

## Why Did Jesus Die?

### A Lenten Journey Through Liberationist Reflections on Jesus and the Cross

February 25-March 25

This Lent, we are tackling the question of “Why did Jesus die?” The crucifixion is a core event in the Christian story, and it is a troubling one. What does it mean to lift up a person who died a violently as the central figure of grace and salvation? For hundreds of years, Christians have found the answers of previous generations unsatisfying, and struggled to find their own understanding of crucifixion.

Contemplation of the crucifixion has never been a purely intellectual exercise. Think of the phrase “Jesus died for our sins.” What do those words evoke for you? I’m not asking what they mean to you, but how they make you feel. For many, the very statement evokes an experience of deep reverence and connection to God. For many others, the statement provokes resistance, anger, and hurt. For still others, particularly those who have no background in Christian theology, the statement is utterly nonsensical and elicits bewilderment. As we will see in our Lenten readings, the meaning of the crucifixion is not only- perhaps even primarily- grappled with cognitively, but rather experientially, through our encounters with our own suffering and attempts to make meaning of it.

As we grapple with the question “Why did Jesus die?” for ourselves, our companions on the journey will be Black, feminist, womanist, and Latin American theologians who are working to understand crucifixion in light of the suffering of the people around them.

This Sunday School class does encourage you to do some background reading and study. This may be challenging, as these may not be the kind of readings you are used to. I encourage you to push yourself and absorb what you can, but do not be overly concerned if there is an idea or paragraph that you cannot get your head around. A key concept in liberation theology is *abundance*: God provides more spiritual nourishment and support in this world than we can ask or imagine. If all you have time or energy for is one paragraph or sentence, it will be a blessing and it will be enough. In the same spirit, please feel empowered to attend class even if you cannot do any reading in a week.

## A Brief Background of Liberation Theolog(ies)

Midway through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic priests trained in Europe and serving Latin American parishes encountered a profound disconnect between the conversations they had had in seminary and what was happening on the ground in their communities. One of the central challenges European theologies had been tackling was how to understand God and faith in light of reason and the critiques of atheist thinkers. In the communities they were serving, the priests found that the main challenge to faith was not reason, but the intense suffering of the people in poverty and the complicity of the Church in the systems that kept them poor. In partnership with their parishioners, they began to articulate theology in response to experiences of poverty. Father Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru is credited with coining the term “liberation theology” with the publication of his book “A Theology of Liberation,” in which he argues what is now a famous liberationist claim: God has “a preferential option for the poor.”

Meanwhile, in North America, the civil rights movement was picking up steam. Thinkers such as James Baldwin, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. were doing theology in light of Black experiences of suffering and oppression. Into this conversation came James Cone with a book called *Black Theology and Black Power*, in which he argued that, in the context of the United States, no one can grasp the true significance of Christ apart from the systematic oppression of Black people. In the United States, Christ is a Black man. Simultaneously, feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary Daly were publishing critiques of patriarchy within the Church and Christian theology as the sexual revolution unfolded. In light of the systematic oppression of women, Ruether famously posed the question “Can women be saved by a male Savior?”

As these theologians published their writings, they consistently received the criticism that they were only looking at oppression through one lens, whether it was poverty, race, or gender. They did not consider how these different categories intersected to create particular experiences of oppression. Black women theologians, in particular, found that their experiences of oppression were not reflected in the writings of either feminist theologians, who were predominantly white, or Black theologians, who were predominantly male. In fact, they were often oppressed and marginalized by the movements that supposedly sought female and Black liberation. Womanist thought arose both to fill the gap and provide a corrective, further advancing and deepening the conversation around God and liberation. Mujerista, gay, and queer voices have also moved the conversation forward.

The entire discourse has become what I consider to be the most important development in Christian theology in the past sixty years. Though coming from distinct experiences and perspectives- it is better to think of liberation theologies, rather than liberation theology singular- each of the thinkers we will read is in conversation with the others. A central concern

of these theologies is that God seeks the physical, emotional, and social well-being of all God's people. For any theologian to be liberationist, they must grapple with all kinds of oppression, and not only their own.

