

Over the Rhine

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I could not have predicted on Palm Sunday 2001, a day filled with bright sunshine, Hosannas, Palms, and a triumphal procession, partnered with music and celebration, that the next few days would plunge me into the passion and death commemorated by Holy Week celebrations.

What began as a bright and beautiful week marked by sunshine, warm weather and expectant hope of the Easter celebration to come, quickly transformed into the experiences of anger, confusion, fear, and despair, stemming from the shooting death of Timothy Thomas by the actions of the Cincinnati Police. The resulting violence in our city brought me to a deeper understanding of the Holy Week journey.

Our lives here in Over-the-Rhine became an experience of walking the passion, death, and hopefully, the resurrection of Jesus.

Tuesday, on my ride home from St. Francis de Sales School, where I teach the fifth and sixth grades, I was irritated at the traffic that I experienced on Liberty Street, wanting only to get home to rest from a hard day. I was aware of the shooting of Timothy Thomas, was angered by this, and had been thinking about what my response should be, but I was unaware of the depth of anger this action had engendered in my neighbors of Over-the-Rhine.

As I passed Vine Street, noticing the armed police in riot gear, blocking the street, I knew that something terrible was in the offing, yet still I was thinking only of the inconvenience I presently faced. As I passed Race Street, I noticed the large crowd who had gathered. I then knew that my neighborhood was in trouble. When I came to Elm Street where I usually turn, it too was blocked. Rolling down the window to ask what streets were open so I could get home, I was met with a very flustered and uninformed police officer. His response to my question was, "I don't know. Move along."

After finally getting home, I turned on the TV to find out what had happened to spark this activity, and to my surprise, found no information. Not on any of the local TV stations, nor on the other news networks. It was as though what was happening in the streets of my neighborhood wasn't really happening.

That night, as we gathered for night prayer, the sounds of screaming and gunshots, helicopters and sirens were the backdrop for our prayer. Huddled in our upper room chapel, we sang our psalms about the rest and peace we find in the arms of our God.

How distant these words seemed as the sounds of chaos and violence surrounded us. As our prayer ended, I could see the flow of fire at Findlay Market, which sits across the street from our Marianist Community.

I knew the peril that prowled our streets, but felt compelled by faith to witness what was going on in our neighborhood. I witnessed Evil that night. I witnessed horrors, which will be forever burnt into my memory.

Both the police and residents of the neighborhood were acting without thought. I witnessed groups of young people, like the ebb and flow of a tide, run toward and away from the violence in our street, as though they were at a carnival or concert. I witnessed a group of police (about 12) open fire – no warning from them, and no provocation toward them – on a group of neighbors (about 15) who were headed for New Prospect Baptist Church, where non-violent strategies were being sought to end the violence in our city. Screams and panic followed.

How could people, many calling themselves Christians, act this way? How could a neighborhood, which has so much to offer by way of community spirit and mutual support, slip into the violent chaos that I was witnessing? How could a police department be so blind not to see that its actions, far from suppressing the violence and anger, was actually fueling the fires of resentment?

Where was Jesus' healing presence in this time of great need? Jesus was there in the Garden of Gethsemane, with me, praying that if it be God's will, this cup of suffering would pass by.

I prayed that night like the disciples must have prayed when Jesus was arrested, and they all scattered. Alone in their fear, anger and confusion, they must have felt the abandonment of all their hopes and dreams, as I did that night.

Our Marianist community brings young people into our neighborhood to work and reflect, in order to try to eradicate the racism and classism that plague our society. We try to bring to light the stereotypes and prejudices that influence how the rest of society treats those who are poor. We speak of the responsibility of all Christians to act on behalf of the poor, to act as hands of our God. We speak of the community spirit that can be found among those who are poor and the gifts and graces, which one can receive from those who are poor.

In one night I felt that our mission of the past 7 years was undone; that our hopes for a better world, where all have enough was shattered; that the efforts that the people of Over-the-Rhine have made over the years to make a life a little more bearable would now be wasted. I felt evil had won. Like the disciples, I wanted to run and hide.

