

Lives Matter

Luke 10:38-42

There are a number of people in this world who, for a variety of reasons, believe that their lives don't matter. On a personal level, we see it with those who suffer from low self-esteem—a condition often related to one's upbringing or place in life, or some traumatic experience, or perhaps even mental illness. Whatever the underlying cause, each day a sufferer lives with the outlook and perception that their presence in the world doesn't matter to others. That is such a pathetic and difficult place to be, emotionally and spiritually. In such cases, persistent love, encouragement, and compassion, along with intervention of some sort, may be the only things that eventually turn such dispiritedness around for the better.

However, it's a different matter when you broaden it to where it describes entire populations who are convinced their lives don't matter because of who they are or where they're from or how they're profiled and treated in society. They may not suffer personally from low self-esteem, but they also cannot change their race, their skin color, their gender, their sexual orientation, their ethnicity, their criminal past, their age or physical condition—maybe not even their educational or economic status or their social location—and yet they perceive the world around them doesn't care about them or the injustices they experience each day. Not only that, they may feel like they are penalized unfairly for being who they are; sometimes, others make them into scapegoats for society's ills and problems. They are not treated with the same respect, dignity, and courtesy as others. As a result, people like this feel as if their lives don't really matter.

In fact, it is no small matter. This is the concern of the Black Lives Matter movement that has emerged throughout our country. It's about

fairness, dignity, and social value. It's been wrongly construed in the public square as being about black power with the slogan that only black lives matter, which is hardly the intent of the campaign. Instead, it was in response to so many unarmed black citizens who were killed by police around this country over the past few years and the apparent lack of outrage and concern by government leaders and the general public over the injustice of these deaths, as well as the problem of racial profiling in our society. It's not the beginning of a race war as some have claimed; it has been a plaintive cry from many within the African-American community who have lost sons, daughters, mothers, and fathers, and feel as if their lives don't matter.

This is understandable, given that instead of garnering empathy and support, skepticism abounds around this country over claims of social injustice and inequity of any type. Rather than reckon with what it's like to be black in America (particularly in certain regions of the country), the response has been to blunt the primary purpose of the movement by claiming that all lives matter—which they do, of course—but it misses the point that not all people are treated the same in this society. Not everyone gets profiled based on a few bad actors. The Black Lives Matter movement exists because of the injustices against African-Americans, not to diminish the value of other people's lives. Honestly, they might not be alone. If we go beyond race, we can discern bias against certain religions, certain sexual orientations, certain ethnicities, and the like. Campaigns like this serve the purpose of helping us realize that all lives matter as much as those who benefit from being in the majority.

A simple way to illustrate the fundamental privilege many of us in the majority experience is in what is viewed as normal. Norms are expressed

all the time in the words we choose and the terms we employ to describe who we are. As a rule of thumb, if fewer social descriptors are needed to describe who you are, then you are closer to the center of what is considered the norm for society.

I know this from firsthand experience. Whenever I've described myself over the years, I've rarely had to identify myself as anything other than a male at whatever age I was at the time, e.g., a middle-aged male. Underlying that (because I haven't described myself in any other way) is the presumption that I'm white, English speaking, fairly average in many ways, and likely Christian; the norms of our environment fill in the gaps of information about me. However, whenever I'm in an environment where whites are in a minority, I would use the qualifying descriptor to note that. The majority gets to determine the norms. In the general public, the majority in America are white, English-speaking, heterosexual, middle-class, Christians who have at least a high school, if not college, education and, most likely, children. Those are the norms. Unless I want to distinguish myself, I can get away with simply claiming my gender and my age, since the rest is assumed. I live largely in a white, middle-class, Christian world; it's my home-field advantage.

That's not the case for many others. It's a different situation when you have qualifiers that distinguish you from the norm, such as African-American (or black), or Hispanic (or Puerto Rican, Mexican, etc.), or gay or lesbian or transgender, or Muslim (Jewish, Hindu, Wiccan, atheist, etc.), or even female. Everyone who is required to use a qualifier is in some way distinct from what is accepted as the cultural norm.