### **Key Principles of Liberationist Theologies**

#### **1) Structural violence**

- a. In any society, there are beliefs, stereotypes, and practices that legitimize and perpetuate the pain of certain groups of people. The suffering and deaths of some provoke outrage, while the suffering and deaths of others are justified and even welcomed.
- b. The structures that perpetuate this kind of suffering are the primary face of sin and evil in the world.
- c. God is fundamentally opposed to suffering wrought at the hands of structural violence. If any talk of God perpetuates this kind of suffering, it must be abandoned or revised.

#### **2) Theology can only be done in context.**

- a. All theology is culturally inflected. All theology comes out of a specific set of experiences. It is important to explicitly analyze that context in order to fully understand the strengths and limitations of one's theology.
- b. Social suffering is all around us. If talk of God remains abstract and is not continually assessed in light of on-the-ground experiences of social suffering, it will inevitably perpetuate some aspect of the beliefs and practices that cause that suffering.
- c. The best way to combat this is with what Rev. Dr. Emilie Townes calls the "womanist dancing mind," which takes an idea from one particular context to another, jumping across cultures, times, and places.<sup>1</sup>
- d. This does not mean liberation theology is relativist. Rather, firm moral values and theological claims can only be properly applied when the context is explicit.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Townes is an American Baptist minister and womanist ethicist. See Townes, Emilie. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), p. 2.

## Week 1

**Rev. Rita Nakashima Brock** is an ordained Disciples of Christ minister and Founding Co-Director of Faith Voices for the Common Good. She is a member of the U. S. group of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, the leading global organization of liberation theologians.

First Excerpt<sup>2</sup>:

“Children at school occasionally called me names, like Chink or Jap, and made fun of me by pulling the corners of their eyes up tight. Their taunting made recess time a minefield. Eventually, I figured out who the mean kids were and avoided them, but it was difficult. I grew more homesick for Japan, where I had lived for my first five years. No one there had ever treated me with such cruelty. How does a seven-year-old child defend herself against random and incomprehensible hostilities?

It would be many years before I had an answer. I formed a flesh of bronze to shield myself from arrows of hate. Inside that metallic skin, I could pretend that I did not feel the sting of scorn, the humiliation of contempt, that I was impervious to hate. My pain remained hidden, as undigested lumps frozen in time...

Even now, when hurt I sometimes retreat behind that shield; it gives me an air of imperturbability. I am emotionally hidden, unavailable to others. I can be indifferent or cruel... My capacity for empathy disappears. I survived a childhood being Japanese in Kansas this way, but sometimes, I feel as though the [white children who taunted me] won.

I realized long after I was a theologian that my interest in religion and my focus on the violence done to Jesus are grounded in my childhood experiences of racism. I have concluded that the Christian theological tradition has interpreted Jesus' life in ways that reinforced trauma. I was isolated by the traumatic events of my childhood. The tradition has isolated Jesus as a singular savior, alone in his private relationship with God. Jesus is depicted as unique and separate, carrying salvation on his own solitary shoulders. His relationships to others are described paternalistically, as if they needed him but he did not need them. To be saved, I was supposed to have an isolated relationship with him, to need him when he did not need me.

I knew, from my own experience, that there is no grace in such isolation. Isolating Jesus from mutual relationships carried forward the trauma of violence without healing it. My theological obsession became how to show that vulnerability, mutuality, and openness demonstrate love,

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<sup>2</sup> Brock, Rita Nakashima and Parker, Rebecca Ann. *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), pp. 52-53.

that these bonds of love and care reveal the presence of God. If Jesus did not participate in such bonds, if he was isolated, he could not offer any grace.”

Second Excerpt<sup>3</sup>:

“Power is a basic human reality because we are related to each other. However, our conventional understandings of power are colored by our experiences of life in societies of male dominance. From those experiences we come to believe that power is hierarchical and is demonstrated by dominance, by status, by authority, and by control over people, nature and things. This may be the power we know, but it is not the power we were born with.

The fundamental power of life, born into us, heals, makes whole, empowers, and liberates. Its manifold forms create and emerge from heart, that graceful, passionate mystery at the center of ourselves and each other. This power heals brokenheartedness and gives courage to the fainthearted. It is the feminist Eros, what I call erotic power...

