

Why Black Lives Matter?

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First Parish in Brookline

On February 26, 2012, George Zimmerman, an armed white bigot, shot and killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year old black man. A predominantly white jury acquitted Zimmerman of both murder and manslaughter, and the Black Lives Matter movement was born. November 23, 2012, Jordan Davis, a 17-year old black man was shot and killed by Michael Dunn, a white software developer, for playing his music too loud. On November 29, 2012, Timothy Russell and Malissa Williams were driving a Chevy Malibu which backfired; this sound led Cleveland police to believe they were be fired upon. This resulted in 13 police officers firing 137 bullets into their car, hitting each of them more than 20 times, killing them and then riddling their bodies with police bullets. On September 14, 2013, Jonathan Ferrell, a 24-year old black man, was in a car accident in a white neighborhood, so he approached the nearest house looking for help. A local police officer, responding to a report of breaking and entering, shot Ferrell dead. In all these cases the police were acquitted of any wrong doing.

On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner, a 43-year old black man, was strangled to death by a white police officer while being arrested on suspicion of selling untaxed cigarettes. On August 5, 2014, John Crawford III, a 22-year old black man, was holding a BB gun on sale in a Walmart, when a white officer, responding to a 911 call, shot him dead. On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an 18-year old black man, fleeing arrest was shot multiple times by white police officer Darren Wilson until he was dead. On April 4, 2015, Walter Scott, a 50-year old black man, fleeing arrest, was shot in the back multiple times by white police officer Michael Slager, who is being charged with murder because this was all caught on video. On April 12, 2015, Freddie Gray, a 25-year old black man, while under police custody, was beaten so severely by six police officers that he died of spinal injuries. On June 17, 2015, a young white man shot and killed nine black congregants at a prayer meeting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. The Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly met the following week in Portland, Oregon. We felt we had to take a moral stand, called a GA Action of Immediate Witness, calling for organizing for racial justice, police reform, prison reform, and a system of fair, transformative, and restorative justice. And urging congregations to do more than talk about it.

Ten workshops and three GA talks in the plenary hall focused on anti-racism work and Black Lives Matter organizing. Black Lives Matter activists led the prayer at the Sunday worship service, GA's largest event, and Cornell West urged UU's to support these black activists. In its final afternoon, GA overwhelmingly adopted a statement based in our principle of striving for justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, and our goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. It recognizes the Black Lives Matter movement has gained powerful traction in addressing police brutality and institutional racism that target the black community. It identified mass incarceration of young black men, the school to prison pipeline, and the 7X

higher police killing rate of young black men as the fundamental issues. The resolution called UU member congregations to support the Black Lives Matter movement and Black-led racial justice organizations. It encourages us to educate ourselves while working for police reform, prison reform, and racial justice. Adopting the resolution was followed by a public rally and 4 ½ minute die-in outside the convention hall.

Kenny Wiley, a black *UU World* senior editor and director of faith formation at Prairie UU Church in Parker, Colorado, writes: “Through racism and posthumous victim blaming, through silence and bullets and indifference and vilification, black people are being told our lives do not matter – or that they matter conditionally. Black lives matter if we are educated. If we are respectful. If. And sometimes, not even then do our lives matter... Guided by that enduring, unfulfilled promise of the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, ours is a faith that has said, or worked to say to those who have been marginalized: You are a woman, and your life matters. You are gay or lesbian, and your life matters. You are transgender, and your life matters. You are bisexual, and your life matters. You have a disability, and your life matters. You were not loved as a child, and your life matters. You struggle with depression, and your life matters. Right now we are being called – by our ancestors, by our principles, by young black activists across the country – to promote and affirm: You are young and Black, and your life matters. You stole something, and your life matters. I have been taught to fear you, and your life matters. The police are releasing your criminal record, and your life matters. They are calling you a thug, and your life matters. Our ancestors, principles, and fellow human beings are calling on us to promote and affirm, with deeds and words: Black Lives Matter!

According to Wikipedia, “Black Lives Matter is an activist movement in the United States that began in the wake of the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the Florida shooting of African-American teen Trayvon Martin. The Black Lives Matter movement campaigns against what it calls police brutality in the United States against African-Americans. The group received fresh impetus from the 2014 deaths of two unarmed African-Americans, teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and 43-year old Eric Garner in New York City; in both cases the grand jury did not indict the officers and no charges were brought. Several unarmed African-Americans who died at the hands of law enforcement have had their deaths protested by the movement, including Tamir Rice, Eric Harris, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray (whose death sparked the 2015 Baltimore protests).” As of today, well over 1,000 Black Lives Matter demonstrations have been held, including one some of us participated in here in Brookline. They are increasingly disrupting traffic, including police vehicles and ambulances, and political gatherings of both political parties. Yet this month three leaders of this controversial protest group were welcomed to the White House by Valerie Jarrett, President Obama’s Senior Advisor, as a sign of support and encouragement for their non-violent civil disobedience.