Race, though, is not the only way people are profiled. Gender is a potentially marginalizing factor, as well. Granted, compared to the past,

women are much more prominent in traditional roles that were once defined solely by males. Despite the progress, however, across the board it's pretty clear that women still are not at parity with their male counterparts. A gender gap remains in job and career positions, real wages, professional respect, and in equal opportunities for advancement. Then add to that the prevailing expectations for physical appearance, for expression of personal ambition or competitiveness, or for being a provider, yet having responsibility for family. There are many other cultural norms in society which are still not equally interchangeable or fair between men and women, girls and boys. The most one can say is, there is relative or conditional equality between the genders.

The point is, regardless of how it gets parsed, white males still have significant advantages over just about everyone else. If you have a qualifier that distinguishes you from white maleness, then you have not experienced equality within the norms of society in many aspects of our shared life. You are more likely to fall into a place with inferior status or to be profiled by a negative stereotype, or at least face many more challenges to overcome before you can achieve a level playing field.

Though we've made great strides in this society, to be sure, there is also the counter-reaction largely based in fear over what traditional roles and distinctions are being lost or abandoned by society. Frequently, the ones who fear the changes most are the ones who have benefitted from the privileges the longest. One of the reasons we are experiencing so much unrest in our society at present is because there is a reaction and counter-reaction to what it means when we say, all lives matter, especially in a context where many people do not believe their lives do. One can claim "All

lives matter,” yes; but still, by evidence on a daily basis, some lives clearly matter more than others.

Social inequality is even more evident in traditional societies where change has been nonexistent or slow in coming. When I’ve been in more traditional societies in various parts of the world, a social hierarchy is quite evident to the degree that women are rarely allowed to share roles and responsibilities with males. If you factor in race and tribal elements, there will be additional obstacles to human equality and justice. This has been one of the frustrations in human rights advocacy around the world because traditional societies with long-standing social hierarchies and customs lack the cultural reference points for transforming themselves into political democracies or even abiding by U.N. standards. In many places around the world, women and men do not possess the same status or fulfill the same roles or receive the same protections under law. The same is true with minority populations. Unless customs evolve in those settings, which usually results in the loss of an ancient (or at least traditional) culture, then social injustices and inequities will remain that serve the best interests of those with power—those who establish the norms. It’s no easy transformation to make, but if all lives matter to God (as we believe), then traditional roles and relationships have to evolve to reflect that. That’s one of the concerns many Americans raise over having someone’s ancient religious beliefs control the modern world (e.g., Sharia, Christian fundamentalism, etc.).

Now I realize some may argue that I’m only voicing the cultural bias of our modern, pluralistic, even secular times. I admit, I am. Standing up here today, I’m more of an advocate for equality than the history of human civilization has ever been. But I believe, equality isn’t merely germane to

our time and place in history. I actually believe that one of the central claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that all lives matter—a prophetic claim by Jesus that challenged the traditional roles and rules of his own time and culture. The ancient world was patriarchal and aristocratic—a social pattern that largely defined the biblical environment and most other traditional cultures down through the ages.

In Judea, cultural boundaries and prohibitions were inherent to everyday life. Women were relegated to domestic duties, while elite educated men governed the civic and religious affairs, and less educated men dominated the trades and merchant and agrarian classes. Females for the most part were excluded from public life; they weren't supposed to interact with males outside of their kinfolk and kept company mainly with the women and children of their extended family and village. As a rule, adult women would not be known publicly by their personal name, but by their relationship with their father or husband, as the case may be. Boys were cared for by their female relatives until they reached the age of puberty (and their Bar Mitzvah), when they would come under the tutelage of their father and other male elders. They would be formally educated to the degree suitable for the needs of the family and village, whereas young girls would not be, as it would have been considered unnecessary for their roles in the home and society. That was the traditional Semitic world.

