

September's Food for Thought:

Black Lives Matter: Affirming God-given Rights and Respect

by Osita Iroegbu,

(reprinted and posted with the permission of the author; originally appeared in *The Richmond Times Dispatch*)

Food for Thought is presented by *Conversations in Black and White*, St. John's initiative promoting racial understanding and reconciliation. Our goal is to provide ideas, articles, and topics that we can explore with an open mind, suspending our judgment and listening to others. "Black Lives Matter: Affirming God-given Rights and Respect" will be available in the weekly emails from St. John's, on the website (www.saintjohnsrichmond.org), and in hard copy in the church and parish hall.

We are continuing the promotion of racial understanding and reconciliation through the commitment we made and continue to make in our Baptismal Covenant to God and each other:

- To seek to serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- To strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

We hope this article will stimulate your thinking, spark discussion with others, and promote action aimed at racial understanding and reconciliation.

To provide a time and space to engage with God and with each other, the Committee will host a potluck supper and dialogue on the issues raised in this article on Wednesday, September 21, at 6:00 p.m. The Committee will furnish the main dish and drinks and requests that you bring a side dish, salad, or dessert. Everyone is invited.

The Rev. Dr. Dorothy White will facilitate the dialogue. The committee looks forward to seeing you on September 21 for the discussion. Come and be part of compelling discussion.

The committee, Paul Broughton, The Rev. Deacon David Curtis, Carolyn Dallas, Irvin Dallas, The Rev. Laura Inscoe, Karla Hunt, and The Rev. Dr. Dorothy White, looks forward to receiving your feedback.

Black Lives Matter: Affirming God-given rights and respect

Osita Iroegbu | Posted: Saturday, July 23, 2016 10:30 pm

That all lives matter should be beyond debate or controversy.

We are creations of an almighty God who has a plan and a purpose for each of us.

But within the context of the remnants of this nation's sordid past, the reality is that all lives have not mattered.

Theoretically, yes, all lives are supposed to matter. But, realistically, within a system literally built on the backs of the black and brown, many lives, historically, simply have not.

Did Native American lives matter when their land was "discovered" and overtaken by settlers as part of the decimation of the indigenous population?

Did African lives matter when they were forcibly pulled from their kingdoms, stacked like sardines on ships only to become property owned by Europeans - **beaten**, overworked, tortured, raped, and killed?

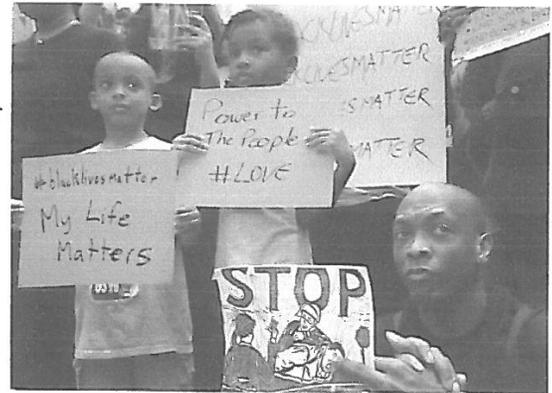
Did black lives matter when U.S. Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney, in his opinion on the *Dred Scott v. Sanford* case of 1857, wrote that black people in America "**had** no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit. He was bought and sold, and treated as an ordinary article of merchandise and traffic, whenever a profit could be made by it."

Merchandise. Traffic. Whenever a profit could be made by it.

So, now that today's generation of African Americans chooses to publicly pronounce and affirm that indeed their lives matter, we are perceived as going too far.

Why is affirmation that my life matters a radical one that would spark even a scintilla of discomfort or opposition?

When we say black lives matter, it does not suggest that other lives do not. It simply declares that black and brown lives are to be valued the same way white lives have been valued throughout history.



Photo, page 1 with BLM

Jashaun Sadler, right, and his twins Malik, left, and Jazlin Sadler listen to speakers during a Black Lives Matter demonstration in New York on July 10.

Recent irresponsible assertions that Black Lives Matter is inherently racist –assertions made by people like former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani and other media talking heads –are dangerous, deceptive, and dismiss the insidious history of this country.

During my childhood, the question of whether my life mattered loomed in my young mind. Growing up in a public housing community in South Richmond, I saw and experienced first-hand the remnants of broken practices and policies stemming from structural racism_

There was crime, teen pregnancy, illiteracy, and other social ills. I saw dead bodies from gun violence and watched friends forego college to take care of the children they had at a young age. Neighbors dropped out of high school and some ended up in jail or prison. These issues still plague not only the Richmond neighborhood where I grew up, but low-income, mainly-minority communities across the nation.

I later covered these issues as a reporter for the Richmond Times-Dispatch in my quest to use the power of journalism to effect social change. As a crime reporter, I saw more homicide victims, primarily within the city's low-income communities. I rode along with local police officers to get a better sense of the challenges they face.

