

Malden Reads: The Hate U Give
March 18, 2018
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First of all, I want to say that I'm really excited to be doing this sermon in conjunction with Malden Reads. As a relatively new resident of Malden, I'm was excited to learn that the city reads a book together. I'm also impressed with the choice the Malden Reads committee made this year, in picking a book that is topical, that touches on the issue of race, of police brutality, and of having the courage to speak up for what's right.

Now, before I get started, how many folks have read the book? How many have finished it?

Feels a little like being in a book club. Not everyone always finishes the book, right?

Well, that's ok. I'll give you an overview. I'll try not to give away any major spoilers, but reading this book isn't about spoilers, as much as it is about the experience.

So, this is my copy. The Hate U Give, by Angie Thomas. I ordered it online. And the first thing that struck me about it was that The Hate U Give spells "THUG," and that's what it says right there on the spine. I don't think the other copies actually have this. I didn't intend to buy the copy that had this. But this is the one I bought.

It stands for, of course, The Hate U Give, and, as is explained in the book, from early nineties rapper Tupac's idea of "Thug Life" in which, "Thug" stand for "The Hate U Give" and "Life" stands for "Little Infants F's Everybody" as in "The Hate U Give Little Infants F's Everybody" - Thug Life. We are all responsible - and impacted by - the racial and economic inequality in the world.

which stands for "The Hate U Give Little Infants F's Everybody," meaning we are all responsible for the inequality in the world and how it impacts all of us.

So, I have this book with the word "THUG" in huge letters on the spine.

And I, like a lot of other folks, I like to read on the T. Or in coffee shops. I like to read in public.

But, I have to tell you, that it was uncomfortable, for me, as a white guy, to be sitting in these public places, reading a book that just says "THUG" in big bold letters on the side.

That was my first clue of how reading this book was going to be for me.

It was going to challenge me, pull me a little outside my comfort zone, and help me to confront my own assumptions about police shootings.

This book covers the story of a teenager named Starr. Starr lives in a poor black neighborhood. And one day, on her way back from party, in the car with her friend Khalil, they are pulled over by the police.

I'm sure, even if you haven't read the book, you know where this goes.

Khalil is pulled over and asked out of the car. After the police officer tells him that he needs to stay on the hood of the car as he goes back to the police car, Khalil disobeys and goes to the window to ask Starr if she's ok.

And that is when, Khalil, unarmed, is shot. And killed. Right in front of Starr's eyes.

But, you see, nobody knows that she was the witness.

And so, she goes to school the next day. A prep school in a different neighborhood, mostly full of white kids. And none of them know about what happened to her. She doesn't tell her best friends or her white boyfriend what she saw. She pretends it didn't happen.

But then people start talking about Khalil and how he "deserved it." Because he was part of a gang (maybe) and selling drugs (definitely). This was not some story of the perfect kid. Yet, do these crimes justify a death sentence? The media certainly seems to think so.

Eventually, she goes public with her story, her friends find out - both her local friends and her friends at school, and, well nothing much changes in the wider world. The story ends like many other police shootings of unarmed black men. No justice. No consequences.

It's a funny thing to read a fictionalized account of something that has been happening publically, and that has finally had some light shown on it thanks to social media. Because in some ways it's prescriptive, it's predictable.

But when you read a book, you get to know the characters. You feel for them. You experience, in some way, what they feel. A well written novel, like this one, draws you into the lives of these people. They became, in some small way, a part of your experience.

Now, I have never personally known an unarmed Black man who was killed by the police.

At least, not that I am aware of.

But I - like you - have heard the news stories.

Oscar Grant, the first real person named on the list in the book, in Starr's voice, that Therese read just before this, was killed in 2009 in the San Francisco Bay Area. I was actually living in San Francisco at the time. Oscar was 22 almost the same age that I was, and he could have been my friend, he was my peer, we lived in the same metro area, right?

Some police officers had responded to reports of a fight breaking out at the station in the early morning of New Year's Day. Oscar, unarmed, and restrained by police officers, was shot in the back as he lay face down on the ground at Fruitvale Station.

It was caught on camera, not just by BART - that stands for Bay Area Rapid Transit - not just on BART cameras, but on the phone cameras belonging to private citizens, which were disseminated to media outlets.

It was clear that Oscar didn't need to be shot. The officer who shot him had control of the situation. But he was shot. Oscar died in a hospital in Oakland.

The protest began the next few days, but of course I didn't go.

I mean, I barely remember hearing much about it at all at that point. It was like Oscar and I lived in different worlds. And, in a way, we did.

The officer who killed him was eventually convicted of two years of involuntary manslaughter.

