

Peaceful disagreement is not an oxymoron

The Bethlehem Gadfly Uncategorized September 27, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts responding to the George Floyd murder* 

selections from Bill Seaman, “Your View: I agree both that Black Lives Matter and that we need to support our local police.” Morning Call, September 27, 2020.

The headline in the print version of the paper was “Peaceful disagreement is not an oxymoron.”

Most of us like to have a way of expressing ourselves and our opinions publicly. We do it through bumper stickers, some of which are wallpapered across the entire back of our car. We do it through a letter to the editor, and an occasional few of us will rent sky banners towed by a small plane to express our love to someone we may be trying to impress.

But the medium of public expression as we lead up to the election is yard signs.

What caught my eye the other day was a “Black Lives Matter” sign immediately across the street from one that proclaimed “Support Your Local Police.” With the number of Black men who have been the victims of quick-triggering or choke holds, many concerned folks are agonizing as to if and how and why racism in our country has permeated even our law enforcement officers.

I recall that an integrated neighborhood in one of our larger cities had BLM signs on every yard or sidewalk up and down the street, and Washington, D.C., has included the slogan on Pennsylvania Avenue.

On the other hand, families of police officers and many others recognize the valor of individual officers and the chaos that would result if a law enforcement component was not present. Another sign calling on us to “Defund the Police” has been prevalent, an unfortunate choice of words generally meant to encourage municipalities to develop alternatives to the unnecessary use of force in situations of domestic unrest.

I would like to put up a two-faced sign, perpendicular to the street that says “Black Lives Matter” on one side and “Support Your Local Police” on

the other. I would like to do that because I fervently believe that both need to be said.

Several years ago, I participated in the civilian police training course offered by the city of Allentown. It enabled me to understand much better, not only the training and the commitment of law enforcement officers, but also the real threats they face. They deserve the support of citizens, even while we deserve accountability of individual officers who often face not only disrespect but physical threat.

But I have also come to understand the role that white privilege plays not only in our society, but in my life as well. I enjoy, in some unmeasurable way, a better situation in life, because of slavery and its lingering aftermath that has not allowed for equal valuing of Black lives, Black lives that do really matter.

Is that a “two faced” accommodation, my imaginary back-to-back sign in my front yard? Maybe. But too often in our political, religious and social life today, we find ourselves with an “either-or” mentality, when what is called for is a “both-and” approach. We assume the thoughts of some of us are always right, while those of others are always wrong.

We hear that Democrats want to destroy America, while being told that Republicans really want a dictator. Many of us regard the beliefs of other religious traditions as heretical or, worse yet, fabricate misunderstandings of them that feed into our hatred. We refuse to consider that someone of a different ethnic background or political persuasion or religious conviction may have an insight that we need to hear.

A long time ago, there was a teacher from a dusty town called Nazareth who spoke of loving our neighbors as much as we care about ourselves. Even if that neighbor puts out a yard sign that contradicts our yard sign.

Ideas and beliefs are not necessarily contradictory. Justice and mercy can co-exist. Peaceful disagreement is not an oxymoron. Respect for an individual who holds even fervently an opinion that differs from our own belief can lead to conversations that can be mutually enriching.

All lives matter. But there have been times such as our own in which some lives more than others need to be lifted up because they suffered much abuse. That was true at the time when a Fuhrer in Nazi Germany tried to unify hatred against Jewish people, and it was true in our beloved country when the first residents were labeled as “savages” and treated accordingly.

It is true now, when the demographics of injustice are indisputable to any person willing to think. So Black Lives Matter.

But there is also no question as to the need to “Support Your Local Police.”