Erotic power is the power of our primal interrelatedness. Erotic power, as it creates and connects hearts, involves the whole person in relationships of self-awareness, vulnerability, openness, and caring.”

“In moving beyond a unilateral understanding of power, I will be developing a Christology not centered in Jesus, but in relationship and community as the whole-making, healing center of Christianity. In that sense, Christ is what I am calling Christa/Community. Jesus participates centrally in this Christa/Community, but he neither brings erotic power into being nor controls it. He is brought into being through it and participates in the cocreation of it.

Christa/Community is a lived reality expressed in relational images. Hence Christa/Community is described in the images of events in which erotic power is made manifest. The reality of erotic power within connectedness means it cannot be located in a single individual. Hence what is truly Christological, that is, truly revealing of divine incarnation and salvific power in human life, must reside in connectedness and not in single individuals. The relational nature of erotic power is as true during Jesus’ life as it is after his death. He neither reveals it nor embodies it, but he participates in its revelation and embodiment. And through its myriad embodiments and playful manifestations, we are led to take heart.”

“In sacrificing his most beloved and only son, god the father demonstrates his love for all others. In believing that this transaction reveals the loving grace of god the father, the faithful are absolved of the need to suffer the consequences of sin. Rather than being cocreators and co-revealers of grace, human beings are the dependent recipients of the fruits of an event

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<sup>3</sup> Brock, Rita Nakashima. *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroads, 1988), pp. 25-26, 52, 55-56.

working within a transcendent god. We are encouraged to believe our own suffering has been taken away by someone else's suffering and by a cosmic transaction within the divine life....What is missing in this scheme is interdependence and mutuality. We are not called to embrace our own suffering, to touch the deepest pain we feel about not having been loved and respected, and to discover the gift of grace in our connectedness to ourselves and others. Instead we are enjoined to look to a suffering and power outside us, both greater than ours."

## Week 2

*Delores Williams, a Presbyterian theologian, is one of the founding mothers of womanist theology, which creates and critically considers the implications of theological claims through the lens of the lived experiences of black women.*<sup>4</sup>

“Often, African American women in church and society have characterized their oppression as unique. Some black female scholars define this uniqueness on the basis of the interfacing of racial, class, and gender oppression in the experience of black women. This interfacing of oppressions is not unique to black women’s experience, however. Jewish, Hispanic, Asian, and other women of color in America can also experience that reality. My exploration of black women’s sources has revealed a heretofore-undetected structure of domination that has been operative in African American women’s lives since slavery. This structure of domination is surrogacy, and it gives black women’s oppression its unique character as well as raises challenging questions about the way redemption is imagined in a Christian context.

On the basis of African American women’s sources it is possible to identify two kinds of surrogacy that have given rise to the unique character of black women’s oppression: coerced surrogacy and voluntary surrogacy. Coerced surrogacy, belonging to the pre-Civil War period, was a forced condition in which people and systems more powerful than black women and black people forced black women to function in roles that someone else ordinarily would have filled. For example, black female slaves were forced to substitute for the slave owner’s wife in nurturing roles involving white children. Black women were forced to take the place of men in work roles that, according to the larger society’s understanding of male and female roles, belonged to men... During the antebellum period this coerced surrogacy was legally supported in the ownership rights by which slave masters controlled their property, for example, black women. Slave women could not exercise the choice of refusing the surrogacy role.

After emancipation in the coercion associated with antebellum surrogacy was replaced by social pressures that influenced black women to continue to fill some surrogacy in the postbellum period. The difference was that black women, after emancipation, could exercise the choice of refusing the surrogate role. Because of this element of choice, postbellum surrogacy can be referred to as voluntary surrogacy, even though social pressures influenced the choices black women make as they adjusted to life in a ‘free’ world.”

