

Following Jesus' Example of Love in an Increasingly Hostile Culture

This is not an easy article for me to write.

It should be easy, shouldn't it? Really, the facts of the matter are plain. The passion of Christ for black lives is not difficult to discern in the Scriptures. The blood of a Jewish man was spilled for everyone in every tribe, tongue and nation on the earth, in every generation. He paid so much—a deeply personal cost—for the privilege of fellowshiping with black men and women in unity and joy for all eternity. If this is about the worth of a black man to Jesus, if this is about what makes a black woman beautiful to God, then our opinions must go the way of the end of the book of Job: He is sovereign; He is Maker, Lord and God. We put our face in the dust, we humble ourselves, and we let Him speak and define the inarguable worth of a man to Him. Case closed, right?

No. Not as easily as I'd like it to be. It's never easy.

It was after the shootings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile in July 2016 that the complexities of the brokenness of the human condition bore down on our little ministry. We tried to speak prophetically and pastorally into the pain. Our answers were inadequate, unprepared, and the narrative unclear. Many of our leaders and pastors (including me) lacked understanding and clarity. We weren't ready to serve helpfully in a moment where real, gospel help was most needed. In other words, while the Bible verses were clear, we had very little actual understanding regarding what our black brothers and sisters were feeling, thinking and experiencing in relationship to the tragic events of the day. It hadn't even occurred to us to ask.

Our first instinct wasn't to ask, "How are you doing? What are you feeling? How can I pray for you?" No. Our first instinct, reflexively, was to post on Facebook. Tweet something. Our first actions were to add our disconnected, uninformed, politically charged and racially naïve perspective to the fire of controversy, imagining it would be helpful. We were confused when the flames burned hotter afterwards.

Theology and truth always seem clear in a vacuum of genuine relationship, empathy and compassion. Black and white, neat and clean, plain and simple often are the places where disconnected theory and detached pride mingle to birth confusion and conflict. God, who could have stayed at a distance and simply delivered perfect truth audibly from on high, understood that the best way to birth actual unity of heart was to enter into our messy lives. He came near. He became a man, and lived with us.

We don't even know what God incarnate had to say for the first 30 years of His time on Earth. He didn't write position papers on the Futility of Roman Engagement or post thoughts on the travesty of the Jewish high priestly appointments. He engaged with broken and confused people, and He listened. What's even more astonishing is that, in His outrageous humility, He learned.

We hosted, as a ministry, community gatherings after the shootings. We didn't plan anything else to happen beyond our friends having a place to share their pain, anguish, anger, fear and most of all, their stories. We listened. I learned a lot. In a few of my team meetings I asked a few on my team—young, gifted women; moms; and dads—to share their experiences in life and in our ministry. It was painful to listen to. I felt exposed. I had no idea regarding what they had experienced. I had never thought to ask.

A short while later, I was in Florida visiting my father, who was recovering from surgery. I engaged some friends in

conversation. They were white friends, and, as it became clear, very Republican friends. They began to complain about the current national conversation and had particular vitriol for the Black Lives Matter movement. Fox News-fueled assumptions and narratives flowed effortlessly out of their mouths. I winced. I was still raw from the conversations we had been conducting as a ministry. The stories of my friends echoed within, and my heart beat faster, harder.

I was annoyed, but tried to gently steer the conversation in a different direction. It wouldn't budge. I relayed some of what I had heard and learned recently. Battle lines suddenly formed. Anger flashed. I felt helpless. Their narratives and opinions were like impenetrable castles built specifically to keep my words and perspectives out.

One of my friends cursed angrily at me. As a single mom, she didn't want to hear about the systemic disadvantages others faced. She was angry at the system, angry with the government, angry with the left, angry with the media. My other friend shared that anger. This was a fight I wasn't going to win, therefore I surrendered, yielding to them. I didn't like it. I don't like it. The castle walls are formidable. My friends had retreated into the safety they felt behind them. There would be no breaching their defenses.

With the election of Donald Trump, the world has seemingly become an angrier place. Politics and political ideology have galvanized Christians and non-Christians alike to fortify the self-protective castles they have built for themselves. From behind their walls of anger and fear, they fire arrows on social media platforms, arm themselves with articles and research from their favorite websites, and comfort themselves through fellowship with like-minded friends from around the nation. They are content to live at a distance from the ones they fear. Their love has grown cold. They give themselves permission to hate the opposition.

Who am I writing to at this very moment? Who is going to read these words? I write this knowing that the polarized, media-driven discourse and entrenched narratives and conclusions mean that the folks who actually read this will likely be among the few who have dared to venture out into the open. They've dared to enter into the realm of the unknown, the place of uncertainty where long-held assumptions are held loosely. It's a dangerous place, where one listens more than speaking, and the painful, real experience of a new friend resonates more powerfully than freshly-Google'd ideological political rhetoric.

I'm praying that love compels even more sincere Christians to come out from behind their walls.

Jesus left the safest place possible to enter into rough, dangerous, hostile territory for the sake of love, friendship, and unity with the Godhead. It cost Him his life, but it was more than worth it to Him. It's not enough for me to write the words, "Black Lives Matter in the Kingdom of God." It's more than likely that, if you're reading this, you already agreed with that point. Easy. Simple. However, it's also likely that it's been awhile since we've hosted a black man, a black couple, or a black family for dinner. It's even less likely that, if we did, we asked hard questions and listened more than we spoke. We tend to love truth, and yearn for it, but often from a safe distance. The implications of scriptural truth, when mixed together with the love of Christ, are that perfected love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). We need more than right truths from the Word of God when it comes to this subject. We need love perfected in us that makes us fearless, so that we can draw near to one another and listen to one another without defensiveness.

If "Black Lives" truly "Matter," then we need more than detached agreement with truth. Black lives need to actually matter to us.

For more on this topic, watch Mike Bickle's sermon from July 10, 2016 » {eoa}

With all that is occurring in the nation at this time, we at the International House of Prayer of Kansas City are looking forward to the opportunity we have as a family to speak to the matters that are close to God's heart—unity in the church and loving the body well—as we host the Stand Conference to address and champion the prophetic destiny of the black community. Learn more at:

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