

Southern trees bare strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

This poem, "Strange Fruit," written by Lewis Allen and sung by Billie Holiday, pervades the Stations of the Cross hanging in my church. The exhibition is titled "Stations of the Cross 2006: It Was Just an Old Fashion Lynching." It is unexpected and shocking. Let the images of the 14 stations penetrate, and you will feel the deep and true despair of the cross. Each station is framed with 16 photographs of lynchings. Let me describe them. Little white girls dressed in their Sunday best watching as Rubin Stacy is lynched. Men in suits and top-hats smiling as William Brown's body is burned. James Lynch; Laura Nelson; Nease and John Gillepsie; Jack Dillingham; Henry Lee; George Irwin; Joseph Richardson; black men whose names have since been forgotten— all of them bodies broken, hanging from trees. Leo Frank lynched for being Jewish. Fricke Weiss gassed at Auschwitz. A man in present-day Ramallah raising his bloody hands to a crowd after strangling two hostages with his bare hands. Nigerian Muslims protesting caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed.

"The lynchings, oh the lynchings," the artist, Mario Alberico mourns. "I wanted to take all of those images and put them along side Christ's lynching to honor them and all who have been lynched by hatred of any kind." He continues, "We have been crucifying the poor and the oppressed, the afflicted, the widowed and the orphaned along with Christ for the past 2,000 years."

But why the Stations of the Cross? Why not just a single painting? The stations began in medieval Europe when people were prevented by wars from making pilgrimages to the Holy Land. As a substitute for the pilgrimage, stations would be set up along a procession route that people would walk. They'd stop at each station to pray. This way, people would walk the way of the cross.

But we don't now, nor did we ever really, need the stations to walk the way of the cross. As Alberico's "Stations" reveal, the cross is not merely a thing of the past. We live the cross daily. Within us, around us, because of us— the crucifixion happens daily.

And Christ is in each one of them. Isaiah tells us “The Lord will go before you,” marred in appearance, beyond human semblance, despised, rejected. A man of suffering, who by a perversion of justice was taken away. “Surely, he has borne our infirmities.”

And Lamentations comforts us: “When all prisoners of the land are crushed under foot, when human rights are perverted in the presence of the Most High, when one’s case is subverted, does the Lord not see it” (3:34-36). For, “the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases” (3:22).

No, we don’t need the Stations to walk the Way of the Cross. We are crucified daily. We crucify others daily. We don’t need the Stations, if we choose to see this; if we choose to let these daily crucifixions break us; if we submit to the penetrating, transforming power of the cross, rather than run from our brokenness and project our abuse onto others.

I find the images in Station XII particularly piercing. The station is “Jesus dies on the Cross.” The question the artist asks with this station is “Who stayed and who ran away when Jesus died?” In the middle of the image of Christ dying is a picture of a white man, neatly dressed. He’s cropped out of a larger picture of Leo Frank’s lynching. He’s one of the onlookers, but, at the moment this photo is shot, he’s not watching the lynching. In this moment, he stands, arms crossed, staring, penetratingly, out of the frame, straight at me, straight at you – as if to ask, “do you stay? Or do you run?”

Framed by images of lynchings, crucifixions throughout history, the answer is unbearably obvious. Too often we run away. Or worse, we conspire with these daily crucifixions. Like the anonymous white conspirator of lynchings who stares out at us, we protect ourselves with false images of superiority. We align with the powerful and rest safely in our notion of an exalted self, shouting “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Alberico reminds us, “[Christ’s death] was just an old fashioned lynching, and we continue to crucify him to this day. We lynch him over and over with hate - in words, in actions, and in nonaction.”

We too often run, because if we stay, the pain of the cross humbles us. Vulnerable to Christ’s suffering, to the suffering of others, we become vulnerable to our own pain. We are no longer superior. We are no longer protected. We see ourselves as we really are, knitted into the web of all life. We see ourselves in unity with all suffering. We are on the cross, and we are broken.

Perhaps Station XI – “Jesus is Crucified” – tells the truth of this option the best. Flanking the image of the crucified Christ are Mahatma Gandhi and Archbishop Oscar Romero—two men killed for creating a world of greater humanity, justice, and peace. Scattered throughout the other stations are images of other men and women who lived mingled in the struggle and hope of the Cross— Coretta Scott King; martyred Civil Rights workers Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner. Their images remind us that when we stay with Christ on the Cross,

we also break. We become people of the Cross. Humbled. Dead to our superior, impenetrable notions of ourselves. Vulnerable to our and other's daily crucifixions.

It is this death into which we are baptized so that we can be born anew into life in Christ— a life beyond fear; a life beyond self-absorbed protectiveness; a life beyond abuse and violence. In the words of Archbishop Romero (moments before he was gunned down), "One must not love oneself so much, as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us." This life of risk is the life Christ lived, and the life for which he died. It is this life of risk into which our baptism leads us and through which our Christ accompanies us. For, "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases."

And so the question: do you stay? Or do you run?

May we be a people who stay. Empowered by Christ on the Cross, may we enter with him into the world's pain so to make ourselves, and the world, anew — so to transform the world's strange and bitter fruit into Christ's new creation.