

Editorial: Why we need to listen to protesters

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How do you feel about protesters?

What if a protester was your son or daughter?

What about counter-protesters?

Do you know any protesters personally? I do. And it makes a difference.

We need to listen to protesters, because each one is a human being created by God. We don't necessarily need to listen to agree. We do need to listen to love and to learn.

Perhaps the easiest way to listen to protesters is to engage them individually.

Protesting war

It was March 5, 2003. A Wednesday afternoon.

I was in my office in the Baptist Student Union across the street from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque when I heard unusual sounds, looked out the window and saw officers in riot gear. Some had dogs.

Then, I saw the line of anti-war protesters [across the street](#), marching between buildings toward University Boulevard. They reached the sidewalk where police were lining the street, turned south and marched to the intersection of Central and University, where they stopped and demonstrated.



A man protesting the pending war in Iraq holds a cross and Bible as he passes lines of police and dogs on University Boulevard in Albuquerque. The building in the background is St. Thomas of Canterbury Episcopal Church. Immediately to the left and out of the frame is the Baptist Student Union building where Editor Eric Black was taking photos of the protest March 5, 2003, when he was a collegiate missionary there. (Used by permission of Albuquerque Journal)

It wasn't a huge group of protesters, but it was enough that police felt the need to wear riot gear and have German shepherds.

Protesters later moved east to the intersection of Central and Cornell. When some of them entered the intersection that night, police responded with tear gas and arrests. It made national news.

I grew up after the Vietnam War. My childhood and youth were filled with stories of anti-war demonstrations. However many people were in photographs and newsreels of the protesting crowds, the people always were known by one name—protesters.

When I stepped outside the BSU that afternoon to take in the protest, I also knew the crowd by one name—protesters.

I walked back into the BSU abuzz with adrenaline. A little while later, one of the protesters walked through the same front door. His name is Jesse.

Jesse was one of our best and brightest students. He had a strong mission upbringing and a burning compassion for people enduring poverty. He was and is a justice-seeker. While I was surprised a BSU student was among the protesters that afternoon, I wasn't surprised it was him.

Protesting racial injustice

Fast forward to the end of May 2020, when protests erupted all over the United States and spread around the world over the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. Once again, we saw crowds of people protesting. As with past protests, many painted them with a single and disparaging broad brush.

It's easy to dismiss a crowd we don't know. It's harder to dismiss a person we do know.

I don't know in what protests my friend Pastor Joseph Parker may have marched during those early days of protest in 2020, but I know he shared [a video you must see](#). He opens the video saying:

“No stealing, no looting, no violence, no destruction is condoned, but here we are again having to directly protest nonviolently, because Black folk in America are sick and tired, in the words of Fannie Lou Hamer, of being sick and tired of racism and inequities. I wonder, do you hear us now? Do you see our wounds? The cry throughout the land is for us to have justice.”

Pastor Parker, like Jesse, is one of our best and brightest. His father was a pastor who participated in the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama alongside

Martin Luther King Jr. Pastor Parker has been and is a justice-seeker.

For me—if not for you—Jesse and Pastor Parker personalize protesters. They taught me to listen.

Protesters are people

We may not agree with protesters' proclaimed positions or aims. We may not condone all or any of their actions. But we must not disregard them. We must remember the crowd—however large or small—is a group of individuals, each one created by God. In fact, many of them may be our sisters and brothers in Christ.

Rather than painting a crowd of protesters with a single broad brush—coloring and dismissing the whole as unpatriotic, criminal, disreputable, ungrateful—we should refrain from rushing to judgment about every person in the crowd.

Protesters are not a monolithic group any more than you are a monolithic group that chafes when others paint you with a broad brush in disparaging terms because you're a Texan, a Baptist, a Christian or otherwise. Just as we want others to hear us and know us for who we are, most—if not all—protesters want the same.

If we believe in Christ's redeeming and reconciling work, then we know we are called to get involved in it, even if that involvement takes us to uncomfortable places, places that don't seem safe, prudent or respectable.

How many opportunities to love people the way Jesus loves us don't happen because we are more concerned about our safety, prudence and respectability? How many have I missed?

Today, as people protest the war in Gaza, we paint with a broad brush again. We label "antisemitic" all those protesting U.S. support of Israel.

Some of the protesters unashamedly are antisemitic, but the label may not fit every protester. Even if it did, you and I—as ambassadors of Christ—ought to find a way to listen to the protesters.

Listening to protesters

Why might a college student protest an imminent war predicated on shaky evidence? Why might Black people, during weeks of protests, call to be treated with dignity? As obvious as it may seem to us now, why might so many be protesting the current war between Israel and Hamas?

To know and maybe start to understand, we have to listen ... and not just to the protesters. We also need to listen to God's Spirit. What is God saying to us in this time? What is God saying to us as we listen to a young adult call out for justice—even, and maybe especially, if we disagree with how “justice” is defined and with how it's said and done? We will have to listen to find out.

To listen, [we have to be there](#).

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