

The liturgy of a black lives matter protest

Last week in Louisville, I went to church.

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While the valiant online efforts of my local congregation have been a lifeline to me during COVID-19, the other day I had church for the first time since the start of the pandemic. That worship service was a black lives matter protest.

Unlike other protests I've been to recently, this one wasn't a march but a rally—so it had an adequate sound system. I could hear the call to repentance: the litany of names, beginning with Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, black people sacrificed to the idol of white supremacy.

There was confession, in a sense, as a white schoolteacher talked about implicit bias, prejudice, and genocide. And then there was the most ridiculous forgiveness. A young black woman thanked all the white people who came out to protest. We

blushed and looked at our feet, aware that we were undeserving of such a gracious response.

People spoke, testifying and teaching. A Native American man was asked to explain how money flows in city politics. He explained the power of an endorsement from the Fraternal Order of Police. This is how the city remains captive to militarized policing of division, keeping black and white as starkly separate today as in the legalized segregation of the past century.

During a pause to sanitize the microphone, we were told to greet our neighbors. Masked and sweaty, we bumped elbows with awkward sincerity. In the only overtly religious moment of the rally, a skinny southern man offered a patriarchal-themed prayer for protection. The old-fashioned masculine language was comforting and irritating in equal measure.

It was oven-hot in Louisville. The protest organizers set up tables of water and sunscreen. There were coolers of quickly melting freezer pops, boxes of granola bars, and bags of potato chips. The man at the mic announced, "We've got pizza over here!" Volunteers offered everyone hand sanitizer and masks.

It was strange to realize that all of this was free of charge. In today's world, almost everything is commodified. You could make money selling cold water on a hot day. Yet somehow this protest space was set apart from the marketplace. It held an entirely different economy.

As the afternoon turned to evening, more protesters arrived with different supplies. Jugs of milk to soothe eyes from the teargas that was surely coming. Ziploc bags filled with basic first aid supplies.

My home congregation has been celebrating virtual communion. My family brings a little plate of crackers and small glasses of juice to the computer in our living room. The pastor says the words of institution, and we take the elements on the couch.

At the protest, the familiar words came back to me: "on the night before he was betrayed." The protesters out in the street would be betrayed again that night. The police sworn to protect them would turn against them. The deal had already been worked out—a bag of silver and an FOP endorsement had already exchanged hands. "This is my body, broken for you."

The organizers offered instruction: everyone take a baggie filled with bandages.

“This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins.”

If your friend goes down, move them out of the street. If you need medical aid, cross your arms above your head. Practice now, so we all recognize the sign.

This is true Eucharist, the kind that remembers crucifixion and threatens empires.

This is ritual that reckons with the past in the present day, in the life-risking hope for tomorrow.

“Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.”