

The White Man, the Black Man, and The Cross

by George Getschow

“Who will put an end to it? A white man or a black? A cop or a suspect in the back of a police car? Will it be a liberal or a conservative, a Republican or a Democrat? A Sunni or Shia? Believer or atheist? Northerner or Southerner or Easterner or Westerner? Who will be the last to pull a trigger, light a fuse, push a button? Them or us? Because someone has to put an end to what Cain started. Someone has to close the last door, hammer in the last nail.”

--Facebook post, July 7, the night of the rampage

Bill Marvel, a distraught Dallas writer, captured the gut-wrenching sentiment of residents in the above Facebook post reacting to the murders of five Dallas police officers and the wounding of eleven others assigned to protect a Black Lives Matters protest march in downtown Dallas.

Michah Johnson, an African-American and U.S. Army veteran, hid out in the staircase of a downtown community college – out of sight of the protestors and the police – waiting to take revenge on the white policemen for the killing of black men in several other states.

As the protesters and the police turned the corner toward El Centro College, a hail of bullets rang out, sending the protesters scrambling for cover. Scores of Dallas police raced toward the sound of the bullets, trying to determine where the sniper was posted. As they did, Johnson’s bullets ripped through the back of the neck of one police officer, killing him instantly, and four other officers caught in the ambush also perished.

The bullets that ripped through the uniforms of our Dallas police also ripped apart the soul of the community. Dallas residents were left as shell shocked and shattered as they were on November 22, 1963 when John F. Kennedy’s head was blown apart by a sniper as he rode in a motorcade through Dealey Plaza in downtown Dallas preparing for the next presidential campaign.

Bill Marvel, the writer, echoed the anxiety of most people in town with his elegiac essay, wondering, “Who will put an end to it? A white man or a black man.”

It turns out it was both. Two Birmingham, Alabama ministers – one black and one white – flew to Dallas last Saturday morning in the wake of the bloodletting to offer the grief-stricken community a striking and powerful consolation for their suffering: The Cross.

After arriving at DFW Airport, Rev. William Wilson, an Anglican priest who is now bishop-in-residence at St. Peter’s Anglican Church in Mountain Brook, and Stephen Manyama, the African-born pastor of the Family Worship Center in East Lake, borrowed a truck from a friend, drove to the nearest hardware store and spent the next three hours fashioning a 12-by-6-foot cross from the cheapest lumber they could find in the store.

After nailing the two-by-fours together, the ministers glued the purpose of their mission across the vertical face of the cross in big, bold letters: PEACE BY THE BLOOD OF HIS CROSS.

The ministers carried their rough-hewn cross past Dealey Plaza and along the six square blocks that constituted the crime scene, cordoned off with tape and barricades. As they carried their cross along the crime scene, the white man and the black man were approached by curious onlookers wondering who they were and why they had come to Dallas. "Only to pray with you, to console you, to help you heal," Rev. Manyama said over and over.

As I watched these ministers carrying their cross along the streets and sidewalks of downtown Dallas, I kept thinking of Bill Marvel's essay. "Someone has to close the last door, hammer in the last nail."

The black man and the white man, I thought, were doing that in their own way -- closing the door to indifference and discord, hammering the last nail into a cross to remind everyone of the power of Christ to transform evil into love for all humanity.

Early Sunday morning, the black man and the white man took their cross to Dallas's downtown Police Headquarters, where a make-shift memorial in the courtyard had sprung up after the melee. The memorial consisted of hundreds of balloons, teddy bears, and letters to the fallen police officers draped over a squad car.

As the black man and the white man slowly entered the courtyard, several hundred mourners looked shocked at the sight of the towering cross being carried, with great care, across the mass of mourners. The black man and the white man carried the cross into a crowd of policemen standing under a banner mounted on the side of the headquarters that said, "We support our Dallas Police Officers."

Now standing under the cross and hearing the black man and the white man invite them to pray with them, the police and the ministers draped their arms around one another, wailed words they remembered from scripture towards the heavens, and wept until the courtyard under their feet became a pool of tears.

"They suffered a kind of crucifixion," Bishop Wilson told a reporter back in Birmingham. "The just man taken down by the violent. That's what the cross represents."

The black man and the white man stationed their cross inside the memorial and waved goodbye to the crowd. The cross is still there, alongside the teddy bears, offering consolation and healing to a community badly in need of salvation.

EPILOGUE:

The author of this story had the privilege of helping and observing the black man and the white man's ministry of mercy to the tormented souls of Dallas last weekend. I saw, first hand, how these compassionate men, carrying their cross, transformed a city and its citizens. What I witnessed was something sacred and holy, an act of love that will live on in me and in the citizens of Dallas forever and ever. Amen.