

Lord, if you had been here

Peace Vigil, February 5, 2009, Logan Square

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In the eleventh chapter of John's gospel is the profound story about Jesus going to the grave of his friend Lazarus. Jesus was a close friend of Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. When he hears that Lazarus is gravely ill, he heads off to where they lived in the little place called Bethany and he arrives only after Lazarus is already dead. Martha is told that Jesus is on his way and she leaves her sister mourning in the house to go out and meet Jesus. She says to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." She's not criticizing Jesus or saying it out of bitterness, she's simply expressing her deep faith that Jesus can accomplish anything. For his part, Jesus doesn't just pat her hand and offer some pious reassurances. No, he goes to the tomb of his friend and he weeps. Actually the original bible text in Greek suggests that Jesus isn't merely sad about Lazarus' death. He is angry. He's angry about the power death has over us.

I will never forget a conversation I had once with a friend who was serving as a priest in the central city of Milwaukee. His parish was a center for after school education, it had a lunch program for homeless people and outreach programs for many youth and young adults in the neighborhood. This is still a rough neighborhood in Milwaukee and in those days it was really quite dangerous. My friend's parish was a place of safety and service for people in the community and it was never vandalized or harmed in any way. The people respected the work of the church there and so they protected it.

Violent crime was a feature of the daily life of the neighborhood and murders were not uncommon. My friend's parish was occasionally the scene for funeral services for those who suffered violent deaths so as horrible as it was, they were not unused to it. But there was a case that shocked and horrified the whole community one summer afternoon. A young teenage girl shot and killed another girl in the middle of the day out on a busy street. It seems to have been the culmination of an argument they'd been having about a boy. These girls had been participants in the after-school tutoring program in the church and so the funeral was scheduled to take place there too. My friend the priest had to help a grieving family plan the service. And here's what he said to me about trying to understand what could have led to such a terrible event. He said, "I don't think there's any question that she meant to kill the other girl ... I just don't think that she understood that if she killed her she would be dead."

With people everywhere we mourn the violent deaths of children and adults in the city of Chicago. We have to do everything in our power to bring to an end the cycles of violence that result in the murders of children in this city. So much of this violence is rooted in the despair of poverty and racism. It feeds on hopelessness and the devaluation of life, and it's fueled by the ready availability of guns and the alternative appeal of gang life. Life on the street becomes so cheap, so disposable that it is possible for far too many young people in particular to imagine that death could be a permanent consequence of violence. And even more chilling, in many instances the violence is not on the street but in the home—a parent, spouse, partner or sibling taking their

anger out on another family member. There have been far too many deaths by violence in Chicago streets and homes, whether adults or children.

For Christians every murder is a blasphemous act because every man, woman and child who lives or dies is made in the image of God. Let tonight be a call to all of us who follow Christ to do everything in our power in taking action against the perpetuation of systems of injustice and discrimination in our society. We must also be more alert to the incidence of family violence in our communities, educating our members, speaking out against domestic violence and sexual assault, and providing safe space and comfort for victims and those mourning the loss of a loved one. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord if you had only been here my brother would not have died." Well my friends, where Jesus Christ is present, there is hope, there is the possibility that life will have the final word.

St. Teresa of Avila wrote this:

Christ has no body now but yours
No hands, no feet on earth but yours
Yours are the eyes through which He looks
compassion on this world
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

She was telling the truth. We -- you and I-- are the hands and the feet and the heart of Christ. And Martha was right too: where Christ is, death is not inevitable. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother, my sister would not needed to have died." But, oh my friends, Christ is here. He is here in you and me and he's waiting for us to become the people he has made us to be. The lives of our brothers and sisters do not need to end in violence. If the Lord is here, if Christ is with us, then the final word is not death – it is life.

We are the church and we are here to bear the heartbreak of those in grief yes, but also to bear witness to the ending of this endless, needless violence, to say loudly and clearly, "No more." I think we must follow Jesus in weeping with outrage at the power of death in our city. We must commit ourselves to changing the structures and systems of our communities and families that keep people so hopeless that life means so little. Let us pledge ourselves to join hands with city government, schools, agencies, and all people of faith to stop the killing. A favorite writer of mine says that if it really is good news that we preach in the church, then it must be good news for everyone ... whether they believe it or not. My friends, let us be the good news we preach. I ask all of you, all our churches to redouble your efforts to offer an alternative to the allure of violence, a vision of community in Christ which leads to abundant life and a future of hope. The Lord Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus his friend. He also called people into unimaginable new life. Let us follow his example