

Among the chaotic and deeply disturbing scenes of the insurrectionists storming the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday was the banner one individual waved. It read: Jesus. My heart broke. And then it boiled. As the Bishop of Washington, D.C., Mariann Budde eloquently noted in a video response to the rioting, “there is nothing Christian about what we are witnessing today. Nothing.” Indeed, she goes on to articulate what Jesus is about. “He calls us to love one another. Love requires sacrifice. It demands kindness. It seeks understanding. Love believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” While a rioter may have toted a banner of Jesus to the melee; Jesus most certainly was not there. And I imagine God’s heart was breaking (and boiling) as well.

Breaking, in part, for the senseless loss of life. Breaking, as well, for the intimidating violence toward others and the desecration of a sacred space for democracy. Breaking, ultimately, for the perversion of that holy name: Jesus.

From its very inception, Christianity--like all religious traditions--participated in an intricate dance with society. At times, Christianity would borrow from the larger culture. Thus, we have Saturnalia to thank for our Christmas observance. Other times, the larger culture would borrow from Christianity. Indeed, the commercialization of Christmas is a fascinating study of the co-opting of sacred symbols, images, and rituals within the secular sphere. And there are myriad other examples. From the start, Christianity has always been a little suspect of the wider culture. Even when Constantine converted in the fourth century and Christianity became aligned with power, there were still those who were skeptical about such a marriage. Hence, a classic text of the 20th century is Richard Niebuhr’s, *Christ and Culture*, where Niebuhr sets up a number of paradigms: Christ *against* Culture, Christ *of* Culture, Christ *above* Culture, Christ and Culture in *paradox*, Christ the *transformer* of Culture.

All this notwithstanding, it astounds me how woefully misguided the understanding of Jesus is by one who would bring a “Jesus” banner to the violence and sedition that occurred on Wednesday. The high irony is that the individual probably thought that he was a true believer, in the same way that he clearly thought that he was a patriot. How to disabuse someone of such delusion? *That* is the \$64,000.00 question.

While I don’t have the answer to that question, I do know that screaming why he is wrong, or using force to prove why I’m right clearly do nothing except widen the divide that separates us. As Bishop Budde noted, “Love requires sacrifice. It demands kindness. It seeks understanding.” So, I am sure that some of the reclamation of Jesus’ identity within the larger culture and any chance of reconciliation with one who holds a profoundly different understanding of Jesus will take just that: sacrifice, kindness, and understanding. (Please do not misunderstand: these actions do not in any way condone or minimize the heinousness of the actions of people like the one carrying the “Jesus” banner. Indeed, many will hopefully have their day in court.) I know

that the model of Jesus that we proclaim and seek to emulate is one of the ways that such reclamation and reconciliation will occur if it has any chance of occurring.

The *Going Deeper* article from the *New Yorker* possesses a wonderful section on how the early church was seen by itself and the larger culture. Michael Luo writes about a plague in the 3rd century and the Church's response:

Dionysius, the bishop of the Church in Alexandria, where two-thirds of the population may have died, mounted a broad effort to tend to the sick. "Most of our brother [and sister] Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another," he wrote in an Easter letter to his flock. "Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains."

Luo goes further and contrasts the aforementioned action with that of others in the society. He notes:

Dionysius contrasted the behavior of believers to that of pagans, who "pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease." Accounts of works of mercy by followers of Jesus were not limited to Christian sources. Nearly a century later, Emperor Julian, seeking to bolster paganism, urged the high priest of Galatia to emulate the charitable works of Christians, attributing the growth of the "impious Galileans" to "benevolence toward strangers and care for the graves of the dead" and how they "support not only their poor, but ours as well."

Tending the sick, unbounded love and loyalty, benevolence toward strangers, care for the graves, support of the poor. This list is not a bad description of what we are called to. The posture that we are invited to adopt as followers of Jesus is one that is sacrificial, kind, and understanding. We may lose power. We may be considered culturally irrelevant. We may even return to the periphery of society where we began. Yet, when we embody what Jesus was about--love, mercy, compassion, and justice--we need not prove we are right. We are. Right. This does not mean that we fail to condemn actions like those in Washington, D.C. We can do that as well. However, when we act out of the Jesus ethic, the means is the end. As the old song

goes, “They will know we are Christians by our love.” And, we should be clear, it is not only our souls that we save in the process but the very world’s.