There are complicated issues and feelings involved in acknowledging our complicity in America’s racism. These young black activists are likely to disrupt American society in ways that we aren’t going to be comfortable with, in ways we may find difficult to defend. But Rev. Maria Cristina has described what it feels like to be a person of color, while white anxieties or

our desire to follow the rules get in the way of our supporting people of color among us, and those who will never be among us. Her heart broke as she ministered to these young people of color even as GA participants argued for hours about wording of the resolution using Robert's Rules of Order. What do we most value here? Ron Wilkinson described his horror and stress over the past two years, as the death toll mounted, and police often were not held accountable. How do we find hope in the midst of fear? How do we reach out and show support to vulnerable people of color when they need it most?

What will this congregation do? We have already begun to educate ourselves, but there is more we could do. We are already supporting prison reform, immigration reform, and racial justice, but again we could be doing more. We could put a Black Lives Matter banner up over our front entrance, akin to the rainbow banner we have had the last eight years to show our solidarity with GLBT rights, but what exactly are we saying? Chris Crass, an anti-racism organizer writing on behalf of the UUA STANDING ON THE SIDE OF LOVE campaign wrote: "an open letter to white Unitarian Universalists struggling with their commitment to Black Lives Matter." He writes: "Our commitment to living the values of our faith is being tested. We are standing in the storm of reaction against the Black Lives Matter movement. Now is the time when we must ask ourselves, 'do we become even more out and proud for racial justice or do we shrink in retreat?'" With FOX news leading a media frenzy denouncing the Black Lives Matter movement as a hate group, as terrorists, as anti-white, some of us are retreating from wearing Black lives Matter buttons and some of us are questioning whether or not to take down the Black Lives Matter banners from our churches... This is much bigger than buttons and banners. This is about breaking a centuries old code of white silence and white consent for anti-Black racist violence and institutional white supremacy... The Black Lives Matter movement is the leading struggle for racial justice in our times. It is a movement led by Black people who are women, queer, youth, working class, including Black UU's around the country. It is a movement to end institutional racism and to respect the inherent worth and dignity of all people."

What shall First Parish in Brookline do? Chris Crass offers ten tips for white Unitarian Universalists taking action in support of the Black Lives Matter movement:

- 1) Distribute Black Lives Matter buttons to the congregation and commit to wear them; you have more influence than you know;
- 2) Hang a Black Lives Matter banner in front of your church as a tool for internal and external consciousness raising and as an act of solidarity;
- 3) Invite Black leaders in this new movement, from your local community or region, to give a talk or sermon at your church;
- 4) Encourage our congregation to show up and participate in local and regional marches, demonstrations, vigils, and die-ins;
- 5) Use public demonstrations as intentional learning opportunities;
- 6) Reach out to find what local Black Lives Matter organizers need;
- 7) Hold fundraisers for local Black Lives Matter movement efforts;
- 8) Provide resources to support young adult Black Lives Matter activist networks;
- 9) Get involved with Showing UP for Racial Justice, a national white anti-racist network;

10) Most importantly, love yourself and love the people around you dedicated to this work.

Living in solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed is never easy. The Rev. Jeannie Shero, a UU minister in Denver, Colorado, cries: “Let the only burning be the fire of commitment in our hearts, minds, hands, and spirits in our community of faith. Live solidarity. Use your voice. Demand justice... better, live it into being. Cry out for others to join you. Name hate as hate – without shrinking back, without letting embarrassment or false humility or resistance or apologies for white skin get in the way. Direct all that energy to action, standing with, speaking out. Be impassioned... About the ending of so many black lives, precious, precious, precious lives... Be outraged. About the burning of houses of worship, sanctuaries of the spirit, sacred communal spaces. Be awakened. Racism is alive. It will never die of old age – ancient though it is. Rather, it must be buried by human awakening to equality incarnate. Participate in the movement: Call out those perpetuating violence against black people and black communities. Demand action from those in power, the press, government and everywhere this story is not told. Live differently... struggle to awaken... there is no safe place from which to simply observe.”

I am a privileged white UU male minister. We are an increasingly diverse but largely privileged, largely white, UU congregation. We are being called into relationship by horror and stress of our own members. We are being called to radically reflect upon the injustice in our society. How will we stand in solidarity with these black activists? How will we show that we truly believe Black Lives Matter? These are questions for our time. I love you all dearly. Amen and Blessed Be.