

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O God.

In my mid-20s, I took a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I had just ended a significant relationship and was going through all the movements of grief, and there was no better place to bring my heartache than the land where Jesus walked and healed people in every facet of their beings. Partway through my time there, my fellow cohort of pilgrims traveled to the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem. The garden is planted at the foot of the Mount of Olives facing into the Kidron Valley in Jerusalem's old city walls. It's a sheltered and enclosed garden filled with ancient olive trees. Their trunks are ribbed and knotted, so old and full of stories that some have split apart.

I walked along the dirt path, which took me to the Church of all Nations, a holy site built in commemoration of Jesus's last night with his Disciples and his eminent betrayal. As I walked out of the stifling heat of summer into a cool dimly lit sanctuary, I realized that the church was lined with purple stained-glass windows, making it a perpetual evening. I walked to the altar rail and kneeled, folding my hands in prayer. And as I had throughout my travels in the Holy Land, I sensed Jesus's presence with me. And in my spiritual heart, I heard him say in a voice that was strong and full of compassion, "I know the pain of losing someone you love. I carried it so you can live freely."

Until then, I hadn't really considered the depth of love and friendship between Jesus and his Disciples. It had been part of his most intimate moments, talking, traveling, sharing stories and meals, enjoying one another's company. They saw God move in miraculous ways together, and yet in the end, it wasn't one of his accusers that found him out and turned him in. It was one of his closest friends.

When Jesus' trials began, most of his Disciples fled and denied even knowing him. And in this, hadn't Judas become the bad guy and no one would want to be friends with, and hadn't his Disciples become unreliable, people who weren't even real friends.

Yet, as I knelt in this church, in the Garden of Gethsemane, grieving my own loss of relationship, I realized I had overlooked the simple truth. Jesus had lost someone he loved, and he was heartbroken.

Jesus took his heartbreak with him to the cross in his physical torment and suffering. The loss of his intimate friendships, Judas and Peter and all the other Disciples that denied him, was part of the weight he was carrying. Jesus went through one of the most painful and nuanced experiences of being human, the severing of relationship. And yet, Jesus didn't respond in kind. He didn't give up on humanity, rejecting and abandoning those who rejected and abandoned him, and he didn't give up on his purpose in the world to repair the breach between God and creation, bringing every person in every time and place back into relationship with God's limitless and infinite love. Instead, in his final moments in all of the pain of his physical and emotional suffering, Jesus looked down from the cross and put his mother, Mary, and beloved Disciple John into closer relationship.

He said to Mary, "Here is your son," and to John, "Here is your mother." And from that hour, John took Mary into his own home, making her part of his household. John was likely the one who saw Mary through old age and through the final transition of her own death in which unlike Jesus, she would be loved, safe, and supported because Jesus knew the pain of losing someone he loved and carried it so that they could live freely. In doing this to the very end, Jesus was who he said he was, the "I am" of God, or in other words, God's pure essence in a human body, the same pure essence that is inside each one of us and expressed through our human bodies, the same pure essence that is pulsing through all of creation, calling us to remember again and again that we are not separate from God, because God's love is in us and we are held together in love, made alive in love, and set free in love, a love that will never betray, reject, abuse or abandon because it is deeply and irrevocably interconnected to you, a love that is indestructible. When it was nailed to a cross and

crucified, it didn't end but continued to love. When Jesus' body was pierced and broken, all of the love he embodied was poured out, amplifying God's love in all of creation and enduring the world's violence and hatred and not becoming a victim or abuser or dissenter. Jesus showed us that violence and hatred isn't God's way and isn't what God is made of. Jesus showed us that there is an entirely different way to exist in the world.

If we stay true to the essence of God that is in us, we won't become bodies filled with and shaped by the violence and hatred of the world. Instead, like Jesus, we will become God's pure essence in human bodies. We will call forward God's essence in all of creation. If we stay true to the essence of God that is in us, we will never be crushed under the world's pain or the world's brokenness or from the severing of relationship because God's love is alive and growing in us, uniting us to the love that is pulsing through all of creation. And if we follow at Jesus's example, not avoiding or denying the world's brokenness, but letting it affect us, the pain and brokenness and severing will pierce our hearts so deeply that God's eternal love can pour through us, and we can all live freely.

That is the miracle of the cross. In the human person of Jesus, God experienced both the deepest love of close relationship and the deepest suffering of the world's violence and brokenness. In Jesus, God's love was steadfast and didn't change. It never conformed to the beliefs or behaviors of the world, but remained the great "I am."

When abandoned and betrayed, God's love drew nearer. When pierced, God's love was poured out. When annihilated in the finite realm, God's love was proven to be indestructible, infinite and eternal. This miracle of the cross is the hope that lives inside each one of us. God's love draws near to us. God's love is poured out in and through us. God's love cannot be taken from us or destroyed because it is infinite and eternal.

So today, on this Good Friday, we are gathering together as pilgrims in God's Holy Land of San Diego (since all the land that we stand on is holy).

We are in this sanctuary in the Garden of St. James, planted by the sea. We have come to meet Jesus in his final hours of suffering, and we have each brought our own particular heartaches and burdens that we are carrying.

In a few moments, we will have the opportunity to kneel beside the cross and lay our burdens down or stay after the service for the Stations of the Cross. In doing this, we know that Jesus understands the most painful and nuanced experiences of being human and invites us to follow in God's way, letting our heartache lead us into deeper relationship with God's pure essence already in us and in all of creation.

So may we each let what pierces our hearts enable love to pour through us. May this be the love that holds us all together. May this be the love that makes us all unburdened and free. Amen.