The Black Lives Matter movement seeks to place these urban social issues into greater context, shedding light on the fact that these social ills are symptoms of a larger, systemic problem that we have to both acknowledge and address, together, as a society. Refusing to recognize and address the fact that we are still reeling from the roots of racism simply perpetuates injustice.

The Black Lives Matter movement began after George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2013. It was heightened after the police-related deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, John Crawford, Walter Scott, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Akai Gurley, Freddie Gray, and others.

It addresses a plethora of institutional injustices that marginalized communities have faced for decades, such as housing segregation, inadequate schools, health inequities, crime, and the schools-to-prison pipeline.

Work is being done within communities across the nation on an almost daily basis to address these issues.

The Black Lives Matter movement simultaneously calls for accountability of public officials and public servants, forcing leaders like Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders to dialogue on critical social issues facing the black community, including the black LGBTQ community and those suffering from mental illness.

It demands an end to a history of police brutality against our black and brown brothers and sisters. The plight of our urban communities and unfair policing are not mutually exclusive topics of conversation. We have been and continue to deal with them simultaneously.

It's important to underscore that the senseless shooting deaths of the three Baton Rouge police officers last week and the five Dallas police officers the week before were not Black Lives Matter acts, as some media talking heads have irresponsibly suggested. Neither of the shooters were tied to the Black Lives Matter movement. These were acts of what appears to be mentally unstable war veterans who needed help.

The constant killing of Black men and women by police, such as the recent shootings of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge and Philando Castile in Minneapolis, appears to be a continuation of a police culture that harbors racism (as seen in the U.S. Department of Justice's scathing Ferguson report) and implicit bias. It was reported last week that the Minnesota police officer who shot and killed Philando Castile initially pulled him over after racially profiling him as a robbery suspect because of his "wide set nose." Last week, North Miami police shot an unarmed black man as he was helping his autistic patient. His hands were up. He was still shot. Thankfully, he lived to tell his story.

The Guardian reports 145 out of 585 people killed by police in the U.S. during the first half of 2016 were black. Blacks make up roughly 13 percent of the U.S. population. For those who argue that this disproportionate number is due to police being called into black communities at a greater rate than other communities, I offer these alternative reasons: stop-and-frisk practices, racial profiling, over-policing in communities of color, and the war on drugs, which has resulted in the disproportionate arrest and prosecution of African Americans, despite whites using and selling drugs at the same rate or greater. This is a highly nuanced issue and calls for a critical analysis on multiple levels.

Black Lives Matter is simply calling for state-sanctioned cease-fire on the lives, bodies, and communities of black people, and an end to racist practices and policies stemming from slavery, Black codes, Jim Crow and, as Michelle Alexander puts it, the New Jim Crow. We must not forget, and must learn from, our history. It was police who surveilled and controlled black bodies and enforced these racist and discriminatory codes and laws.

The constant barrage of violent police altercations within the black community hurts. It causes rage, distrust and damage to the psyche of an entire culture, including relatively affluent African Americans. It creates deep conversations that black mothers and fathers must have with their children. It's also a catalyst for police to finally get it right through de-escalation strategies, improved community policing, cultural-competency training, and collaboration with the black community.

Again, the Black Lives Matter movement is not anti-police. It does not promote or provoke violence against anyone – **not** politicians, not judges, not police officers. It is a peaceful movement of respect, integrity, justice and love and is largely aimed at mobilizing the masses against a system that has historically disregarded and diminished our lives.

It is about dismantling a system of historic oppression. It does not assume that all police departments are bad. It does demand an end to the stereotyping, mistreatment, and vilification of black men and women.

As a student at Blackwell Elementary School in the 80s, I came to realize that my life, and that of my neighbors, mattered, contrary to the societal messages we received through unjust media images, laws, practices and policies. Now, as founder of a mentoring program, I spread this message to our youth, including youth who live in the neighborhood in which I grew up. I also serve as a volunteer member of local advocacy coalitions to improve police engagement with the black and brown community.

As a current PhD student, I recently returned from an academic research conference in Japan where I presented on the Missing White Woman Syndrome — a concept describing the lack of media coverage and law enforcement priority afforded to missing women of color.

I shared the story of Ogechi Sarah Uwasomba, a young Nigerian-American woman who went missing in Chesterfield and whose body was later found in Richmond. Participants from Nigeria, China, India and the U.S. discussed how we would do our parts to ensure that the lives of women and men of color all over the world are deemed worthy.

That is the essence of the Black Lives Matter Movement. It is filled with members and advocates of all hues, ages, ethnicities and social status. It does not devalue others, but instead seeks to elevate the God-given fact that black and brown life, existing in a system that considered them to be merely merchandise, traffic and profit-making, is fully respected and valued. It deserves nothing less.