“One of the results of focusing upon African American women’s historic experience with surrogacy is that it raises significant questions about the way many Christians, including black

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<sup>4</sup> Williams, Delores. “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption,” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), pp. 19-20, 30-32 (excerpts).

women, have been taught to imagine redemption. More often than not the theology in mainline Christian churches, including black ones, teaches believers that sinful humankind has been redeemed because Jesus died on the cross in the place of humans, thereby taking human sin upon himself. In this sense, Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate figure standing in the place of someone else: sinful humankind. Surrogacy, attached to this divine personage, thus takes on an aura of the sacred. It is therefore altogether fitting and proper for black women to ask whether the image of a surrogate God has salvific power for black women, or whether this image of redemption supports and reinforces the exploitation that has accompanied their experience with surrogacy. If black women accept this image of redemption, can they not also passively accept the exploitation surrogacy brings?

“The Synoptic Gospels (more than Paul’s letters) provide resources for constructing a Christian understanding of redemption that speaks meaningfully to black women, given their historic experience with surrogacy. Jesus’ own words in Luke 4 and his ministry of healing the human body, mind, and spirit... suggest that Jesus did not come to redeem humans by showing them God’s love ‘manifested’ in the death of God’s innocent child on a cross erected by cruel, imperialistic, patriarchal power. Rather, the spirit of God in Jesus came to show humans *life*- to show redemption through a perfect ministerial vision of righting relationships. A female-male inclusive vision, Jesus’ ministry of righting relationships involved raising the dead (for example, those appearing to be lost from life), casting out demons (for example, ridding the mind of destructive forces prohibiting the flourishing of positive, peaceful life), and proclaiming the word of life that demanded the transformation of tradition so that life could be lived more abundantly...God’s gift to humans, through Jesus, was to invite them to participate in this ministerial vision (‘whosoever will, let them come’) of righting relations. The response to this invitation by human principalities and powers was the horrible deed that the cross represents- the evil of humankind trying to kill the ministerial vision of life-in-relation that Jesus brought to humanity. The resurrection does not depend upon the cross for life, for the cross only represents historical evil trying to defeat good. The resurrection of Jesus and the flourishing of God’s spirit in the world as the result of resurrection represent the life of the ministerial vision gaining victory over the evil attempt to kill it.”

“The image of Jesus on the cross is the image of human sin in its most desecrated form. This execution destroyed the body, but not before it mocked and defiled Jesus by publicly exposing his nakedness and private parts, by mocking the ministerial vision as they labeled him king of the Jews, by placing a crown of thorns upon his head, thus mocking his dignity and the integrity of his divine mission.”

“What this allows the black female theologian to show black women is that God did not intend the surrogacy roles they have been forced to perform. God did not intend the defilement of

their bodies as white patriarchal power put them in the place of white women to provide sexual pleasure for white men during the slavocracy. This was rape. Rape is defilement, and defilement means wanton desecration... The cross is a reminder of how humans have tried throughout history to destroy visions of righting relationships that involve transformation of tradition and transformation of social relations and sanctioned by the status quo. The resurrection of Jesus and the kingdom-of-God theme in Jesus' ministerial vision provide black women with the knowledge that God has, through Jesus, shown humankind how to live peacefully, productively, and abundantly in relationship. Human kind is therefore redeemed through Jesus' life and not through Jesus' death. There is nothing of God in the blood of the cross. God does not intend black women's surrogacy experience. Neither can Christian faith affirm such an idea. Jesus did not come to be a surrogate. Jesus came for life, to show humans a perfection vision of ministerial relation that humans had forgotten long ago. As Christians, however, black women cannot forget the cross. But neither can they glorify it. To do so is to make their exploitation sacred. To do so is to glorify sin."

### Week 3

*Roberto Goizueta is a Cuban-American Catholic theologian who currently teaches at Boston University.*<sup>5</sup>

