

Opinion: Rev. Morrill addresses ‘Black Lives Matter’

Rev. Jake Morrill

September 21, 2015

This past July, a church committee requested a new message on the electronic sign, which faces the Oak Ridge Turnpike. The message they requested was “Black Lives Matter.” The board of the Oak Ridge Unitarian Universalist Church, or ORUUC, voted to approve it, and the message was added to the sign’s series of scrolling messages.

Since then, we’ve received feedback from different members of the community. Some has been to praise the sign; some, to criticize.

The Police Lives Matter Rally

Saturday night, I attended a rally called Police Lives Matter in A.K. Bissell Park. My colleague at ORUUC, the Rev. Tandy Scheffler, attended as well. She’s a recent graduate of the Citizen’s Police Academy.

She told me she saw the rally as a chance to demonstrate that support of police officers and support of black lives is not an “either/or,” but a “both/and” for her. Yes, she said, police lives matter, and yes, black lives matter, and yes, all lives matter. I agree. Along with my gratitude for police officers and first responders, I also attended because the rally’s organizers have been critical of the church’s “Black Lives Matter” sign.

When people have an opinion, I believe it’s important to listen. In fact, responding to online criticism of the sign in recent weeks, I’ve extended at least 15 invitations to people to sit down together so we could talk. I’m sorry to say that no one, as yet, has accepted my invitation.

So, at the rally, I wanted to shake hands and introduce myself to a couple of people. When people disagree, I prefer to talk in person than online, where it’s easy to fall from the highest standards of respect for each other. Some of the online rhetoric about the church and me has been inaccurate and has felt unkind. But I’m grateful that the church sign has not been vandalized, as has happened to “Black Lives Matter” signs in front of churches across the country. I know it’s more than our security cameras—it’s that, in Oak Ridge, no matter our different views, we have standards of respect and decency. As Oak Ridgers, we are in this together.

At the rally, prayers offered by two of my ministerial colleagues greatly moved me. I was inspired by the testimony of an officer who has lived heroically through PTSD. I’m grateful that there are those who care enough about our police officers that they would appreciate them publicly in this way. And yet, for all our common ground, I sense we differ with regard to “Black Lives Matter.” Because I can’t seem to tempt anyone to talk about it in person, maybe sharing my thinking in writing will help.

Rev. Morrill: A Christian and a Patriot

I don't speak for our whole diverse congregation, nor can I speak for the Church Board. But I can speak for myself. So, for whatever it's worth, here are my thoughts. I speak as a Christian and a patriot.

In the Christian tradition, I'm a Universalist. For 2,000 years, Universalists have said "all lives matter." In the early centuries of the Christian church, as different people took different views on the nature of God, Universalists were those who said that, if God was love, and if God's power was infinite, then no one could fall outside the care of that infinite love. They believed that humankind's sins, no matter how awful, were not more powerful than the capacity of God's grace to bring ultimate redemption. From that view, I aspire to live as if every life has inherent worth and dignity. In other words, theologically and ethically, along with centuries of other Universalists, I say, "all lives matter."

In the American tradition, I'm a patriot in the line of 19th century Senator Carl Schurz, who said, "My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right." Our democracy is an ongoing process toward a more perfect union. Our founders were wise to set in place ways to reform and improve our systems through the years. That's why, in 2015, we can have laws that speak to Internet commerce and other things our founders could not have imagined.

In a monarchy, or under fascism, the people have no voice. But, in a democracy, the nation is ruled by "we the people" and elected officials accountable to us, the citizens. Through election and appointment, in a democracy, people gain positional authority. And, in a democracy, their authority is strengthened and maintained through accountability. We ask accountability of our elected politicians. We ask accountability of our civic employees, as well.

I believe in the basic premise of this great nation: that it is possible to establish and sustain liberty and justice for all. In fact, I've backed my belief with the oath I took upon becoming an officer in the U.S. Army Reserve, to defend the Constitution. As I understand it, the Constitution provides for equal justice for all American citizens under the law.

