



The power of the cross is the power of love

Sermon for Sunday, March 21, 2021 (5th Sunday in Lent, Year B)

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Our Lenten theme this year has been: "The power of love is God's power working in us."

Over the past four weeks, we've reflected on God's love in the form of covenant, that committed, steadfast relationship that God makes with all of humanity in the story of Noah, with the people of the Abrahamic religious traditions in the story of Abraham, and with Christians specifically in our baptism into Jesus Christ. We reflected on how the assurance that we are beloved of God can enable us to face suffering and let go of our fears.

We also reflected on how love and suffering are often intertwined, how truly loving in an authentic and deep way makes us vulnerable and opens us up to suffering, but that that suffering that is born of love can actually bring healing to our souls.

On this last Sunday in Lent, we find ourselves in the shadow of the cross. Our readings from Hebrews and the Gospel of John refer to Jesus's suffering – and to his prayers to be spared from that suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his death. As we prepare to walk the way of the cross once again during Holy Week, let us consider the cross in light of our Lenten theme: the power of love is God's power working in us.

As I said when I introduced this theme on the last Sunday after the Epiphany, although we might think of the way of the cross as the way of suffering and death, it is actually, on its deepest level, the way of love.

God so loved the world that he became one of us. God loved us so much that he experienced what we experience, feeling the depths of human suffering and despair. God in Jesus Christ loved us so much that he allowed himself to be killed rather than to fight back and harm even one of his beloved children. He loved us so much that he forgave us when we rejected and killed him. He loved us so much that he broke our cycle of violent retribution, coming back from the dead to offer peace to those who had deserted him.

Jesus was able to do this because he was so completely rooted and enveloped in God's love. He knew he was God's beloved and he was sent to make God's love incarnate in this world, and that gave him the strength to face rejection, suffering, and death, knowing that God's love was stronger than all of those things.

When we truly understand and experience that love, it has the power to transform our lives. The power of love illustrated in Jesus's death on the cross becomes the power of God working in us to build bonds of solidarity and love with all our relations in God's magnificent creation.

One of the most-used devotional practices during Lent and Holy Week among liturgical Christians is the Stations of the Cross. For me, meditating on the Stations of the Cross has helped me to connect deeply with the power of Jesus's love, recognizing in his death an expression of God's solidarity with all of human suffering, and has opened portals for me to connect more deeply with others' pain on a spiritual level. I'd like to share a story with you about that today.

In October 2005, I was attending the Spinning Wheel Film Festival in Toronto, a Sikh film festival where my friends Valarie Kaur and Sharat Raju were screening a rough cut of their documentary film on hate crimes against the Sikh community after 9/11, a film for which I served as communications director. I wasn't expecting to be invited to reflect on the Stations of the Cross at a Sikh film festival and wind up having one of the most profound Christian spiritual experiences of my life, but that's what happened!

One of the films that was screened at the festival was a short film created by a pair of Sikh identical twin sisters from England about their experience participating in an interfaith Stations of the Cross project sponsored by the Church of England.

Most of you are probably familiar with the devotional practice of looking at the Stations of the Cross as a means for connecting more deeply with the suffering of the world around us. You've probably seen depictions of the Stations of the Cross that show images of world events rather than images of Jesus's body on the cross. The iconic picture of a student facing down a tank in Tiananmen Square, refugees fleeing communities ravaged by war, or toxic waste being dumped into a stream all can invite us to see the crucified Christ in our midst today.

The project that the Sikh artists were invited to participate in was just that kind of project – but instead of inviting Christian artists to reflect on the Stations of the Cross and make connections to the suffering of the wider world, the church invited

artists of other faiths to "share in the suffering of Christ" by picking one of the stations and reflecting on it from the lens of their own faith.

The Sikh artists who were at this film festival had chosen the first station, "Jesus is Condemned to Die," and for it, they created a short film about the massacre of 5,000 Sikhs in the Golden Temple, the holiest place of worship in Sikhism, by the Indian government in 1984. While looking at images of traditional religious paintings they had created of this scene (it would be our equivalent of making an icon of the scene), we heard the words of a poem they'd written to accompany these images. It began:

"Condemned to die
For what possible reason?
A faith in one God and service to others
A love for all humans as sisters and brothers?"

When I heard these words, tears immediately began to pour from my eyes. A wave of emotions overwhelmed me as I heard the events of the massacre at the Golden Temple in 1984 interpreted through the lens of the Passion... or maybe it was the other way around – the Passion interpreted through the lens of 1984— and the ambiguity of it all was the beauty of it. The fact that the words we were hearing could be describing Jesus's crucifixion just as much as they could be describing the anti-Sikh violence of 1984 powerfully communicated the deep solidarity with all human suffering Jesus experienced on the cross.

In the closing of the film, the artists said something like, "The intent of this piece was to invite the artists to share in the suffering of Jesus. However, we hope that by depicting the story of 1984 in terms of one of the most widely understood and practiced faiths in the world, that we will enable people to share in (or understand) our suffering."

It worked. As a white Christian sitting in that mostly Sikh, mostly Indian audience, I felt a sense of deep, visceral connection to the suffering of the Sikh community that I had not felt before I was given this opportunity to reflect on how their suffering was connected to Christ's suffering.

As a result of that experience, I went on to re-create a similar interfaith Stations of the Cross at the parish in Nebraska where I served as an intern before I went to seminary. The parish used the interfaith stations as the basis of their Wednesday night Lenten series that year. (I will share the PDF of that set of stations with you

all later online.) One of the most powerful parts of that project for me was hearing reflections from those who participated in it – many of the people of other religions who created the images and reflections for the stations said it helped them to connect more deeply with the story of Jesus, even some who had previously had very negative experiences with Christianity and thought Christian theology had nothing to say to them personally on a spiritual level. Parishioners at the Church of the Holy Spirit said it opened deeper connections for them with the suffering of others.

As I grieved the shootings in Atlanta this week, I was reminded of that Stations of the Cross project from many years ago, particularly the reflection that Valarie wrote for the first station in my interfaith stations project. For the "image" of "Jesus is Condemned to Die," Valarie showed the first 10 minutes of our documentary film, and wrote her reflection based on the story of the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi, the first man to die in hate violence after 9/11, on September 15, 2001, shot in the back outside his gas station in Mesa, Arizona by a man who called himself a patriot and thought he was retaliating against the terrorists. Her reflection began:

"They were afraid of the ones they could not understand. They reached for their weapons and marched in the streets. 'You are the enemy,' they said to the man with light in his eyes. His face shone with God, but they could not see the divine in him. They could only see strangeness."

Those words have stuck with me for years, and I remember them every time another story breaks of innocent lives lost as a result of racism and misunderstanding. "They were afraid of the ones they did not understand" – or know. "They could not see the divine in them."

The same was true of the crowds who killed Jesus: they could not see the divine in him. That piercing reality is at the root of so much suffering and violence in our world today – when we cannot see the divine in others, we feel justified in attacking them, and in extreme cases, even killing them, like this shooter in Atlanta.

As we prepare to enter Holy Week and walk the way of the cross with Jesus once again, I invite you to allow the message of God's profound, steadfast and unconditional love to transform how you see the ones you are afraid of, the ones you don't understand, the ones in whom you cannot see the divine – whoever they are. The power of love is God's power working in us to transform enemies into sisters and brothers, moved by the depths of God's love expressed in solidarity with all human suffering on the cross.