With this in mind, then, it is apparent that this story in Luke was quite remarkable to tell. Not only did Jesus enter the home of a woman who was unrelated to him, it was presented as the home of Martha and Mary, rather than the home of the eldest male; in this case, Lazarus, their brother, as John's Gospel would later recount. That in itself would be socially provocative and alarming, at least according to tradition.

Yet, what really challenged the status quo and custom was the audacity of Mary to sit at the feet of Jesus like a male disciple, which was unheard of in public and rarely a privilege afforded even in private company. It might occur on occasion if she were granted permission by the eldest male, but it would not be a celebrated story in public. Frankly, a lot of the interactions Jesus had with women would fall outside of traditional Hebraic norms. So for an anecdote like this to become a Gospel story, meant that it was intentionally characteristic of Jesus' ministry and mission—a radical defiance of traditional roles in order to raise the status of women in parity with men.

This story, of course, is not usually interpreted this way; typically, it's conveyed as the difference between Martha's distracting busyness and Mary's faithful listening to Jesus' word. It's been a convenient foil to critique those who focus on the organizational aspects of church life, while revering the contemplative, spiritual ones who sit at Jesus' feet. That's understandable, since there are many times when we get distracted from the real purpose of being a church, which is to carry on and represent the ministry and mission of Jesus.

The problem with this traditional interpretation, though, is that it attaches a meaning to a story that likely wasn't its original, or certainly sole, message. Yes, Martha was complaining to Jesus that Mary wasn't helping her out with the meal preparations. It was, in fact, a woman's role to take care of those things. A woman's status traditionally was higher when the home was in good order and hospitality was great. It was for the men to talk and discuss among themselves to learn and feed their souls, while the women provided the meals to satisfy their hunger. The division of purpose was clear. That's the way things were done. Martha's intent was for her

and Mary to fulfill their roles to provide hospitality at its best to honor Jesus' company in their home. Mary, it would seem, was the distracted and disobedient one, acting like she was a male, when her role and responsibilities were "in the kitchen."

The power of the story was in Jesus' direct challenge to the social norms and customs. Instead of dismissing Mary, he turned the tables by putting the onus on Martha to join Mary in defying the rules and prohibitions that prevented them from becoming his students. Their lives and souls mattered too! Jesus was creating a new community, demonstrating equality between the genders by breaking through the cultural taboos of his time. As Rita Nakashima Brock comments:

The Gospels challenged systems of domination wherever they manifested themselves, including gender relationships. Genesis 1-2 and Song of Songs had established the prototype for equal relationships among women and men. Though the stories of women in the Gospels cannot be called feminist, they do present women as ordinary people exercising power and agency beyond the social structures that might have constrained them. They were a sign that Jesus's community did not follow... hierarchies of power and exclusion. Jesus had women friends, shared communal meals that transgressed social divisions, and refuted dogmatic applications of sacred scripture. The Gospels report that these practices threatened even the male disciples, who complained that Jesus spoke with women and was too generous to outcasts.¹

The real tragedy is that the Church and Christian cultures did not sustain this down through the ages, except rarely in smaller communities. In effect, Christendom largely defied Jesus in favor of keeping social hierarchies in place to serve the interests and power and privileges of those who have resided at the top of the patriarchal world.

So where do you think we would find Jesus today? Would he be preaching from a pulpit or podium, decrying all the changes that have come to this society? Would he be insisting on faithfulness to the literal word of

¹ Rita Nakashima Brock, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*, Beacon Press, 2008, pg. 45.

the Bible, in order to make certain traditional patriarchy would remain intact and that those who are marginalized because of it would be kept in their places? Would he be a stubborn traditionalist or a radical deliverer? What do you think?

I would well imagine wherever people feel as if their lives don't matter (for whatever reason) that Jesus would compel us to join those who lead efforts to make them matter. Frankly, I think Jesus would push us until all lives are truly equal and no one suffers unjustly under another person's oppression or power or privilege. We're not there yet, but every time we express empathy for those who feel like their lives don't matter, every effort we take to make sure everyone's lives do matter, every person who realizes they are a precious gift of God to this world, then we will participate in the redemptive, emancipatory work of Jesus, for whom all lives matter.

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