

Sermon for Christ the King Sunday: Luke 23:33-43

The Rev. Brooks Cato

If I were an old school preacher, I'd start this sermon off by asking y'all to get up, move to a place in the church you've never sat before, and see what looks different, sounds different, even smells different from your new vantage point. But, and this should come as no surprise, I'm not really an old school preacher. And I know you good Episcopalians well enough to avoid the riot I'd be causing. So, instead, I'd like to tell you a story. That's kinda like shifting vantage points, right?

Last week, I went to a service up at Colgate, tucked away in the Judd Memorial Chapel down in the basement. Upstairs, some choral group was practicing, and when they really got going, you could just hear their music sifted through the ceiling tiles. Nextdoor, students studied, which is another way of saying that there was a lot of noisy reactions to videos on YouTube mixed in with noisy reactions to concepts forgotten and relearned. But in the chapel, there was a still silence while members of the community read the names of 22 departed souls. See, we were gathered in that small space for the Transgender Day of Remembrance, a day set aside to honor trans people who have met their demise by violent means. It's a sin of our society that such a day needs to exist, but it's an extraordinary and brave witness that it does. See, trans women are over 4 times as likely to be murdered as cis women, and something like 87% of trans people killed are people of color. In the basement of the Colgate Chapel, those that gathered heard the names of the 22 trans people known to have been killed in this country this year, so far. Names I'd never heard before. Stories I did not know. People I'd never met.

I arrived early and had my pick of seats, so, naturally, I sat in the back row, up against a wall. There's Biblical precedence for this. In Luke, Jesus tells us to take the bad seat and wait to be invited up to a better seat. But of course, as most of us know, when it comes to church, the good seats are in the back, so maybe I wasn't being as pious as I'd hoped. But my seat got the best of me. Sure, I was in the way back, but there was a post right in my line of vision. I couldn't see whatever there was to see on the other side, but I'd already sat down, and it would just be awkward to get up and take another seat. So, I stayed put. The service began with a brief explanation of what we were doing, and then the readers named the victims, one at a time. Name. Location. Age.

Dana Martin. Montgomery, Alabama. 31.

Bubba Walker. Charlotte, North Carolina. 55.

Bailey Reeves. Baltimore, Maryland. 17.

With each name, I heard a click, but I didn't know what it was at first. It was a few names later that I understood. A shadow shifted a little from the other side of my view-blocking post, and I realized another person was standing beside the readers, dutifully lighting a candle as each name was read.

Claire Legato. Cleveland. 21. Click.

Tamika Washington. Philadelphia. 40. Click.

Paris Cameron. Detroit. 20. Click.

The names kept coming, slow but relentlessly steady. Cities. Ages. And clicks. And then the room was silent. The readers invited us to join them for a reception, and one by one, folks left.

Now, I had originally planned on going to this service with the hopes of, I don't know, showing the community that St. Thomas' cares about this sort of thing, or maybe meeting someone I'd never met before and planting the seed of an idea about maybe coming to church one Sunday. But I couldn't move. It hit me somewhere between Dallas and Kansas City that, while I may have shown up with the intention of showing support, something else worked on me in that room. I knew I was going to need to sit there for a while and

digest what I'd just heard, so I shifted a little in my seat. And that little shift was all it took. Now, peeking around the corner of that post, I saw the flame of a single candle. My blindspot suddenly filled with light bright enough to sting my vision just a little but also to draw my gaze into it. I leaned forward and rested my arms on the chairback in front of me, and another four or five flames came into view. I was there to witness. I don't mean I was there to witness to the other people. I was there to see. Meanwhile, chairs around the room emptied in a slow and steady trickle.

And soon, only a handful of us remained, watching the flames and remembering those who had died. I broke my gaze and looked around briefly only to realize that there were 23 chairs in front of me, all empty save one. Someone else watching the candles shrink. When they stood, I saw the colors of the trans flag on their shirt and felt an awful pang. 22 killed. So far. 22 empty chairs. So far. And now there's 23. I know, maybe that sounds a little too much like meaning heaped on coincidence, but it didn't feel that way in the moment. Not at all. 23 chairs, and I was there to witness at least one.