I didn't know much about Oscar Grant's story until years later when I was sitting on a plane and the movie "Fruitvale Station" came on. It shows the last day of Oscar's life - humanizes him.

Which is what we all need, really. For these stories to be humanized.

When we were talking in our staff meeting this week about this reading and these names at the end of this book that Therese read for us, Miranda, our Music Director, suggested that we include the faces of these people who were killed, to help us to think of them not just as a list of names. Because they are more than just a list of names.

But when I look at this list of names, I realize that it doesn't take long before I don't recognize them.

Like Aiyana, is the second one, right after Oscar.

Some Googling revealed to me that this must be referring to a seven-year-old girl named Aiyana Jones, who was killed when a police officer's gun shot her during a raid in Detroit in 2010.

A grenade had been thrown through the window of their house.

The reports of what happened inside afterwards are conflicting, and the officer was later convicted of involuntary manslaughter.

But Aiyana Jones. I didn't know her name.

There are others, who I know of course. Like Trayvon Martin, the next one on the list, who made me think of my friend Sean, a black man from Florida who grew up in a gated community like the one that Trayvon Martin had been killed in.

But still, it's never happened to someone I know. Someone I love. Someone I care about on a personal level.

So when I read this book it did two things for me. It personalized a fictional account of a real story that happens to real people in the character of Starr.

And it made me realize that, in this story, I wasn't relating to the protagonist, her family. I wasn't relating to the boy who got shot, or the people in the neighborhood that Starr and Khalil grew up in. It was so far outside of my experience.

No, in the story, I was the white kids at the prep school, totally unaware of what was happening to Starr in the "other" part of her life. Mistakenly believing that her life was just the same as mine, that her experiences were just the same as mine, that her chances of getting shot were just the same as mine.

There's this scene in the book I find especially relevant in these times.

The kids at Starr's prep school hear about what happened to Khalil, that he was unarmed and shot by police.

And so they get upset. And they decide to stage a protest during class.

But not Starr.

She feels unnerved that these people who are not connected to what happened are staging a protest to "get out of class." All the while, without anyone knowing, she sits in class, with her white boyfriend Chris, not being ok with this excuse.

Now, I am, like I'm sure many of you are, so excited and inspired by these teenagers who are speaking up after the Parkland shooting. I'm impressed with our students here in Malden and neighboring towns who are walking out because gun control is ridiculous in our country.

But they aren't the first youth activists of their generation.

Columnist Dahleen Glanton of the Chicago Tribune wrote this week about the teens involved in the walkouts:

We should all applaud these teens for having the guts to stand up to lawmakers in the way that adults have failed to for far too long. We stand with them in the struggle to make our schools and our nation safer from mass killers who strike indiscriminately with semi-automatic weapons.

But shouldn't we also pay attention when young people express their pain and frustration over the violent killings of unarmed African-American children and adults at the hands of unscrupulous police officers?

She goes on to question if the difference between these two is really simply a matter of race (which would be my first reaction - we listen to white voices more and mourn the losses of white lives more) or because of the justification of what happened.

And she wonders if, perhaps these young, black activist are not given the same respect and admiration, because in the back of our minds we wondering if these black folks who were killed by police did something that justified their deaths.

So let us remember that, just like Khalil is not perfect, none of us are. And if we were all caught and portrayed by the worst thing we did, we still wouldn't deserved to be killed. And none of these people did either.

Starr, our hero in the book, finds her voice eventually, and it's not with her white classmates. It's in her neighborhood, the Garden, when her lawyer hands her a megaphone and she gets up on a car and speaks her truth, the truth of what she saw, of what happened. It doesn't come without real consequences to her family and her neighborhood. But she knows she acted with integrity for what's right. Which is a lesson we could all learn.

But there are other lessons to take away from this book, for our lives:

Learn the stories of these young black folks who are killed. They are humans and their lives matter and the more we know about them, the more we humanize them, for ourselves and others, the more their deaths with outrage us. The more their deaths will be seen as unacceptable.

And listen to our youth when they are trying to tell us something. Like right now with the Parkland shooting. And all the youth of the Black Lives Matter movement. And Starr.

Sadly, the list of unfathomable deaths will only get longer. So let us look to these movements for hope and for direction. And let us listen to the stories as if they were our own.

And let us take a moment of gratitude for Angie Thomas for speaking her truth in this book, for we here at First Parish know that something doesn't have to be factually to contain truth. This book tells a story that is true to the experiences of so many in this country. So let us glean wisdom and courage from its pages.

And, as we say together here every Sunday, let us say together Amen.