On Wednesday, I entered my classroom, filled with African American students, who were relentless in their need to find comfort, meaning, and hope in light of the past night's events. I faced students who were filled with anger, confusion, hopelessness, and a thirst for vengeance. I had few answers for them.

But I listened.

I reflected with them through our Christian stories of Holy Week.

We talked about betrayal, Jesus' betrayal by Judas, and society's betrayal of those who are poor. We talked about the fact that in the presence of arrest and violence, Jesus stood nonviolently and passively as he experienced beatings at the hands of government officials. We reflected on the individual Christian's responsibility to stand with the poor and oppressed, even if it costs us our well-being, our peace of mind, even our lives.

We reflected on where hope comes from in the face of violence and oppression. We talked about family and community spirit. We spoke about, and listened to, what it means to carry on Jesus' mission, when Jesus seems so far away. We talked about modern saints and martyrs who walked with those who were experiencing the oppression and violence society imparts to those who are poor.

We talked about our own classroom and how we enable each one of us to become the person that God envisions. We talked about the responsibility each Christian has to see to it that every individual, whether deserving or undeserving, is given the tools they need to take a step closer to the Kingdom of God. We reflected on what it means to constantly stand with open hands and hearts, even though few care to take advantage of what we have to offer. And we talked about the strength and conviction that it took for the disciples to leave their hiding places after their hope had been crushed in order to carry on Jesus' mission of the Kingdom.

I left school that day realizing that these few students had heard a message different from the ones they were hearing in the news or on the streets. I left with hope that these few students would be the seeds and saplings needed to give strength and energy to a very troubled city. I left with hope.

Then looting began.

Once again I found myself on the step outside our apartment building. Yet this time my anger and confusion didn't stem from the violence and oppression perpetrated toward those who are poor but from the actions of my neighbors.

I could understand how years of pent up frustration, lost hope, and oppression could lead man to unbridled violence . . . how the feelings of a community cut off from mainstream life have no recourse but to lash out, but I found no such understanding or compassion in the face of the looting which accompanied the past nights' violence.

What I witnessed this night was mob behavior, the kind of behavior that led a crowd to lust for death of Jesus. Crucify him, crucify him.

I witnessed the very real Evil of Greed take over my neighbors (some very young and some in their 40s and 50s), stemming from the fact that they could now, under the cover of darkness and violence, acquire the material possessions, which until this moment, were unavailable to them.

I wondered this night, where were the police that were so prevalent the night before? Where were the voices of reason to admonish this crowd to think about what they were doing? Where were the sirens and helicopters on this night?

I found myself alone, and yes, afraid, one individual against a tide of evil. What was I called to do?

I began to say to those who passed me, "Think about what you are doing."

This mantra was met with a myriad of responses, from "Who are you?" to jeers, to advice that I better get my "ass" off the streets, to being ignored completely as folks went about their business. The most disturbing response was the laughter. An evil laughter that showed me how powerless I was to influence anyone this night. Evil had possessed my neighbors, and all I could do in the face of it was to admonish people to think.

I wept that night, as Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I long to take you under my wing, as a mother hen gathers her chicks.

There was one individual, a young man around 17 or 18, who made several trips by me in the alley behind our building, stashing his stuff. He had a large smile on his face each time he passed me. I asked him why he was taking part in the madness and violence in our neighborhood. His response was, "Nobody cares what happens to me, and this is my chance to get what the rich people have."

How could a young man, in the prime of his youth, feel so cut off from others? How could he think that by looting anything would change? All these questions repeated over and over in my head.

I also witnessed a man, obviously from outside the neighborhood, stash the stuff he was stealing in his van, and then lock his doors so no one would be able to steal it.

It was after this that it hit me.

We Americans have bred this behavior into our citizens. From the youngest age, we nourish our children's milk laced with the message that our possessions equal our worth. Our success and happiness in this country is marked by possessions. The more I have, the more important I am. And above all I must protect what I call my own.

