

Naming Lives That Matter

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September 20, 2015

Readings

Jonah 4:5-11

These closing verses from chapter 4 of the book of Jonah (a traditional reading for the high holy day of Yom Kippur) describe what the story tells us happened to Jonah after he had first refused God's command to preach to the people of Nineveh about their evil ways and inevitable destruction, after Jonah then sailed as far away as he could from Nineveh, after the shipwreck and his time in the belly of the whale, and after finally giving up and preaching to the people of Nineveh, who, much to Jonah's distress, repented of their sins so that God did *not* destroy them as He had threatened to do.

Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

from *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Ta-Nehisi Coates, an African American man, has written this book in the form of a letter to his 15-year-old son. Here is a brief passage:

When Abraham Lincoln declared, in 1863, that the battle of Gettysburg must ensure "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth," he was not merely being aspirational; at the onset of the Civil War, the United States of America had one of the highest rates of suffrage in the world. The question is not whether Lincoln truly meant "government of the people" but what our country has, throughout its history, taken the political term "people" to actually mean. In 1863 it did not mean your mother or your grandmother and it did not mean you and me. Thus America's problem is not its betrayal of "government of the people," but the means by which "the people" acquired their names.

Sermon

In the summer edition of our denominational magazine, the “UU World”, we read the story of Raziq Brown, a 25-year-old African American man who was detained by police when they found him napping at the Montessori school where he works nights as custodian... and which his mother directs. Police – one white and one black – refused to look at Raziq’s school I.D. or keys. Polite at every moment of the encounter, Raziq was nevertheless handcuffed and questioned until finally his mother arrived and verified his story.

The next day Raziq posted this on Facebook:

“Young black women and men are shot by cops for ‘resisting arrest’ all the time. I can’t fully express how scary it is when a man with a gun tells you ‘you’re fighting and trying to walk away from me’ as you stand still, attempting to comply. I almost got arrested for taking a break at work while black – and that is not okay.”

Another sort of example of what it is like to be a black man in the United States today.

Perhaps some of you saw the interview this week on the PBS News Hour with physician Damon Tweed, author of the new book *Black Man in a White Coat*. During the interview he shared a personal story. He had hurt his knee somehow and showed up at a doctor’s office still in sweat pants and casual shirt. The doctor, who was white, never looked him in the face, cursorily examined his knee, said it was fine, and waved him on his way. Until Dr. Tweed told him he, too, was a physician. Then... everything changed. The doctor looked right at him, did a more thorough exam, and prescribed treatment.

Really, what more do we need to know about the need for the “Black Lives Matter” slogan and movement than such stories, stories added to those with far more tragic endings that we know all too well?

It would of course be wonderful if I could stand before you today and together we could celebrate a post-racial and post-racist America. But this simply is not possible. Granted that there have been huge changes for the good in our nation during and since the Civil Rights movement of the fifties and sixties... but not everything has changed, not by a long way. From wildly different rates of incarceration to enormous differentials in income and family assets to inequalities in hiring, bank lending, and, finally, but by no means least, story after story like Raziq’s and Dr. Tweed’s, like Michael Brown’s and Eric Garner’s... it is clear, isn’t it, that we do need to affirm that black lives matter, since by so many measures it would seem that in our nation they matter far less than other lives.

It is of course not at all that black lives matter more than any other lives – white, brown, yellow, red. Rather, this naming that “*black* lives matter” is necessary because for hundreds of years in our nation black lives have been treated as *less* valuable than white. Most certainly during the centuries of slavery. With equal certainty during the decades of Jim Crow and legal discrimination. But too often, still, today.

As we know, when the “Black Lives Matter” movement began last year in the wake of events in Ferguson and elsewhere, many (mostly white) people rushed to substitute or add that “all lives matter.” Democratic candidates for president among them... who were quickly brought up quite short.

I understand the rush to add that “*all* lives matter,” I understand the wish that we didn’t have to single out and name this or that group of people. After all, our own Unitarian Universalist principles begin by affirming the inherent worth and dignity of *every* person, our way of declaring that “*all* lives matter.” Christians and others often affirm that we are all children of one God, yet another way of saying that “*all* lives matter.”

But a challenge lingers. How do we put such affirmations that *all* lives matter, that *all* are children of God, that *all* have inherent worth and dignity, into practice in a world that holds manifest inequalities of human experience and treatment based on such things as skin color, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender identification, religious affiliation, and so on... suggesting that some lives matter more than others?

How? We need to get specific, that’s how.

Jesus *named* those who were not treated equally, named in words those in prison, those who were hungry, those who were sick, as members of his family; and he named others through his actions, sitting at the table with those considered by society at large to be sinners – tax collectors, prostitutes, and others. Jesus *named* specifically that those lives mattered: mattered as much as – not more than, but as much as other lives, all lives. He *named* those lives because the society of his time was failing to treat those lives as if they mattered equally with all lives.

