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The T-Shirt

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The T-Shirt

In Mark 10: 17-31 of the Scriptures a rich young man approached Jesus and asked what he must do to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus explained that he shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, or bear false witness nor defraud another. He must also honor his father and mother. Having confidence that he had followed these things throughout his life the young man exclaimed "I am in" (non-biblical interpretation). Jesus then looked at the young man lovingly knowing that he was very rich and said "...You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

During the difficult and ongoing period of racial violence inflicted upon the African American community by police in the United States I was contacted by a young man who was very upset. The young man was infuriated by the hesitance of his institution's administration to respond in solidarity with ongoing protest to the murder of George Floyd. The young man felt as though the administration had acquiesced to the demands by him and his athletic peers to make a statement about the Black Lives Matter movement in a manner comparable to those of so many other institutions and individuals around the world had done. Rather than clearly and empathically voicing support for the Black Lives Movement, the institution selected to take a more modest stand by producing t-shirts with a less controversial statement like a prayer for peace.

Exacerbated and disillusioned on the phone the young man exclaimed "I don't know what to do; they are handing out t-shirts that say pray for peace rather than Black Lives Matter". After a moment of thoughtful reflection, I asked "Did you take the t-shirt"? His reply was "Yes I did". Hoping my delayed response to his would provide a moment of reflection for the young man, I asked "Did you give the shirt back"? After some hesitation his reply was "No".

At that moment I realized rather than resolving the issue I placed the young man in the more difficult position of reflecting upon his actions rather than focusing on those who neither looked like him or understand his outrage. He was now faced with a choice, return the t-shirt, and demand a more fervent response by the administration at the risk of his athletic standing or let it go. Our call ended and I do not know the decision that was made, but I could feel the weight of the decision on him as the call ended.

Often in our walk with Jesus we become comfortable in the relationship. When we believe we have all the prerequisites and are on track. Just when we settle in for the ride God uses someone or something to grow us in ways we have yet to encounter. I am certain this young man was sincere and passionate in his indignation, but righteous anger without reflection leaves us without a realistic view of the situation we find ourselves in and unable to weigh the impact of the decisions we make. In a recent study by DeAngelis (2021) black victims were overrepresented by population to police violence in the Mapping Police Violence Database (MPVD) while being underrepresented of this who exhibited mental illness, were armed on scene, or attempted to flee.

While I may never know whether this young man confronted his decision to risk it all in order to obtain the greater reward, I do wonder if the young man who encountered Jesus ever regretted his decision.

Reference:

DeAngelis, Reed T. "Systemic Racism in Police Killings: New Evidence From the Mapping Police Violence Database, 2013–2021." *Race and Justice*, 2021, p. 215336872110479.