Daily Lenten Devotional
Friday, March 21, 2025
Written by Rev. Fred Garry

They're selling postcards of the hanging
They're painting the passports brown
The beauty parlor is filled with sailors
The circus is in town
Here comes the blind commissioner
They've got him in a trance
One hand is tied to the tight-rope walker
The other is in his pants
And the riot squad they're restless
They need somewhere to go
As Lady and I look out tonight
From Desolation Row

Bob Dylan—"Desolation Row"

For the last few years I have visited or revisited many, many memorials and monuments. In these visits there have been surprises. I didn't realize the Jefferson Memorial was supposed to be a monument of Liberty and hold the Declaration of Independence. I was surprised to discover that New York was the state who lost the most during the Civil War with the highest number of causalities. The teddy bear as a symbol of lost innocence answered a long lingering question. Yet, the one unexpected insight that left me dumbfounded the most was a Bob Dylan song about injustice.

Dylan's lyrics have always leaned toward matters of injustice. Certainly the most obvious is the "Lonesome Death of Hattie Carrol" where he ends the song,

Oh, but you who philosophize,
disgrace and criticize all fears
Bury the rag deep in your face
for now's the time for your tears

"Now's the time for your tears" only comes after all the misdeeds, all matters of injustice, all "levels of law" have been exposed as corrupt. But there are so many more calls for justice, claims of wrongs, too many to number perhaps. So it is not surprising that a song by Bob Dylan might be calling out a wrong. What was surprising was the very particular injustice mentioned in "Desolation Row" and the very particular act of penance that was done. The song is about a lynching that took place in 1920, in Duluth, where Robert Zimmerman's father was living at the time.

Erika Doss, in her book *Memorial Mania,* describes the event:

> In October 2003, a lynching memorial was dedicated in Duluth, Minnesota. . . [recalling] the June 15, 1920, murders of three African American men employed by the John Robinson Circus.
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> Falsely accused of sexually assaulting a local white woman the men . . . were arrested and incarcerated.
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> That night the jail was stormed by a mob of some ten thousand people (about one-tenth of the city's population) who overpowered the police with bricks and battering rams and grabbed three of the prisoners from their cells. Dragged up a steep hill, past a crowd of onlookers including children, women, and a group of Shriners attending a local meeting, the three young men were viciously beaten and then lynched from the crook of an electric light pole.[1]

Eighty-three years later, the three men who were murdered were remembered in a memorial whose intent is penance. Bronze statues of the men were placed in a small plaza in Duluth across the street from the site of their hanging. They were named as well as the named purpose of the memorial. Laid out in large letters set in the pavers of the plaza are three words: respect, compassion, atonement. All three words are important to the memorial, yet, in terms of a debt of memory, atonement is the most illuminating.

Atonement means "to make one." In everyday usage it is the healing of a fractured relationship, a restoration of unity, a sense of community restored. In its theological usage

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[1] Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010; 253-4.

atonement refers to the restoration of injury or misdeed owed to God. We speak of Jesus as an "atoning sacrifice" as he "paid for our sins." When the people of Duluth put the word "atonement" into the pavers of the plaza the impression is they were leaning more to the theological. A great act of injustice occurred in this place, and something must be done to restore the fracture, to right the wrong.

Two things here need consideration. The first is the idea that a debt was being paid. The three men who died Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie were wrongfully accused, violently murdered, and then life in Duluth went back to normal. The circus moved on. To say things "went back" or "moved on" though is inconsistent with the act of penance seen in the statues, the plaza, and the call for atonement. Things didn't move on; the circus left but the shame persisted.

The need for an act of penance is real. Who hasn't lived with guilt or shame, a kind of deep scar hopefully covered or obscured by time and a life lived in a better fashion? The memorial in Duluth speaks to this buried shame not in derision or condemnation, but in restoration. The three men who were lynched are depicted in everyday life; it is as if they are walking the streets of Duluth. The plaza contains no images of violence. The statues of the men look across the street to the site of their lynching almost as if to say, "we" can look at this now.

The second consideration, something crucial to monuments, museums, and memorials is the time and generational gap between the tragic event and the commemoration. 83 years means there should be little if any living witness left of the tragedy. Some could suggest then what is the point? If the people who did the horrible deed are no longer alive why bring up this shame? Who are we to repent of deeds done by strangers, by people we never met, by a generation now dead? But this is the key to the debt of penance owed in memory. For the most part atonement comes from others and to others than those who experienced the injustice.

Consider the people in your own life who have wronged you or you have wronged. The chances are very good most of them are dead or live far from you or are someone you are likely to live the rest of your life and not see. Grace, forgiveness, healing, if they are to happen in an atoning fashion, these will be experienced indirectly. This is how penance works, how the debts are paid. By others, for others.

Bob Dylan wrote "Desolation Row" in 1965. He most likely heard the story of the lynching from his father who lived in Duluth at the time and was perhaps even witness to it. The event happened twenty years before Dylan was born, yet, the story lingered, the need lingered to say, "this was a great act of injustice." Here is "a time for our tears." The monuments we build, the memorials we engrave, the museums we curate can house a shrine, or they can build a bridge to a moment of restoration, a debt yet paid in full.