

ESSAY

Window Signs and Hashtags: Jesus at the Margins

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Several months ago, when I was driving my daughters to school, I noticed a sign in the vehicle in front of me that read: “Adults on Board. We want to live too!” Perhaps it was because we had a “Baby on Board” sign in the back of our van, but I found myself reacting to this sign. I thought, “isn’t that a given? Obviously, there are adults on board. And obviously, you want to live too.”

Throughout the remainder of the day, I thought about this sign. At the time, I was teaching an undergraduate course on human diversity to a group of Christian students, nearly all of whom were White, heterosexual, and middle-upper class. In the weeks leading up to this event, we had been talking about issues related to privilege, race, and Whiteness, during which we discussed the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement. One or two (White) students questioned the effectiveness of such a movement, stating that it can make White people feel as though their lives do not matter as much. These students then asked why, instead of highlighting certain groups or characteristics of people, could we not simply agree to say *all* lives matter? Would this not obviously include Black lives?

I believe the intentions of these students were good, and that they truly believe the lives of Black people matter. I also recognize that at the heart of their questions lay a belief that their own lives and experiences were equally as important as those of Black persons, and therefore ought to be included in any popular social movement such as *#BlackLivesMatter*. What these students were missing, however, was a very important reality that they struggled to see. As White, educated, heterosexual, and able-bodied persons on the middle-upper end of the socioeconomic spectrum – in other words, highly privileged persons – they had been and still were reaping the benefits of those privileges. Their lives mattered. Nobody needed to say so to convince the world of their importance. It was obvious to everyone but them.

The more I thought about the “Adults on Board” sign, the more it reminded me of the *#AllLivesMatter* countermovement that arose in response to *#BlackLivesMatter*. Both the “Adults on Board” sign and the *#AllLivesMatter* countermovement state seemingly obvious truths. I could hang a sign in my car advertising that an adult is “on board” and that “I want to live too.” I would hope, however, that the other drivers around me would already know these truths. Likewise, should there not be a commonly held belief that all people matter? As followers of Jesus in particular, we believe that life itself matters. These remain truths that, one

would think, need not be said. This seems particularly true when compared to their counterpoints.

In contrast to the ideology promoted by the “Adults on Board” sign and *#AllLivesMatter* stands the ideology that suggests it is important to consider and even highlight the vulnerable and oppressed driving and living among us. If “Adults on Board” states an obvious reality, a “Baby on Board” sign reminds other drivers of another, though somewhat less obvious reality: there are less visible though arguably more vulnerable persons on the road. In this manner, a “Baby on Board” sign sends a message not dissimilar to that of *#BlackLivesMatter*. Both act as reminders that there are others on roads and in the world that may be unseen, overlooked, or forgotten, yet remain important none the less.

Though some similarities exist, it is important to note a significant difference between a “Baby on Board” sign and the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement. While it seems unlikely that many would dispute the notion that babies are more vulnerable than adults, sadly many forget, ignore, or worse yet dispute the message of *#BlackLivesMatter*: the lives of Black people do in fact matter. The entrenchment of Whitecentrism and White privilege has stripped away the obvious nature of this reality. Many, particularly those who benefit from White privilege, become unable or unwilling to acknowledge the many ways this reality plays out on a daily basis. It obscures the fact that throughout history, Whitecentrism has elevated Whiteness as *the* standard to which all are to aspire, and positioned White people at the center of society, which in turn has pushed countless lives to the margins.

Jesus at the Margins

When discussing these subjects in the class mentioned above, one student made a point that has stuck with me ever since. He pointed out that if one considers the life and ministry of Jesus, it becomes obvious that though Jesus valued all lives, he intentionally recognized those on the margins. He welcomed and helped not only the elite, but also the poor. He conversed with the powerful and the powerless. He ate with the privileged and the oppressed. Numerous references are made throughout the gospels to Jesus meeting with people from across all corners of society, including not only those considered important such as men, Israelites, and Pharisees, but also those on the margins, such as women, children, Samaritans, tax collectors, prostitutes, soldiers, and many others.