To me, it isn't controversial to say that all lives matter, and that, in this country, everyone is equal under the law. But I'm not a pie-in-the-sky idealist. I don't believe that we, as a country, have reached the "Promised Land." So, in this fallen world, as a Christian, I aspire to live according to the injunction of Jesus in Matthew 25:40, to serve and to stand with "the least of these." The outcast, the oppressed, the forgotten, the unloved. To be an instrument of an all-loving God means to extend compassion to those who suffer.

The 'War on Cops' story does not match the facts

In the turmoil of our times, one group of people who suffer are police officers. Their jobs are stressful and demanding. They're called into uncertain, sometimes unsafe situations, and expected to act professionally, maintaining the safety and order of our communities on our behalf. Their long hours and sacrificial service are a tremendous gift. I admire anyone who commits himself or herself to public service, and am grateful, in particular, to police officers. That's why I'm glad the "war on cops" is only a make-believe story, created by Fox News.

The “war on cops” story is intended to discredit the Black Lives Matter movement, and to promote fear and outrage. In those goals, the story has been effective: a recent Rasmussen poll says that 58 percent of Americans believe that there is a “war on cops.” Where the story has fallen short is in telling the truth. That is, according to any statistical measure.

According to research by the American Enterprise Institute, using statistics from the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, 2015 is on track to be one of the safest years for police officers in recorded history (since records began to be kept in 1870). I’ve looked at the original, raw numbers myself. Only the year 2013 was safer, with fewer assaults or killings of police officers. If you look at the rate of murder of police officers, the trend is even steeper. This follows a significant downward trend in recent decades. Under President Obama, there have been 46 percent fewer killings of police officers this year than at the same point in President Reagan’s presidency. By any credible statistic, there is no “war on cops.”

Articles such as the one by the Cato Institute’s Randy Balko, in *The Washington Post* last week, have covered this phenomenon: a large number of people who believe there is a “war on cops,” when in fact, cops are safer than they ever have been in history. They have traced the unfounded fear back to the fiction created by Fox News.

Fox News, I believe, does not mean to generate sympathy for hard-working police officers. If they truly cared about police officers, they would shine a light on compensation and benefits; they would look at job-related health issues, like stress-related heart trouble. But I believe the intent of this fictional story is not to focus public attention on actual issues faced by police officers. I believe the intent is to discredit the Black Lives Matter movement.

Black Lives Matter: Seeking equal justice under the law

I understand Black Lives Matter to be in pursuit of the American ideal of equal justice under the law. In the last couple of years, ORUUC members have read the research in Michelle Alexander’s book, “*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.” The statistics are clear. The war on drugs, in the past three decades, has disproportionately affected African-Americans. Statistically, black people in this country are stopped, arrested, and imprisoned at rates much higher than white people with comparable behavior.

In other words, according to statistical patterns, how you behave is not the sole factor in determining whether you get stopped, arrested, and imprisoned. A significant factor is race. For the same behavior, for the same crime, black people can expect to receive longer sentences too.

Journalist Isabel Wilkinson was widely praised for her book, “*The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*.” This history covers the migration of millions of African-Americans between 1915 and 1970, from the agricultural South to the urban North and West. Some might suspect they went in search only of jobs. But, compared to global migratory patterns, Wilkinson says that the movement of this population more resembles the patterns of people who are fleeing trauma, like the Syrian refugees in the news in recent days.

The trauma in the Jim Crow South was that of the “night patrols,” whose lynchings of African-Americans was the violence that held in place patterns of injustice in housing, education, pay, and so on. An African-American person who questioned Jim Crow, or insisted on being paid a fair wage, was seen as “uppity” and put himself in peril of violent retribution.

As someone who loves his country, it's painful to see where we have fallen short. It's tempting to wish away difficult information. But the thread of racial inequity that begins with slavery, continues in Jim Crow, and finds new form in the "new Jim Crow," with patterns of unequal treatment under the law, asks me to not look away. To seek to understand.

