have to do is remember to be good people and everything will get better. We just need to remember, in our interpersonal reactions, to avoid being racist, we think, and that will overcome racism. We want to respond to MLK’s Dream: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in

a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

But racism isn't always a problem like that. Racism is sometimes problem like the Tar Baby, where every effort to engage gets us stuck. It is sometimes a problem that we cannot overcome on our own. To work toward an anti-racist society, we have to be willing to get into the messy reality of human nature. We have to be willing to risk getting stuck ourselves so that together we can get free.

The world we live in is messy and sticky, and any effort we make is likely to take us only part of the way. Yet taking a step forward is better than standing still. The Black Lives Matter movement offers some solutions.

One project of the Black Lives Matter movement is Campaign Zero (<https://www.joincampaignzero.org/>). Campaign Zero is an effort to reform policing in America. It includes increased training—some officers receive only a few hours of training of any kind every year!—alternatives to force, increased community oversight of police departments, body camera use by officers, and demilitarization of the police. You can sign up to be a part of Campaign Zero, and connect with the initiatives that will make the most sense in your area. Thanks to the Black Lives Matter movement, we can all work together on the sticky problem of racism in our communities.

Just because a problem is sticky doesn't mean it's impossible. There are practical steps we can take. But we could make progress on all our goals, and all of Campaign Zero's goals, and still face racism. We need incremental progress. But we dream a bigger dream than one policy, or one election, or one increment of progress.

We need help from a trickster god like Brer Rabbit, someone who can get into this messy paradox with us, a spirit who can help us work against the reality of racial prejudice while also knowing in our hearts that race is an illusion. We need a new awareness, a new consciousness, a new spirit in our hearts. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream, but now Black leaders are asking White people to wake up from a dream of whiteness.

Our society needs to wake up from the dream that “whiteness” is a thing or that Black children aren’t our children. Anti-racism isn’t about bringing people of color up the ladder of race until they’re indistinguishable from white people. It’s about giving up on whiteness as a source of privilege and recognizing we’re all in this together.

It’s saying Black Lives Matter and knowing that it already means All Lives Matter. It’s weeping at the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice because they’re *our* children. It’s trusting that even when our cultural experiences are different, our common humanity binds us together. It’s abandoning a system of power and privilege based on race, even if—especially if—we benefit from that system. Black Lives Matter *and* All Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter *because* All Lives Matter. Black Lives need our love and solidarity. We dream the dream of a world without race, and we work for justice every day until we get there.