
Going the Distance

**A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener
Good Friday – Year B**

The call came late in the day. Steve Chu and his employees in the Fells Point neighborhood of Baltimore were just finishing another grueling shift trying to prepare enough takeout orders to keep their Asian fusion restaurant afloat. The man on the phone wasn't ordering takeout, though. No, Brandon Jones was calling to ask if Chu would share his famous recipe for broccoli tempura. It was his dying mother-in-law's favorite dish, you see, and he wanted to be able to make it for her when he and his wife went to visit her at her home in Vermont one last time. There was silence on the line for a moment, then Chu said, "You want the recipe? Hey, I can do better than that. How 'bout I come prepare the meal for her fresh? I'll make it outside on a hot plate in the back of my pickup truck and then you can take it on into her house." More silence on the line followed until a dumbfounded Jones responded, "You did hear me say my mother-in-law lives in Vermont, right? That's an awfully long way from Baltimore." "Yes," answered Chu matter of factly. "Give me the date, the time, and the place, and I'll be there." So it was that on March 12, Steve Chu made the six hour trek to New England, prepared several days' worth of meals out in the parking lot of an apartment complex, cleaned up after himself, then turned right around and made the long drive home. The food was delicious, the Jones family reported afterwards, though, of course, that wasn't really what this was about. No, what this was really about was someone journeying all that way to be with a dying woman and her family in the most desperate, anguished, helpless hours of their lives. It was about someone who saw them and their pain so clearly, someone who "got" them and what they were going through so thoroughly and who was willing to go the distance to be with them so that they could know that they were not alone.

Today is Good Friday, that day on the Church calendar when Jesus makes his own long, arduous journey, his own long, arduous journey to the cross. Seeing and understanding our pain and our despair, Jesus goes the distance for each of us, traveling to the farthest reaches of human experience, hauling himself all the way up that "green hill far away" so that you and I can know that we are not alone. Jesus journeys with us today to all the Golgothas of our world, all the Places of the Skull, all the dark and lonely and terrifying corners of the earth that threaten to undo us. The back room of a grocery store in Colorado where the sound of gunfire last week sent both shoppers and employees screaming and scrambling for their lives. The ICUs where over half a million of our fellow citizens have died these past twelve months, isolated from loved ones who longed merely to hug them one last time. The suddenly neat room of the teenager who has packed up her most precious belongings to give to her friends because she has decided to take her own life and so won't be needing all her stuff anymore. The coveted corner office of the prestigious law firm where the man who has everything has come to think of his existence as completely hollow, devoid of meaning. The aisles of the liquor store where a mother of four is loading up a cart for the second time this week even though she wants nothing more than to turn around and go home empty handed.

It is to just such faraway, yet dreadfully familiar, places as these that Jesus journeys for us this day, going to his death while taking upon himself all of our deaths as well. Deaths both big and small, deaths both literal and figurative. Deaths we die close to home surrounded by family and friends and deaths we die in places where we are certain no one can accompany us. Places of guilt, shame, remorse, and hopelessness—places within ourselves where we won't let anyone else in. Today, on Good Friday, Jesus goes to all these places with us and for us, and he inhabits them completely. He makes the long, painful, self-sacrificing trek to join us in the arenas of our lives we suppose are unreachable, unknowable, unbearable to anyone outside ourselves. He meets us there and he speaks to us the words we so desperately long to hear:

I love you. I love you. I love with a fierce and relentless love. I love you with a love that, no matter how far

away the trials, temptations, and terrors of life may take you, is closer to you than you are to yourself. I love you. I see you. I see you in your struggles to find light and life in this often dark and deadly world. I will never leave you or forsake you. There is nowhere you could ever wander that I will not search for you until I find you and bring you home. My body, nailed to the cross in this, the farthest place on earth—this place of betrayal and abandonment and relentless pain—my body, nailed to the cross, is proof: I have come all this way just for you.

I have come all this way just for you . . . but I have come all this way for everyone else, too . . . I have come for everyone else, too. Which brings us back to Mr. Chu and that drive he made to Vermont to cook supper on the tailgate of a pickup truck. Jesus has gone the distance for us this Good Friday; likewise, you and I are called to go the distance for one another. “Woman, here is your son,” Jesus says to his mother, pointing down from the cross to the disciple whom he loved. “Son, here is your mother,” he says to that same disciple. Jesus reminds these two individuals of their connection, because grief and loss have a way of separating people, of isolating us in our own lonely pods of sorrow. So it was for most of Jesus’ disciples on that first Good Friday—they scattered in all directions to nurse their wounds. You and I are scattered, too, on this day; indeed, because of COVID, we have been scattered for quite some time. Not only has the pandemic separated us from one another physically, it has exposed great rifts in our society, it has made clearer than ever the enormous chasms that lie between various groups and individuals in our country and in our world, chasms of wealth, race, education, political persuasion, and creed. And yet . . . and yet, “Woman, here is your son. Son, here is your mother.” Part of the special invitation, the special challenge, of this particular Good Friday, I think—this second Good Friday of the coronavirus pandemic—part of the special challenge of this Good Friday for you and me is not only to meet the One who travels towards us, but, like Steve Chu, to journey in love, peace, mercy, and self-giving towards others, including—even especially—those others we find it difficult to be near. To bridge, wherever we can, the distances that divide us. To find on the cross of Christ arms wide enough to embrace us all.