When I mention statistics of racial inequity in the justice system, do I blame police officers? No. There is a wider context. For instance, housing in Oak Ridge was established according to the norms of Jim Crow. Because of federal housing policy, which set property values through "red-lining," this means that a typical black family who bought a house in Scarboro in 1955 would build much less family wealth, over time, than a typical white family who bought a house in Woodland in the same year.

According to statistics available in city-data.com, there's an academic achievement gap between black and white students in the Oak Ridge Schools. This is no secret; several years ago, I was on a task force, convened by the schools, to look at the issue. Black and white students in Oak Ridge seem to be disciplined at different rates, at least according to figures about suspensions. There are some who will say that, in 2015, what determines anyone's fortunes is personal behavior. Unfortunately, the statistics suggest that, at this late date, in this country, race continues to be a significant factor.

Hope in our democracy

Some will say that to mention these facts is divisive, stirring racial tension. But, as a Christian, I believe in the power of confession. As a patriot, I believe in the possibility of democratic reform. We can handle looking at uncomfortable facts. We can be an even better, stronger, and fairer country than we have been to this day.

In a democracy, one of the ways we can improve is to require accountability from those who hold power. This is especially true when patterns of inequality persist. Statistics from ProPublica show that an African-American teenage male is 21 percent more likely to be shot and killed by a police officer than a white teenage male. Numbers from the FBI suggest that this year will record the highest number of deaths of citizens by police officers. After the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, last year, much was made of the racial bias in the police department there. But last November, research from USA Today found almost 1,600 communities in the country where the race-based patterns in police departments were worse. Last week, in response to these unsettling patterns, the Republican-led Congress passed a bill requiring stricter reporting from local departments of instances in which officers shoot a citizen.

How can we handle all this information? Critics of the police might point to cases like the officer in Louisiana who was fired this summer for his participation in the Ku Klux Klan. Critics of Black Lives Matter might replay that video clip in which some people chant "fry 'em like bacon." But those are outliers that distract from the norm. The great majority of police officers are hard-working professionals. The great majority of Black Lives Matter supporters are non-violent, engaged citizens. We can get hooked by the latest media scandal. But it doesn't help us sincerely talk about the country we want. Or to figure out how to get from here to there.

Do patterns of racial bias exist in the Oak Ridge Police Department? I don't know. It's possible that our community somehow defies overwhelming national statistical patterns. If so, we would

have cause to celebrate. But if the numbers turned out to show racial bias, I wouldn't lay blame on our police officers. I would lay it on all of us, the community. In a democracy, the standards of our community are our responsibility. If the numbers showed racial bias, finger-pointing would be unhelpful. What might help would be dialogue, understanding, and systems of training and accountability that supported our shared desire for equal justice under the law.

The sign in front of the church says "Black Lives Matter." Some imagine it says "Only Black Lives Matter." Some have imagined it says "Not All Lives Matter." Some imagine it says "Police Lives Don't Matter." I respect the right to creative interpretation. I'm sorry that misinformation from Fox News, about a "war on cops," has stirred up some fear. But the sign says none of these things. It says, simply, three words: "Black Lives Matter." If people want to imagine an additional word, they might try, "Black Lives Matter, Too."

Will the sign be changed? I don't know. Probably, at some point. Right now, it signals an area of study and concern among the congregation. Those wanting to share their opinions can write to the Church's Board of Trustees.

In a country with historic and continuing patterns of racial inequality, in a country that promises equal justice under the law, if we're going to ensure that all lives matter, we're going to have to pause, look at the facts, and figure out together how it can be true. Not only as an ideal, but also in fact. Do you believe it is possible? That together, through dialogue about painful information, and in a spirit of mutual trust, grounded in radical hope, we can realize a country and a community, where, along with other lives, Black Lives Matter? I do.

Let us thank our police officers. Let us thank first responders. And teachers. And city employees. And faith leaders. Let's thank all who give of themselves to make our community strong. For over 12 years, I've been proud to call Oak Ridge home. Let's walk together, in love and respect, to make it even greater, according to the standards of mercy, compassion, and justice. Our journey isn't over. But we'll get there, I trust.

Correction: After submitting this column, one of the people I invited to coffee accepted my invitation. I look forward to it. There is reason to hope.