The triduum begins at San Fernando, with the Holy Thursday celebration: the celebration of the Lord's Last Supper and the Agony in the Garden. It is important to note that this is itself a two-part celebration, with each of equal significance: not just the Last Supper, or just the Agony in the Garden, but both. The celebration begins with the congregations procession to the cenacle, followed by the Eucharistic liturgy. Yet this general description cannot truly convey the sensual character of the experience. All one's sense are drawn in: the sanctuary has been arranged and decorated in the form of a real dining room, the people gathered around the table have donned clothing which they imagine the people in Jesus' time may have worn, the Archbishop- surrounded by the many children who have run onto the sanctuary to witness the scene- washes the feet of the "apostle," the sermon commands the congregation to go out into their homes and workplaces to re-enact there this example of service. The end of the mass is not the end of the Holy Thursday celebration. Rather, when the Eucharistic liturgy is completed, the congregation rises and walks out of the church, into the evening, in a candlelight Eucharistic procession. During the procession, which circles the main plaza, a litany is sung to which the people respond: "Caminemos con Jesús" (let us walk with Jesus). The people are walking with Jesus to Gethsemane. It is again an experience that stirs all one's senses: the hundreds of flickering candles under a darkening sky, the loud horns of impatient drivers, the wide-eyed stares of curious onlookers, the angry insults of fundamentalist hecklers, and the incense-like fragrance of the smoke wafting from the multitude of candles... and always: "Caminemos con Jesús."

"At 10 am [Friday], a loud trumpet signals the entrance of Pilate onto the stage to confront Jesus of Nazareth. From this point on, the words and actions follow the gospel passion narratives, with San Fernando parishioners playing the parts of the different characters in the passion story Pilate sends Jesus to Herod, who in turn returns him to Pilate for judgment. After the crowd calls for the release of Barabbas, Jesus is flogged and crowned with thorns. Pilate presents the beaten and broken Nazarene to the people- that is, to the assembled crowd in San Antonio/Jerusalem- who cry out for his crucifixion. The scene can only be described as eerie: this is not an event that happened two thousand years ago, but an event taking place today and in which we are actively participating. With the crack of the Roman soldier's whip echoing through the crowd, one can hear a young woman at the back instinctively let out a half-muffled

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<sup>5</sup> Goizueta, Roberto. *Caminemos Con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 32-34, 67-68.

shriek, or see an old man not far from her wincing in pain, as if he himself were feeling the sting of the whip.

His face and body covered with blood from this torturous abuse, Jesus is given his cross and led out onto the street to carry the cross along his Via Dolorosa to Calvary.”

“This Jesus is a concrete, historical, flesh-and-blood person, who as such, is known in and through his relationships: he is the Son of God, son of Mary, our Lord, brother, friend, and *compañero*. As the first and foundational sacrament (*ursakrament*), Jesus reveals to us not only who God is (theology) but also who we are (anthropology)- inherently sacramental, relational creatures. This Jesus is the one who accompanies us in our suffering and whom we, in turn, accompany in his. This Jesus is, thus, the source of our community: we are one insofar as we all accompany Jesus together. This Jesus is, consequently, the source of those communal bonds which constitute us as persons and as a people, thereby giving us the strength to confront life’s vicissitudes.

Jesus is, first of all, a flesh-and-blood human being who is with us today. Ours is a Jesus who bleeds... which is to say, a Jesus made of flesh-and-blood like us. The blood on his face, side, hands, and feet are the signs of his humanity; not the abstract “humanity” of the philosophers and theologians, but the flesh-and-blood humanity of those who dare to kiss his wounds.”

“As the humanity of Jesus is not abstract, neither is his relationality. The relationships which define Jesus are themselves mediated and defined physically: as accompaniment, as “being with” or “walking with.” These demand bodily presence: walking with Jesus to Gethsemane (*caminemos con Jesús*), kneeling in prayer with him in the garden, walking alongside him on the road to Calvary, kissing his feet on the cross, accompanying the corpse in the burial procession, touching the cold body, kneeling and praying with Mary at her son’s tomb. It is this accompaniment that constitutes us as individual person and as a community. More precisely, it is in our common accompaniment of Jesus on the cross that he constitutes us as individuals and a community. Again, this community is not an abstraction, or a merely “spiritual” reality; it is mediated by a mutual, bodily presence. Such a community of accompaniment is not possible in a disembodied way any more than it is possible for me to break “bread with another” (the literal meaning of *ad-cum-panis*) if I am not actually sitting at the same table with him or her. The act of accompaniment is what defines this community.

