

This week just past has been a tragic one and we have witnessed horrifying deaths. Today, at least 7 families mourn the death of a loved one and we, as a nation, are once again caught up in a heated conversation about race, policing, and whose lives matter. I think it is important to stop this morning and talk about some of the hot words that are circulating and about the role that we, as Christians, might have in steering the conversation in more fruitful directions.

The Black Lives Movement started shortly after George Zimmerman was acquitted for the murder of a Florida teenager, Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman was a community vigilante of sorts, and his defense rested on his use of Florida's stand your ground law, which allows a citizen to use a gun in self-defense to protect themselves if they feel threatened.

Martin was walking through Zimmerman's neighborhood, late at night, returning from a convenience store. In his car, Zimmerman tailed Martin, calling the police, who warned Zimmerman not to approach Martin. But Zimmerman did approach, there was an altercation, Martin was shot and died shortly afterwards.

There was outrage over the death of a black teen who, by all reports was doing nothing for which he should have been killed. He, himself was unarmed, walking through a neighborhood at night with an iced tea and a bag of skittles. In the parlance of the anti-racism movement, he was guilty of no crime except the crime of walking at night while black.

The death of Trayvon Martin and subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman, as well as the rise of stand your ground laws, sent a chill through the black community. It bore an eerie resemblance to midnight lynchings that were all too common in earlier decades. The Black Lives Matter movement was born out of the death of Trayvon Martin as a protest against the apparent disregard by a Florida jury for the various circumstances that led to the death of a teen guilty of nothing more than cutting through a white neighborhood on his way home from a local convenience store.

Meant to convey a message that said Black Lives Matter too, it wasn't long before the Black Lives Matter heard the response that all lives matter, something which was never questioned by the movement.

The point of the movement was to point out a national trend where all too often the dire effect of public policy, media and drug laws designed to specifically target offenders who were poor and black, all had taken their toll. A differing system of arrest and sentencing of drug offenders had left blacks with minor offences imprisoned while whites with more severe offences went free, had decimated black communities. Youth who might have been sent to rehab and gone on to live productive lives if they were white were sent to prison and black communities, who had such hope in the civil rights movement began to see that the ugly legacy of slavery was not

ending. The Black lives matter slogan both stated the frustration and asked the question: Would the lives and dignity of black citizens ever matter to this country?

When, in August of 2014, the body of Michael Brown was left rotting in the hot sun after being shot by police on a street in Ferguson Missouri, tensions in the black community rose and there was an outcry against the historical disrespectful treatment of blacks by the white police force of Ferguson and the Black Lives Movement caught on nationally. And nationally there was a flurry of responses that indicated a basic misunderstanding of the movement itself.

Many people, unaware of the continuing effect of racism on the lives of black people, misunderstood the slogan. Instead of hearing a simple plea to notice that the lives of black citizens, school children, tax payers, young men and their parents, don't appear to matter very much in our country, many whites unconsciously put an additional word in the slogan. They heard that the black community saying that only black lives matter.

And this is bitterly ironic, because it is an all too common occurrence for whites to see black threat where there is none, something that started the movement in the first place, when Trayvon Martin was shot.

I want to tell you a story about something that happened last summer to a woman I know. It is an example of seeing a threat that isn't actually there. Anita is a fellow Episcopalian and she attends St. David's Radner. Anita is a lawyer, her husband is a doctor and they have two teenage sons, twins and they live in an upper class community just off the main line. Last summer the twins were 15 and they had an encounter with the police. Anita and her family are black.

One day last July the twins, who attend a prestigious private high school rode their bikes over to the home of a friend from school where they set off to go swimming. The boys were obedient to the family safety rules and wore their bike helmets. On their backs they had book bags from school, which held their swim suits and a towel. After swimming the boys rode home, traveling from the upper class neighborhood of their school mate back to their own upper class neighborhood.

A woman saw them and began following them in her car. There had been robberies recently in her neighborhood, she was scared and she called 911.

She reported that she had seen 2 suspicious looking black men who had overstuffed duffle bags on their backs. Remember, these were teens, wearing bike helmets, carrying book bags with their school name emblazoned and holding a swimsuit and a towel. Did she lie? Well, not exactly. She was herself, unfortunately a victim of the racist thinking that we are all trained in

from birth. She has been trained to see black males as dangerous, and on this her imagination filled in the details. Her vision was clouded by images our culture has promoted since times of slavery: blacks, black men in particular, are more animal than human, violent and a threat to our security.

If you want to think about what racism is, think of it this way: it is a filter that we unconsciously carry, that judges black people as inherently inferior and dangerous. What is most dangerous about racism is not hate talk and it doesn't wear a white hood. It is an unconscious bias, a lens through which we see people of color. It is a lens that has been several centuries in the making, and few of us even know we carry it. But it effects how we see the world, how we see blacks and understand the unique challenges they have historically faced, challenges for which there is still fallout today.

The woman frightened of 2 black boys called 911, police came, the boys were detained for questioning and later released to their parents from the police station. But it could have gone differently. And every parent of a black child, particularly a black male child knows that it could have gone differently. They know that sometimes our unconscious white fears take us whites hostage: for instance someone reports a black child waving a gun, without really thinking about what they are saying or noticing that it is a child and it is a toy gun, the police are called.

The police, believing they are going into a dangerous situation, are on hyper alert. Maybe it is the 6th high adrenaline situation they have been in that day. Sometimes they over react to a situation that was not dangerous in the first place. Tamir Rice, still baby faced in the picture taken a few weeks before he died, clearly not a dangerous looking person, was shot 2 seconds after the police arrived. Someone had reported he was a dangerous black male waving a gun on a playground and others were present.

Who was guilty of racism the day when baby faced, barely 12 year old, Tamir Rice was shot in Detroit? The police, the caller, our whole society? Who should be held accountable? It certainly wasn't Tamir Rice, who was only doing what countless white children do—playing with a toy gun.

If you heard any of the videos of the shootings last week, you may have noticed the anguish of the police officer upon discovering he had fatally wounded a black cafeteria supervisor, stopped because he resembled a robbery suspect. There was more than one victim that evening. The police officer will also carry scars from that evening, along with all of Philande Castile's family, friends and the students of the Hill Montessori School in St. Paul Minnesota.

Racism is ugly and complicated and for most of us, entirely unconscious. Policing is dangerous and complicated, and when those who have dedicated their lives to protecting us, and in this

case protecting the protesters in Dallas, end up giving their lives to preserve freedom of speech, we should be sickened by it.

If we, as Christians who are neither black nor police do not take it upon ourselves to learn more about the sin of racism which led to the protests where the officers were killed, and we all, as Americans, unconsciously carry, we have given neither group the respect they deserve.

Today we heard the familiar story of a lawyer who asks Jesus the question, who is my neighbor. And Jesus is clear in his answer: your neighbor is the one who needs your mercy. Today, once again, we have a choice. We can commit to learn more about the effects of racism on black lives and on blue lives, or we can, like the priest and the Levite, cross the road and ignore the victims. Today is a day for us to ask ourselves the question, what would Jesus do, and what does our God require us, as Christians, to do?

On Saturday, September 17th, the anti-racism committee of the diocese will again offer a day-long training designed to help us all better understand the reality and effects of racism on our country. I hope that today you will go home and put the training on your calendar.