

Good Friday

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On a cold evening in Feb 2021, a Chinese man was walking home near Manhattan's Chinatown neighborhood when a stranger suddenly ran up behind him and stabbed him in the back with a knife. In another incident in Queens, New York, a man called an Asian American mother the "Chinese virus", and spat on her child.

Do you remember a year or 2 ago, a 65-year-old Filipino woman walking down a street near Times Square in broad daylight, was suddenly hit in the stomach by a man. She fell onto the sidewalk, and the man then kicked her in the head, again and again. He yelled an obscenity at her, and then said, "You don't belong here." While this was happening, three men watched from the lobby of a nearby luxury apartment building. When the woman struggled to stand up, one of the men, a security guard, closed the front door of the building, leaving the woman defenseless. The security guard later said he was afraid.

Hate comes against people of Asian descent happen all over the country, and here in Boston, too; and in Arlington as well.

These attacks are changing the lives of many Asian Americans. They are afraid to go out, go out alone, and also to be in the crowds since attacks can come from behind and in front of them.

What are our responses to these hate crimes? Do we feel terrible and then forget about the people impacted by them? Are we observing from afar, like the disciples watching Jesus being crucified, afraid to get involved? Making those being attacked feel abandoned?

Often Asian Americans are attacked by words and attitude. A few weeks ago, House Republicans claimed that Dominic Ng, President Biden's appointment to lead the country's trade interest in Asia, should be investigated for potential ties to the Chinese Communist Party because of his last name. When Judy Chu, House democrat from CA, along with other House Democrats, defended Ng, Judy Chu's loyalty and competence is being questioned.

These things happen frequently. Are we just staying quiet, and in our silence allow one segment of our neighbors live in fear and bear the burden of racism? Have we abandoned them?

Of course, it is not just Asian Americans who experience hate crimes. At least 229 Black people have been killed by police officers across the U.S. in 2020 since George Floyd's murder. The latest murder that we know of a Black person by police officers is Tyre Nichols in Memphis. As he was brutally attacked, two Memphis Fire Department emergency medical workers and a lieutenant ignored his cries for help. They abandoned him.

What happened to the solidarity we showed with the Blacks right after George Floyd's death? Are we now watching from a distance and leave our Black neighbors in this country to their own defense? Are we abandoning them?

Black people are also victimized by racial profiling. Remember Karen in Central Park? Do you know that Henry Louis Gates Jr. had also been racially profiled by his neighbor?

Are we in solidarity with our indigenous brothers and sisters? Our Jewish brothers and sisters with the rise in antisemitic crimes? I can't help but wonder, with our silence and lack of action, have we abandoned our neighbors in their times of need?

Abandonment and betrayal is not a new human behavior. We know very well Peter denies being one of Jesus' disciples 3 times while Jesus is testifying boldly to the high priest (18:19-23), What is surprising and perhaps puzzling is that earlier in 13:37, Peter vows that he would lay down his life for Jesus. And during the last supper, Peter says, 'Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.' And then he is not around while Jesus carries his own cross up the hill, nor is he standing at the cross with the women and the beloved disciple. He does not participate in the preparation of Jesus' body for burial. In the face of fear, Peter abandons his friend, his teacher, his master, his Lord.

Pilate realizes that Jesus is an innocent man. Three times he says he could find no case against Jesus. Pilate is also a powerful man; he is the Roman governor, and it is within his power to release Jesus, to do what is right and true. But fearing pressure from the crowd, Pilate abandons his power and Jesus, and hands an innocent man over for execution (19:16).

This is why we call today “Good Friday.” If we believe in Jesus’ life, ministry and messages, then we believe this as well - our suffering God does not leave us alone, our loving God does not abandon us. When we are dying, in our death, in our despair, pain, in our doubts, our wanderings, when we are being attacked physically or verbally, there is “nothing that Jesus does not hold in his crucified arms,” a commentator point out.

Some people say there are two kinds of courage: one kind reacts bravely to dangerous and distressing situations that come up suddenly, and another kind can anticipate danger and continue with the planned course of action. And Jesus especially shows this second kind of courage during the last weeks and days of his ministry. He sees the cross ahead of him and does not waver from his mission to show God’s love, and criticize what is not of God’s love.

In some of the Lenten readings, we see the extent Jesus goes to to bring people into God’s love, especially those who are on the margin of society - Jesus makes the point of having a conversation with the Samaritan woman; going against the Sabbath law to restore sight to a young man who had been blind since birth; and raising Lazarus from the dead knowing that this would anger the religious authorities and get himself killed. At the Last Supper in the Gospel of John, Jesus washes the feet of the disciples and give them the 2 great commandments. Before he dies, that’s the message he wants the disciples and us to remember - to love as God loves, and God does not abandon anyone.

Jesus, allowing himself to be arrested and crucified is not a tragic accident or a careless miscalculation, but rather an intentional act of courage and love, his self-giving love. In the garden, he does not pray for relief. On the cross, Jesus bears / absorbs the violence, the contempt, the pain, and the humiliation of the entire world. His extended arms make room for everyone, all those who are abandoned, oppressed, wrongly accused, imprisoned, beaten, mocked, and murdered. He opens his arms to let God’s love, forgiveness, healing and hope flow through his wounded body so that God’s new life, love and hope can grow and fills the earth. While on the cross, Jesus shows us what God’s new life and love is about. Once again, he redefines what a family is. On the cross he shows us that families are not about being connected by blood, but by love, caring for one another. It is said, “the cross pulls us towards God and each other.” And Jesus asks his disciple to take care of his mother Mary, and Mary will love the other disciple as her son.

Our call is to take up the cross as Jesus does, and to love as God loves us. So we identify ourselves with those who are crying for help, weeping, suffering, and dying. We don't just look at the suffering and injustice then look away, but to dwell there in the pain and suffering and those who hurt because of it, whether physically or emotionally, recognizing Christ crucified is in every suffering soul and body that surrounds us, and pouring our energies and our lives into alleviating that pain — no matter what it costs. And yes, we know there could be a cost.

After Jesus' resurrection, Peter boldly picks up the cross. He embraces Jesus and Jesus' ministry, and Peter suffers for the sake of the gospel. He was martyred. But suffering is not his ultimate goal. Being faithful to the cause of Christ is. Our goal, our focus should be faithfulness to our calling in Jesus Christ. And when we do have to pay a price, God will give us the strength to persevere and to love, and God's love always triumphs. And God does not abandon us. Amen.

Inspired by Lindsey Jody, David Lose, Debie Thomas, Debra J. Mumford, Craig Koester, David Lose