Undertaken actively and in mutual accompaniment, the community’s confrontation with suffering can become a source not of despair but of strength. As constituted by his or her relationships with others, the individual person intrinsically and by definition never alone in his or her struggles. Despite the suffering evoked and re-lived during Good Friday at San Fernando, there is no sense of despair or hopelessness in the face of that pain. On the contrary the

overwhelming sense is one of peace, strength, and life in the midst of pain. This is not the illusory and ephemeral strength of the “self-made man” but, on the contrary, the true and profound strength of the person who knows that he or she is not “self-made.”

In this light, the US Hispanic tendency to emphasize Jesus’ crucifixion over his resurrection becomes more understandable: the resurrection already takes place when, as a community and as individual persons constituted by that community, we accompany Jesus and each other on Calvary. It is then that, in the person of the Crucified, we encounter the powerlessness of death in the face of our common life. Jesus is already resurrected when he dies accompanied by his mother and the other women- by the converted centurion whose words proclaim that Jesus’ death is not the end- and by us, who walk with him from Gethsemane to the grave. Easter, then, is but a ratification of what has, in fact, already occurred on Calvary: the victory of life over death. The supremely human, crucified Jesus *is* the resurrected Jesus.”

#### Week 4

*James Cone became one of the founding fathers of Black Theology with the publication of his book *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969. This excerpt is from his most recent book, published in 2011.<sup>6</sup>*

“Martin Luther King, Jr. initially encountered the meaning of the cross at home and at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, where his father was the pastor. At Ebenezer, young Martin heard a lot of singing and preaching about the cross. Black Christians sang, “Surely He Died on Calvary,” as if they were actually there. They felt something redemptive about Jesus’ cross- transforming a ‘cruel tree’ into a ‘Wondrous Cross.’ Blacks pleaded, ‘Jesus Keep Me near the Cross,’ because ‘Calvary,’ in a mysterious way they could not explain, was their redemption from the terror of the lynching tree.

Though wonderful and beautiful, Jesus’ cross was also painful and tragic. Songs and sermons about the ‘blood’ were stark reminders of the agony of Jesus’ crucifixion- the symbol of the physical and mental suffering he endured as ‘dey whupped him up de hill’ and ‘crowned him wid a thorny crown.’ Blacks told the story of Jesus’ Passion, as if they were at Golgotha suffering with him. ‘Were you there when dey crucified my Lord?’ ‘Dey nailed him to de cross’; ‘dey pierced him in de side’; and ‘de blood came twinklin’ down.’

Jesus, my darling Jesus,  
Groaning as the blood came spurting from his wound.  
Oh, look how they done my Jesus.

Instead of attempting to explain the saving power of the cross rationally, black Christians recognized it as a mystery, beyond human understanding or control. In remembrance of Jesus’ last week, leading to his death, blacks at Ebenezer and other black churches, celebrating the sacrament of ‘Holy Communion,’ raised their voices to acknowledge ‘a fountain filled with blood,’ ‘drawn from Immanuel’s veins’; ‘blood,’ they believed, ‘will never lose its power,’ because ‘there is power in the blood,’ and ‘nothing but the blood.’

“When blacks sang about ‘the blood,’ they were wrestling not only with the blood of the crucified carpenter from Nazareth but also with the blood of raped and castrated black bodies in America- innocent, often nameless, burning and hanging bodies, images of hurt so deep that only God’s ‘amazing grace’ could offer consolation.

As a child, Martin King heard his father and other ministers preach about Jesus’ death and his power to save not only from personal sins but also from ‘the hatred, the violence, the vitriolic

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<sup>6</sup> Cone, James. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), pp. 73-92 (excerpts).

and vituperative words of the mobs,... aided and abetted by the law and law enforcement officers.' Ministers often preached sermons about Jesus' crucifixion, as if they were telling the story of black people's tragedy and triumph in America. The symbol of the cross spoke to the lives of blacks because the likeness between the cross and the lynching tree created an eerie feeling of mystery and the supernatural. Like Jesus, blacks knew torture and abandonment, with no community or government capable or willing to protect them from crazed mobs. 'Oh, way down yonder by myself,' in Georgia, Mississippi, and Texas, 'and I couldn't hear nobody pray. In the valley, on my knees, with my burden' 'O my Lord, O my Lord, what shall I do?'

