

"Either death is final, or love is final."

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 19, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

"We spend most of our days in denial, until the day it is no longer possible," writes Michael Gerson in his column this morning. "The options are relatively simple: Either death is final, or love is final. You wanted justice, didn't you?" says J.B.'s wife in Archibald MacLeish's play. "There isn't any? Only love.?"

Here, in essence, is the Christian proposition. Why do we place crucifixes in our classrooms and bedrooms and hospital rooms? Because we believe that love, not death, is final and that love is available even when justice is denied. Why do our celebrations of Easter touch something so deep in our hearts? Because we believe that death, the one hurdle no human can overcome on his own, has been overcome and overcome by love, by God's love.

Yesterday, in Boston, a group of religious and political leaders gathered, appropriately, in the Cathedral of the Holy Cross to pray in the wake of the Boston Marathon attack. I say appropriately because it is Boston, and the Catholic Church is largely the only game in town these days. But, at a deeper level, it was appropriate to gather in a cathedral dedicated to the Holy Cross because Boston found itself, unexpectedly, in the shadow of the Cross Monday afternoon. And, at a still deeper level, it was appropriate to gather in the Cathedral of the Holy Cross because the Cross is no longer a sign of defeat, betrayal, violence and death, but the font of eternal life.

I normally dread these interfaith services, even while recognizing their necessity. The need to scrub our religious sense from its particularity that such events seems to require leaves us usually with vague, anodyne, depersonalized statements of hope, not the sure hope in the Resurrection of Jesus on which our Catholic faith is based. But, yesterday's service actually highlighted, it did not diminish, the particularities of our different faiths. The rabbi invoked the lament of the psalmist. The imam spoke from the Islamic Scriptures. The Christian ministers spoke of Jesus. All related their particular faith to the common suffering of the moment, but there was nothing anodyne or depersonalized about it, no "civic religion" talk. Thank God.

Cardinal O'Malley sat with the other religious leaders in a row of chairs in front of the altar. He did not, as the rubrics prescribe, sit on his cathedra. Like Pope Francis recognizing that the rubrics of Holy Thursday were not going to stand in the way of his washing the feet of women, and non-Catholics, Cardinal O'Malley did not need a master of ceremonies or a canon lawyer or a liturgist to tell him where to sit. He sat with the others. His words were, as usual, magnificent:

The Sermon on the Mount, in many ways, is the Constitution of the people called to live a new life. Jesus gives us a new way to deal with offenses, by reconciliation. Jesus gives us a new way to deal with violence, by nonviolence. He gives us a new way to deal with money, by sharing and providing for those in need. Jesus gives us a new way to deal with leadership, by drawing upon the gift of every person, each one a child of God.

*In the face of the present tragedy, we must ask ourselves what kind of a community do we want to be, what are the ideals that we want to pass on to the next generation. It cannot be violence, hatred and fear. The Jewish people speak of *Tikkun Olam*, "repairing the world." God has entrusted us with precisely that task, to repair our broken world. We cannot do it as a collection of individuals; we can only do it together, as a community, as*

a family. Like every tragedy, Monday's events are a challenge and an opportunity for us to work together with a renewed spirit of determination and solidarity and with the firm conviction that love is stronger than death.

The President also was at his best. He did what presidents must do in such circumstances, naming the dead and telling us a bit about them, humanizing them. He commended the first responders for their bravery. He promised the prayers of the nation. President Obama also struck the principal theme of the day:

You've shown us, Boston, that in the face of evil, Americans will lift up what's good. In the face of cruelty, we will choose compassion. In the face of those who would visit death upon innocents, we will choose to save and to comfort and to heal. We'll choose friendship. We'll choose love.

I am often disappointed in this president but I was not disappointed yesterday.

This morning, the news is that one of the suspected bombers is dead and the other is being chased. They were brothers. When we all saw their pictures for the first time last night at the FBI briefing, I couldn't get over how young they were. They are reportedly from Chechnya, a country where violence has made the young old. I do not hate these young men, although I hate what they did. The catalogue of human iniquity has another chapter that they wrote with their young hands but their chapter will not be the last. One of them is dead, perhaps the other will be tried, but in such a situation, is there ever really justice? Justice will not bring back the victims. Future presidents will go to future interfaith services to mourn the dead. Future cities will be terrorized by senseless violence. Death and evil never rest. But, they never win either. ?Either death is final or love is final.? Yesterday, in the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, we were all invited to decide where we wish to stand, with death or love.

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