Think about it. If we accomplish something in our jobs or in school or in our families, what do we usually do? We buy something; a new car, a nice meal, a new house, a night on the town. We spend much of our income in protecting the things we own—through insurance, alarm systems, weapons—afraid that someone will take them from us. All of us in this country are constantly barraged by this vision from every angle. Yet for our brothers and sisters who are poor, this option is unobtainable. So when the opportunity presents itself . . . ?

This is not a new reality, yet this night, as I saw my neighbors acquire and protect the material possessions with which we measure worth and success, I recognized how powerful and insidious the evil of greed really is, how our economy breeds this greed into each of us. I recognized how strong a hold greed has on all citizens of our country, whatever faith we profess. I had to admit to myself that the only difference between myself and my neighbors this night was the fact that I didn't need to steal in order to satisfy my desire for material goods. I have the ability to buy them.

As I sat there in Judgment of my neighbors' behavior, I was forced to recognize that my sin this night was to think I was different, far removed, and guiltless of the sin going on around me.

Let the guilt be on us and our children shouted the crowds crying for Jesus' crucifixion.

I spent the rest of that night praying for forgiveness for our country and myself.

I found out later that the reason no police were present while the looting was going on was that a police officer had been shot at in the southern part of Over-the-Rhine, and all officers were called down to look for the perpetrator, leaving the majority of the neighborhood to fend for itself. Who was looking for the officers who shot at the unarmed crowd the night before? Who was watching out for and protecting the businesses that were being looted for three hours? Who was there for my neighbors who were not taking part in the violence? These questions and more continue to occupy my thoughts and prayers.

Thursday once more found me exhausted and trudging off to school, to be met once again with questions and concerns from my fellow teachers and students. Many offers of sanctuary were offered to members of my community, but who would offer sanctuary to my neighbors? Did I count more than my neighbors did? As much as I would have liked to escape the chaos going on around me, I had no choice but to stand with my neighbors, as John and Mary stood at the foot of the cross. How could I abandon my brothers and sisters in need? Who will witness to these well-meaning folks that it is not my well-being that they should be concerned about, but the well-being of my neighbors. This idea was met with blank stares.

On the other hand, one of our eighth grade students made a point to ask how I had weathered the storm of the night before, recalling me to the fact that she too lives in my neighborhood. This shared suffering and understanding between myself and this student meant more than all the words of compassion and support I received from those outside our neighborhood.

As we gathered to pray as a school, acting out the Passion of our Lord, I found myself making many, many connections between the passion and death of Jesus and the present struggle of our neighborhood and city. I found myself longing to gather with my own Faith Community at St. Francis Seraph church, to share the pain of the past couple of days, in prayer and celebration. My hope of resurrection now lay in the upcoming Triduum celebrations, where as a community, we could celebrate the hope of new life stemming from the violence and death which now surrounded us. Yet this was not to be. A curfew was enacted for the city of Cincinnati to try to control the looting of the night before.

More questions surfaced. Why wasn't a curfew enacted on Wednesday? Was it only because of the looting of the night before? Did material goods count more than people? And what of our Triduum celebrations? Were we to be deprived of even our Faith Communities? Would this curfew extend to deprive us of our Easter Vigil? The answer to these questions was yes.

I cannot express the despair I felt at not being able to celebrate with our Faith Community our High Holy Days.

As we gathered in our house for Holy Thursday Eucharist the curfew began. The four members of our local Marianist community found ourselves battling the sounds of police sirens and four helicopters that were patrolling the neighborhood, watching out for curfew violators.

The central symbols of Holy Thursday stood out like a beacon this night. A Gathering of Friends in an upper room; Water with which we are called to be servant to those in need; Bread Broken as Body in our sundered community; Wine poured out as Blood, as a sign of the Covenant of new life to come; and a Desperate Prayer in the Garden for strength for the suffering to come. How potent these symbols were, as we raised our voices over the clamor coming from outside our windows.

