

*In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:*

I've got a bit of a confession here—I watch a lot of television. That's been true for quite some time, but during the pandemic, with fewer activities outside the house to engage in, I've definitely watched more. I used to feel bad about that, especially as the rhetoric of my childhood—the idiot box will melt your brain—gave way to more scientific sounding analyses of what “screen time” means. But I've started giving myself permission not to feel so bad about it, especially when I watch shows that bring me perspectives that I would not otherwise have. Stories, narratives, these are how I process the world around me.

& The more I thought this through, the more I realized that as Christians this is how we learn about our faith. Jesus taught in parables, which are ... stories. The epistles tell stories about how the early Christians came to make sense of the new movement they were participating in. And we glean so much from the stories of the old Testament, of all the chronicles of God intervening in history.

This week in our readings, we have two stories about death. John writes in his letter, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” And in John's Gospel, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” These are talking about voluntary death—giving up your life for another. And there is a nobility to that, to standing up and saying: I know that taking this stand will mean my death, and I am willing to do it anyway. We recognize that nobility when we call these people martyrs—which means witnesses—because their witness, their testimony, their *telling the story* (or someone else telling the story on their behalf) of what they believed in and why they were willing to die inspires us. We call other people martyrs too, people who have died even though they did **not** know what was going to happen.

Although it's not their day of commemoration, I think of the Martyrs of Memphis, 4 Episcopal nuns and 2 priests who died nursing during a Yellow Fever outbreak in Memphis Tennessee in 1878. During this pandemic, they've been on my mind a lot. We call these medical professionals martyrs, **yet** I have not heard the word martyr used about the health care workers who have died during this pandemic—more than 3,000 healthcare workers have died of COVID-19 in the United States alone. They did not report for work determined to die for a cause, but they died *servicing*. They laid down their lives for others, trying to heal and restore health. The stories of the

Martyrs of Memphis are easy to look up and find, and I don't think we will truly heal from this pandemic until we hear and tell the stories of those who laid down their lives working to save lives from a virus that travels by air, these people who laid down their lives doing dangerous, deadly, and desperately necessary work.

I started thinking about martyrdom again, watching the Shonda Rimes drama *Station 19*, set in a fire house in Seattle. I don't know any firefighters personally, perhaps you do. But firefighters, EMTs, paramedics—Christian or non-Christian—are following this commandment: they are shepherds willing to lay down their lives for their sheep. Like the Martyrs of Memphis, it is not hard to think of a firefighter dying in the line of duty as a martyr—they died placing their bodies between innocent people and something that deadly.

And as this show is set in a representation of our real world, albeit on a delay, last week, the firefighters learned of the death of George Floyd.

We'll come back to that. While not martyrs, writers can be brave too—I cannot imagine writing an episode about George Floyd months ago, when the writers writing and the actors acting did not know what I knew as I was watching on Friday—that George Floyd's murderer was convicted. That conviction casts a different light on the show. Watching the grief of people not knowing what I know, highlights the grief I still have, because George Floyd cannot be brought back by that verdict. Watching the fear that they displayed highlights the relief I feel that the verdict was guilty. And those writers had to write that episode without the hope I feel that maybe, just maybe this will be a watershed moment, a moment that will change things. Very often it is writers who give us the stories through which we process the world around us.

So, I watch this story, and I think about George Floyd. And I think... I think George Floyd is a different kind of martyr. His martyrdom is a witness to a system stacked against him, I think. He did not set out to lay down his life, I think. He was not doing anything that he could have suspected would put his life in danger, I think.

**Except... that's not right. In fact, it's entirely wrong.**

Because that is **my** perspective, because as a light-skinned Latina, when I go to a convenience store, make a purchase and walk out, *I* do not feel that I have done anything that puts my life in danger. (Make no mistake, I have experienced racism, discrimination, and anti-Latino bias in this country is real and insidious, but it is also not what I'm talking about here.) Because when I walk into a convenience store, make a purchase and walk out, I do not think I have put my life in danger. And probably more than 9 times out of 10, 99 times out of 100, I haven't. But this week, watching *Station 19*, I heard something that hit me in a new way. I heard something that I *knew* but that penetrated my heart in a way that I do not believe will fade. A Black firefighter says: "a comment or a look or the news that a man has been killed in the street reminds me that I have to be careful. And—And it steals all of my mental and emotional energy that I should be giving to my wife and my kids and my health."

And his companion replies (in a way I find really sensible): "Is something going on with your health?"

And the firefighter returns:

*"Being Black in America is a life-threatening condition."*

That bears repeating.

"Being **Black** in America is a life-threatening condition."

"Being Black in America is a **life-threatening condition**."

So, yes, we can talk, and we should talk, about nuns who nurse people with a dangerous disease and when it kills them, and we call them martyrs. We know that they knew they might be laying down their lives for others.

We can talk, and we should talk, and we must talk more, about health care workers who keep showing up, even as people refuse to wear masks, or refuse to wear them correctly, even as people tell them that the disease is fake while they are dying of it. Workers who show up even as people tell them that what they know both with their medical training and with the evidence of their own eyes is a lie. Who show up while they and their colleagues are dying and we can, and we should, call them martyrs. We know they laid down their lives for others.

Working with sick people threatens your life.

But here is where this television show, just a regular old television show cut me to the core:

To go to a store, Black, in America is a life-threatening condition.

To sleep in your own bed in your own home, Black, in America, is a life-threatening condition.

To play in a park at 12 years old, Black, in America, is a life-threatening condition.

To drive a car, Black, in America, is a life threatening condition.

To go for a run, Black, in America, is a life threatening condition.

To be Black in America is walking into a yellow fever epidemic. To be Black in America is intubating a COVID patient with insufficient protective gear. To be Black in America is to be 9 minutes and 28 seconds of suffocation away from martyrdom.

{{{Pause. Breathe}}}

Jesus laid down his life for all of us, and we come here week after week trying to live into his example to what he taught. Black people in America are laying down their lives all the time: what are we called to do?

Our bishops sent a letter this week, and they wrote, “we are called, as followers of Jesus, to be about God’s mission of restoration and reconciliation. Let us recommit to our baptismal vow.” Our baptismal vow tells us to resist evil. Our baptismal vow tells us to serve Christ in all persons. Our baptismal vow tells us to strive for for justice and peace among all people. And today that means to do all we can to work for a society where being Black in America will no longer be a life threatening condition.

*Amen.*

Texts for April 25, 2021

- [Acts 4:5-12](#)
- [1 John 3:16-24](#)

- [John 10:11-18](#)
- [Psalm 23](#)



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