As the room emptied, the flames sank out of view, blocked either by my own blindspot or the rim of the sand-filled basin that held them steady. I'm telling you, those flames called me closer. They begged me to watch them. To witness them. To see them for what they were. Not candles clicked into being, but people. With names. And cities. And ages. People killed for trying to make sense of their place in the world. People that many loved and many hated. Even the idea of them can bring rage, but there, in that sacred place, their lights burned. The church has a part in this, you know. We're still trying to get our theology to catch up with what it means to be created and diverse beings. We've been trying to make sense of that for a long time, but we've hurt a lot of people along the way.

So that day, I felt like what those flames were asking me to do was come closer and witness their stories. So I did. I got up, moved to a seat I'd never sat in, and saw what was different. It was awkward to move. Some people watched me. But the change needed to come. Now, I couldn't see all of the candles. I kinda chickened out and sat in the second row - close, but not too close. And from that place, I watched the basin of lights dance. Each flame moved with the others, but they also had a personality. The third from the back was fierce and leapt at the slightest change in pressure in the room. Right in the middle, that flame was almost perfectly still. Just on the other side of the rim, I couldn't see that flame, but I could see steady streams of smoke spinning from where it had to be hiding. Each of these flames a light extinguished before its allotted time had come. And the flames asked me to stay. To watch. To see what could have been. The lifetime of a candle when left to burn its days.

I watched those flames for an hour, each a name, a city, an age. Jordan. Zoe. Tracy. Soon, there were no candles left, only the hooked, black curve of wicks nearly finished in a puddle of cooling wax, but those wicks stayed lit for a long time. The flames continued to dance together, each with their own movements, sharing their light with the help of their neighbors' fuel. Some wicks drooped, some reached heavenward, but they kept on casting their light. Until, that is, the first flame puffed out, sending a curl of smoke up and pulling a gasp from my lungs. And my eyes immediately filled with tears. It was just a candle, what a silly thing to weep for. But, of course, it wasn't just a candle.

It took awhile for another flame to go out. But of course, it did. This one was more expected. I'd watched its yellow shrink to blue and flicker for a couple of minutes. I knew it was coming, and when the flame finally went out, I sighed. The air from that sigh pushed another flame into darkness, and my hand rushed to cover my mouth and my nostrils. I couldn't have another flame extinguished by something coming from me, from the church. I am here to witness, not to harm.

I watched as one flame threatened to go out, then sprang back into life. I focused on another, sure it would be the next to go, only to look around and see three had gone out while I was looking elsewhere. I saw flames so small I couldn't really see them unless I looked just off to the side. 20 became 12 became 5. Four burned bright and fast, and off to one side, an ember on the tip of a wick with a tiny smear of blue smoldered. I started pulling for that little blue smear to outlast the others. One bright flame sputtered out over the course of minutes, another was there one second and gone the next. And then, my little blue hero was all that remained, refusing to let its light be taken from this world a second time.

But in its own time, finally, even that stubborn flame was gone. I breathed deep and sighed, only now realizing that I'd been holding my breath since I'd blown out that one candle a half hour before. The candles told their story, or rather, they told the story that could've been. They told the story of lives begun and lived and ended in their own time. They told the story their people couldn't, candles snuffed out where so much time to thrive should've been. They told their story to me, their witness, and now I tell it to you. That's what witnesses do, we see and then we tell. It's a two part gig. And the church, when it comes to the lives and deaths, the names, the cities, the ages of trans folks, we've not witnessed well.

But I have a glimmer of hope. There's the flickers of faith and story I saw burning in that chapel. But there's also a promise of faith and story here. We have a choice, we People of God. We have a choice. When the world hangs the innocent, the unknown, and the hated on the cross, we have a choice. We can mock them for all the things they claim to be, or we can offer them some kindness for being who they are. You know, throughout the history of the church, it's said that when the Holy Spirit shows up, she shows up as fire. I know that in the basement of that chapel, there was more than just candles burning. The Holy Spirit was there, and she moved me, made me shift around my blindspot, move myself to see someone I'd missed, and burned a conviction in my soul to make my choice. I witnessed God in that room. And I have made my choice. Truly I tell you, today they are in Paradise, and I hope one day to join them and tell them the beauty of the lives I witnessed them live here.