

I've always loathed dodge ball. I remember having to play it in gym class. I'm pretty sure everyone in my class knew I was terrified of that ball. I wasn't fast, I wore glasses and I worried that the ball would break them. But the biggest reason I didn't want to play -- because I hated how much it hurt to have that ball slammed into me.

So of course, I became everyone's favorite target. Or—so it felt to me. The teacher didn't much care that I was scared, so I had no choice. "We're playing this game—why won't you play?"

*Jesus said to the crowd, "To what will I compare this generation?
"You are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another:
'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;'"*

Sometimes we don't want to play the game.

For the past few weeks, I've taken some verbal battering from some white people I know who have felt the need to set me straight when I say, "black lives matter."

"ALL lives matter!" they say to me with some heat. "White, red and yellow lives matter as much as black ones!" they say. Their brows are furrowed, and their voices are raised. "It's not a fair thing to say," they say.

I used to just let it go. It's not NICE to push things, I've been told. But I'm too old, and too exasperated to stay quiet now.

I point out that white lives have *a/ways* mattered. In fact, some might argue that white lives-- throughout history--have been the **ONLY** lives that mattered. All lives will matter **ONLY** when black lives matter.

Only then will we have fairness.

These friends – and relatives—are well-meaning, but these white children of God have never had the experience of being looked at with suspicion and hostility when they walk down their own street. Just because they're black. These lovely white people will never be stopped by police and harassed for driving too "nice" a car. That's all too frequent in the black community.

I recently read a story about a white woman who'd just relocated back to Michigan. She liked to drive with her large standard poodle-- who rode shotgun next to her while strapped in the front seat.

She wrote that she was increasingly puzzled, and then angry because she suddenly started being stopped by the police-- the first time was for running a stop sign—though she had stopped at it. Then she was stopped for driving too *slowly*. So- she got her speedometer checked and it was fine. But she soon was stopped again for driving too slowly. And again. She finally figured it out-- from the vantage point of the police car following behind her, the large, black standard poodle in the front seat was being mistaken for a black person. She was astonished. And angry. And realized that she was glad she was white—or she would have been very frightened. She began to understand the lived experience of people of color.

Some don't believe this story. Many more don't believe the stories of how differently black people are treated every day. Could it be that the truth is that they just don't want to hear about it? That somewhere inside it makes them feel complicit?

Do we? Do we ever find ourselves speaking heatedly when we want to assuage our real or imagined guilt?

Jesus said, you are like children who say "we wailed, and you did not mourn."

Have any of you been taken to task for standing with our black brothers and sisters as we all work to dismantle the systemic racism our country was built on?

If you have, I'm sorry.

I mean, as Christians we are expected to love— but then when we do, there are unwritten rules about people we shouldn't love that much: our enemies, people who step out of the mainstream of society, people who are different colors and religions, people who don't agree with us.

Sometimes it feels like we try and try to do the right thing, but it's either too much for some—or not enough for others.

“John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, ... Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.’”

Yes indeed. We will see the wisdom of our behaviors by what kind of fruit they bear. By what springs from our deeds.

I am tempted to see the Spirit’s hand in everything that is happening- the pandemic, the hardship, the protests. I don’t mean I think the Spirit caused all this to happen, but I am saying that God’s Spirit can work through any situation—no matter how desperate.

Here’s what I’m seeing. I’m seeing many followers of Jesus being very brave. Up until now we didn’t have the strength to look our faults of selfishness, greed, and systemic racism in the eye.

We’ve always tended to look back—reminiscing about the days gone by, when everything was better, when people all just got along. In other words, we too often succumbed to that age-old disease: nostalgia.

In reality— for many, many people--things were not perfect in the past. I don’t think it takes a crystal ball to see that there was no time in our history that things were perfect. Not for everyone.

But now I’m hopeful that we are finally brave enough to face it.

And why are we brave? Because of love.

If there’s one thing that the pandemic and the protests have shown us—it’s that we really are a world community, and what happens to one person, one country, one group affects us all. When we harm each other, we harm ourselves.

But I see bravery all around me. Even when we are weary or carrying too much to bear. Especially because we are weary and carrying too much to bear.

And why are we feeling brave? Because of Jesus. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle, and don’t think I’m better than anyone else. Take what I carry,” he says. All I’m carrying-- is love.

I think the time has come to follow Jesus into this brave new world of Love. Come take on some of God’s outrageous love that sees everyone. Love that unapologetically stands for justice for all, healthcare for all, love that speaks out fearlessly for people of color, and will walk with **anyone** who is not yet equally treated and say—enough!

There’s lots to lose heart about right now, and lots to worry about. But take heart, valiant ones. In all this turmoil something new and hopeful is starting to emerge: new, unfettered love for all our brothers and sisters.

Like we sang in the first hymn this morning:

“With unfailing love God holds us, every child of ever race. And when human hearts are breaking under sorrow’s iron rod, then we find that self-same aching deep within the heart of God.”

Carry the yoke that is easy to carry, easy to remember because it consists of one word: Love. Love with no qualifications, no exceptions, and no excuses. Because we are Jesus’, and his love makes us brave. Amen.