Though Jesus saw all lives as being important, much of his work and ministry seems to have been focused on the oppressed and the marginalized. It was almost as if he were trying to communicate to those around him that the most vulnerable and marginalized persons in first-century Israel were in fact important. According to McKnight (2013), “Jesus changed the margins. He dared to draw new lines of acceptance with God the Father. Jesus paradoxically

made being marginal central.” In other words, Jesus’ actions seem to suggest a concentrated effort to bring those on the margins back to the center.

Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus is perhaps one of the better-known examples of demonstrating respect for someone at the center of society. In John 3, the writer describes how, when Nicodemus came to Jesus, Jesus received him; he did not turn away. Jesus valued Nicodemus as a person and welcomed him as such. His position as a Pharisee, one in the center of society, neither increased nor lessened his value in the eyes of Jesus. Other examples of Jesus welcoming persons in positions of power and privilege include his interactions with a rich young ruler (Luke 18), experts in the law (Luke 10), and a Roman centurion (Matthew 8), who, while being seen as existing on the margins of society to many in Israel, would have also been seen by many others as being in a position of power. In each of these examples, Jesus demonstrates respect and, to quote Jean Vanier, “an attitude...the constant openness of the heart...saying to people every morning and at every moment, ‘come in’” (1989:267).

In addition to welcoming people at the powerful center of society, arguably more examples of Jesus meeting with people on the margins of society can be seen throughout the gospels. Several of the more common examples of these encounters include the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), a woman caught in adultery (John 8), a man born blind (John 9), a tax collector (Luke 19), a man with leprosy (Matthew 8), and a blind beggar (Luke 18), to name just a few. Through both his actions (e.g., John 4) and stories (e.g., the story of “the good Samaritan,” Luke 10:25-37), he emphasized the value of Samaritan persons who, much like Black people of today, were seen and treated as second class citizens by Israelites. Time and time again, Jesus demonstrated his care for “individuals who were considered so unimportant that their names were not even recorded in Scripture” (Cleveland 2013). He focused his energies on the oppressed, seemingly because unlike many others, they were not already valued within their context. He seems to have understood the vulnerability that comes with being on the margins, and that the way to bring people back to the center was to deliberately recognize them.

In addition to the examples of Jesus acting to promote the lives of those on the margins through his actions, there are numerous examples throughout the gospels of Jesus affirming the value of the most vulnerable through his words. For example, in Luke 4:18-19, Jesus quotes from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (NIV). Jesus then said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21, NIV). In so doing, Jesus plainly communicated a message considered radical to both his time and our own: those who are forgotten, ignored, or in any way marginalized do in fact matter. They are people of value. Their positions in society determine neither their worth nor importance.

Conclusion

Though “God loved *the world* so much that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16, GNT, emphasis added), both the actions and words of Jesus demonstrate that it is the forgotten, ignored, and oppressed that must be consciously promoted. Though adults may be on board, it is the babies we must emphasize. Though all lives do matter, it is the lives of Black persons for which we must advocate. Though God loves all people and the experiences of all persons are important, it is the marginalized that we must work to bring back to the center. As noted by Cleveland (2013), Jesus “repeatedly and strategically emptied himself of his status by defending the defenseless, using his platform to draw attention to the voiceless, and paying close attention to justice issues that didn’t directly affect him.” He revealed the heart of a God who cares about the vulnerable.

In Mark 2:15-17, there is an account of Jesus having a meal in the house of Levi, a tax collector. The writer describes how many other tax collectors, as well as others on the margin of society, were at the table. Some of the Pharisees asked Jesus’ disciples, “why does he eat with such people?” We read that Jesus heard them and answered, “People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick. I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts” (GNT). Paraphrasing Jesus, we might say, “people who matter do not need hashtags or window signs. It does not need to be said.” Jesus reminded us that not only do those at the center matter, but so too do people at the margins, and that sometimes it is important to say so and leave it at that.

References

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