In the last century Mahatma Gandhi, mostly remembered as a leader of the Indian independence movement and teacher (by powerful example) of non-violence, re-named the lowest of the low in India, those who had been called “untouchables” – quite literally outcastes, not members of any of the traditional caste groups, relegated to the dirtiest work of cleaning up after everyone else, handling dead animals, and so on.

But Gandhi gave them a new name, the name “Harijan” – which means children of God.

In that naming he dramatically drew attention to the plight of the untouchables, who had been terribly mistreated by those of higher caste for centuries, drew attention and began in that way to transform millions of lives, to offer dignity where there had been shame, full humanity – not more humanity than others, but full humanity – to those who had been treated as less than human.

That struggle continues in India, just as our struggle for full civil rights and equal treatment for all continues in our nation; but progress has been made, even as those formerly known as “untouchables” often now prefer to be named (their choice of course after all) “Dalit” – which means “broken” or “oppressed”.

Another example, this much closer to home: A little over twenty years ago we had a guest preacher who came to talk about the Unitarian Universalist Association's new "Welcoming Congregation" program, a program designed to help congregations become more explicitly welcoming to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. He was well-received. But in subsequent conversations among Old Ship leaders and others, the resolve was to become more welcoming to everyone, not just specifically to one group of people.

So... nothing much came of it.

But a year or two later, after I preached a sermon titled "Gay is Okay", the moment somehow had ripened, become more propitious for our shared understanding that for those who would understandably assume they would probably *not* be welcomed in a church of any kind, it was necessary to offer an explicit and particular welcome – to *name* who it was our welcome included.

Most of you know the rest of the story. Over the course of several years of education and advocacy I think it's fair to say we did indeed become more welcoming specifically to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people; and I think in the process – and by no means incidentally – became more welcoming generally. So a little later we naturally became involved as a congregation in the marriage equality movement; and can be proud to have been part of such dramatic social change in such a relatively brief time.

You see, my title which *named* that "Gay is Okay" didn't and was not meant to imply that "straight is not okay" or that "gay" is better – it just meant that being gay is as okay as being straight, and that someone who is gay deserves the same welcome and the same rights as anyone else.

And a final example for this morning. Today, this season, in a similar spirit with all I've been saying, with all these varied stories, we do well to *name* those who are fleeing war and violence in Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere, to name them quite specifically, to hear their stories quite specifically... and not just lump these tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of human beings, children, women, men, into general – and potentially demeaning – categories of refugee or migrant. For once we allow this flow of millions to become personal, by *naming* who it is we are talking about – we can no longer turn away. For each of these millions of lives – of course, we know this – matters as much as ours or anyone's. Refugees lives matter.

Naming lives that matter. Which leads to our noticing how some are treated as if they mattered less, and all too often simply because of the color of their skin or ethnic origin or religion... and so on.

As Ta-Nehisi Coates put it in the reading, the challenge in our nation as it long has been, has to do with who we understand to be included, truly and fully included in those two simple words: "the people."

His book, written as I noted earlier, as a letter to his 15-year-old son, is a searing memoir of his own life growing up as a black man and all that we know that can mean and did mean for him; the book is at the same time a searing indictment of our society, yet also a challenge to us to create a nation where "the people" really does mean all the

people, a nation not based on inequalities and what he calls the plundering of everything from black bodies to the earth itself, all in the name of what may seem to be progress, but could be leading us to an abyss.

On the Jewish calendar we approach Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is, as it is sometimes put, a time for turning, for turning away from ways we've failed to live up to our ideals, to our full humanity, and turning towards ways more deeply aligned with those ideals, with our humanity.

What better time, then, to consider individually and collectively how we might be among those who ensure that though of course *all* lives matter – we can best create a nation in which all lives are treated as if they mattered equally (because they do) by *naming* the lives that matter yet for too long have been treated as mattering less?

Black Lives Matter.

Which does not mean, and not at all incidentally, that *police* lives do not matter – for they matter a great deal, and the vast majority of police officers in our communities do their hard and sometimes very dangerous work with dedication, skill, and compassion.

Finally:

We heard earlier the reading from Jonah. Jonah who was more than hesitant to bring prophetic words to those terrible people of Nineveh, Jonah who was then so disappointed when the people of Nineveh actually repented and changed their ways, and so were not smited as he thought they ought to have been smited. Jonah whose view of the world was very narrow indeed.

The message for us from the reading? Well, whatever else can be gleaned from this rich little story:

Let's try not to be like Jonah, even though we may understandably sometimes feel like Jonah!

Instead, let's speak prophetically whenever and wherever we can, in settings small or large... speak truth to power about inequality and injustice in our nation and in the world. At the same time, may we be prepared as well, as Jonah was not, to recognize and honor those who do change their ways.

We are, after all, in the end and always, in this life together.

So may it be.