In their spiritual wrestling, black Christians experienced the weakness and power of God's love revealed in the cross- mysteriously saving them from loneliness and abandonment and 'the unspeakable violence... by blood thirsty mobs.' Black ministers preached about Jesus' death more than any other theme because they saw in Jesus' suffering and persecution a parallel to their own encounter with slavery, segregation, and the lynching tree.

The assertion that Jesus' cross is the answer to the lynching tree, as young Martin heard preachers proclaim at Ebenezer and later appropriated for himself, is a stunning claim. How could Jesus' death in Jerusalem save blacks from mob violence nearly two thousand years later in America? What did salvation mean for African Americans who had to 'walk through the valley of the shadow of death,' or those forced to swing from a lynching tree? As a young Christian thinking about the ministry as a vocation, Martin King had to wrestle with the great contradictions that mob violence posed for black life and Christian identity."

"For King, Jesus never promised that his disciples would not suffer. Quite the opposite: suffering is the inevitable fate of those who stand up to the forces of hatred. Jesus freely accepted the consequences that led to Calvary without turning away. He called upon his disciples to do the same. Just as God was with Jesus in his suffering, black Christians believed that God is with us in our suffering too.

Unlike most Christians, however, King accepted Jesus' cross, knowing that following Jesus involved suffering and, as it did for Jesus, the possibility of an unjust death. Even as a child, King's favorite song was 'I Want to Be More Like Jesus'; and as a minister and civil rights activist, he put that song into practice by taking up the cross of black leadership until he, like Jesus, was killed trying to set people free. While King never thought he had achieved the messianic standard of love found in Jesus' cross, he did believe that his suffering and that of African Americans and their supporters would in some mysterious way redeem America from the sin of white supremacy, and thereby make this nation a just place for all. Who can doubt that those who suffered in the black freedom movement made America a better place than before? *Their suffering redeemed America from the sin of legalized segregation.* And those blacks among us who lived under Jim Crow know that that was no small achievement."

“Love and hope, which Martin King found in Jesus’ cross and resurrection, did not erase the pain of suffering and its challenge for faith. No black Christian could escape the problem of evil that has haunted Christians throughout history. That is why the cross and redemptive suffering are not popular themes today among many Christians, especially among womanist, feminist, and other progressive theologians, who often criticize Martin King on this score. Theology is always so contextual that it is difficult for young theologians today, as it was also back then, to understand King’s profound, existential, and paradoxical truth. I, too, was slow to embrace King’s view of redemptive suffering. Have not blacks, women, and poor people throughout the world suffered enough? Giving value to suffering seems to legitimize it.

Whatever we may say about the limits of King’s perspective on the cross and redemptive suffering, he didn’t legitimize suffering. On the contrary, he tried to end it, sacrificing his own life for the cause of others... He, along with a host of others, black, white, and other Americans of many walks of life, sacrificed their bodies and lives for our freedom today.

Though we are not fully free and the dream not fully realized, yet, we are not what we used to be and not what we will be. The cross and the lynching tree can help us to know from where we have come and where we must go. We continue to seek an ultimate meaning that cannot be expressed in rational and historical language and that cannot be denied by white supremacy. Poetry is often more helpful than prose in expressing our hope. Through poetic imagination we can see the God of Jesus revealed in the cross and the lynching tree. Those who saw this connection more clearly than others were artists, poets, and writers.”

## Week 5

**Dr. Nichole Flores** is an assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia. Her research emphasizes the contributions of Catholic and Latinx theologies to notions of justice, emotion, and aesthetics ([www.nicholemflores.com](http://www.nicholemflores.com)).<sup>7</sup>

There is a femicide in Ciudad Juárez.