Good Friday, the Way of the Cross. Never before experienced as it was this year. I found myself not an observer but a participant. We were carrying our own cross, wondering whether God could truly turn our suffering into resurrection. A day spent praying and searching for faithfulness. Three times Jesus fell, each time struggling to get up and continue the journey asked of him by God. Met by women in despair, who sought to offer comfort. The agony of knowing the journey's end will not bring an end to suffering, but only more suffering. Waning hope and waning faith.

The Easter Vigil was canceled as the curfew continued.

Funeral Services were held for Timothy Thomas on Holy Saturday.

As predicted, as family, friends, and neighbors gathered to mourn the death of Timothy Thomas, continued disregard for the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood continued. The one major parking lot at Findlay Market, across the street from New Prospect Baptist Church, from which Timothy Thomas was to be buried, was commandeered by "The Media."

Although this might seem like a small thing, it was a piece of disregard and disrespect directed toward those who are poor in my neighborhood. Once again those who exercised power and influence set up shop with little thought of those who had great reason and need to gather and support each other.

Rather than reserve space for those who needed it the most, they (the media) believed and acted as if theirs was the greater need.

Because of this, those who gathered to mourn, and to lay Timothy Thomas to eternal rest, had to face the added burden and stress of finding adequate parking. When I asked them why they had decided to take up so much of the parking area needed for Family and Friends, the answer was, “We needed this space and hookups for our satellite trucks.” In their minds, their need outweighed the needs of those who gathered to mourn.

I approached a van (media) which was parked in front of the garage where we park our cars—it has a large gate, and the curb in front of it is painted Yellow, and asked for the van to be moved. The media person in the passenger seat replied, “Oh, we didn’t notice there was a gate here.”

How typical a response, one I’ve heard many times throughout our years here: from suburbanites who shop at Findlay Market; from outsiders who come to the Baseball Opening Day Parade; from Media who want to get their story. How many in Jerusalem didn’t notice the gruesome cross of his execution?

This is one of the reasons for the violence and unrest here in our city over the past week. We (those who have power and influence) don’t notice or listen to how our behaviors and practices impact the needs of the poor. We don’t notice or listen to the fact that to be African American, young, and male makes one automatically suspect. We choose to ignore the fact that we are still executing men and women in our midst. We don’t notice, or ignore, until violence erupts, and then we wonder why these people are doing such things.

Even on this day, after all that had been experienced the past few days, the police opened fire on a crowd of folks, unprovoked, and with no warning to disperse, who had come to pay respects to Timothy Thomas and his family, sparking more fear, anger, and protests.

Is resurrection possible from these experiences? Will the tomb be found empty upon the dawning of the new day? Or will this hope be shattered?

We are indeed fighting New Wars (this statement of Chaminade definitely holds new meaning in my life) against the evil that plagues our world, against hopelessness in the face of violence, against fear for our safety, against the malaise which causes us to do nothing. What will be our strategy? Who will we align ourselves with? What will be our cost? And are we willing to pay it to be faithful to our mission to youth and to the poor?

Rest in Peace, Timothy Thomas, and may your death, as tragic as it was, bring the hope of resurrection to our world, which continues to cry out for Justice.

Easter Sunday dawned, gray and rainy.

As we gathered for Easter Sunday Services at St. Francis Seraph, to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, Life from Death, I found myself praying very hard for renewed faith in resurrection . . . a faith that has been sorely tested this Holy Week.

As we in Over-the-Rhine wait for Justice, for compassion on the part of the rich for the poor, for an end of racism and classism in our city, for economic equity within our country and world, I am strengthened by a small group of Apostles who stood up within the midst of their fellow citizens and proclaimed the great news that one who was dead is now raised to life; that the suffering experienced by the one crucified has redeemed and brought the world to a new freedom. Can this be a witness of the

experiences of the people of Over-the-Rhine? Can our suffering bring new life to our city, our country, and our world?

This is what our Faith in Jesus' resurrection promises us. But only if it is a practiced Faith, by all of us . . . active and vocal on behalf of those who cry out for justice.