Femicide is the systematic gender-motivated murder of women. Since 1993, more than 600 girls and women have been tortured, raped, and murdered in and around Cd. Juárez, a city in northern México that shares a border with El Paso, Texas. Thousands of missing women from this area are also believed to be victims of this femicide. The victims are typically poor women between the ages of 10 and 30 with reddish–brown skin, slender body types, and dark flowing hair. Many, but not all, of the women victims were employed in one the many *maquiladoras* in Cd. Juárez, factories on the U.S.–México border run by foreign companies. The common social, economic, and physical characteristics of the victims suggest that the perpetrators specifically target women who fit this description. Further, the ritual mutilation and symbolic placement of murdered bodies around the city indicates that drug cartels, among other organized crime groups, use the bodies to “mark their territory” in the bloody battle for money and control at the U.S.–México border.

The manifold social, political, and economic causes of femicide, and their theological implications, are thoroughly treated in Nancy Piñeda-Madrid’s forthcoming monograph, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juarez* (Fortress Press). A late draft of this work convicts me to write about the matter as a means of conscientization. Here, I pay particular attention to the popular forms of resistance to femicide, especially the installation of pink crosses in significant public spaces throughout Juárez.

Posted in important public spaces, pink crosses are displayed as a visible resistance to the femicide. In 2002, the anti-femicide coalition known as *Ni Una Más* (Not One More) installed a large pink cross at the Paso del Norte bridge, the main passage between Cd. Juárez and El Paso. It serves as a testimony to the crimes against the women and community of Cd. Juárez and a protest against the ongoing violence and systemic injustice that perpetuates the violence. This pink cross is echoed throughout the city and the surrounding desert, where activists install them in places where women’s bodies have been found. Adorned with flowers and the victim’s name written in black on the crossbar, these crosses remember the lives lost to the hate-filled vie for control between organized crime, government factions, and other economic interests. Further, the crosses are a way of reclaiming the territory marked by the

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<sup>7</sup> Flores, Nichole. “The Pink Cross: Resisting Femicide in Ciudad Juárez.” March 31, 2011. Retrieved from <https://nicholemflores.com/2011/03/31/the-pink-cross-resisting-femicide-in-ciudad-juarez/>

drug cartels, dislodging their sign of death with Christ's sign of solidarity in suffering and eternal life.

The pink crosses installed by anti-femicide activists gesture to Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and the saving significance of these events for the women of Cd. Juárez. The reference to Jesus' crucifixion is obvious in light of the brutal and unjust nature of these murders. Hundreds of pink crosses displayed throughout Cd. Juárez are a painful reminder of the women brutally taken from their families in the perverse power grab and pursuit of profit in this region. Like Jesus Christ who suffered "under Pontius Pilate," these crosses gesture to the unjust system that stands flat-footed in the face of the devastation of an entire society and generation of young women. They signify the community's mourning and longing for release from the violence. Identifying the suffering of their sisters, and their communal suffering, with Christ Jesus, the women and men of Cd. Juárez invoke a God who suffers in solidarity with the people, experiencing the brutal torture and inhumane violence born of hatred and contempt for life. These crosses do not glorify suffering; they lament it while recognizing Jesus' choice to accompany us in our pain. Jesus' suffering is not meaningless; it transforms all reality. Thus, the pink cross ought not prompt us to falsely glorify suffering in itself, but to question and resist the forces that permit and perpetuate it, recognizing that all such forces will be displaced by the gospel enacted in the lives of Christians.

In the midst of this mourning, however, the women and men of Cd. Juárez still find the strength to "lift high the cross," a gesture that continues to acknowledge suffering, but looks with hope towards the already-and-still-approaching salvation of Jesus. While the cross itself ought to sufficiently invoke both Christ's suffering and resurrection, this message has often been lost in Church preaching and practice. By painting the cross pink, the anti-femicide activists highlight the hope for resurrection promised by the cross. The pink color reminds us of the third week of Advent, when the Church lights a rose-colored candle to signify our hope in the midst of our waiting. We wait not in stagnation or paralysis, but in joyful hope that stirs us towards action, even if the face of grave danger. As the martyrs of the Church spoke and lived truth in the face of injustice and death, the Cd. Juárez anti-femicide activists defy forces that seek to undermine life. Through hopeful protest of the pink cross, these women say *Ni Una Más* to death and violence in Cd. Juárez.

For the women of Cd. Juárez, the cross is a sign that Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected is with us always, even to the end of the world. (Mt. 28:20, ASV)