

December 16, 3rd Advent

Just as the people asked John the Baptist, “What are we to do?” So do we have the challenge of asking ourselves, “What are we to do to follow our God by loving God and neighbor and self? Here is a story of three people who responded by putting their lives on the line.

One Friday afternoon a little more than a year ago, a black 16-year-old girl and her 17-year-old Muslim friend, who was wearing a *hijab*, were riding on a commuter train in Portland Oregon. Suddenly, a white man on the train began screaming anti-Muslim and racist insults at the two girls. One can imagine people staring at their phones or burying their heads in newspapers, trying desperately NOT to hear – BUT three brave passengers stepped forward to protect the girls.

The three were as different as could be. One was a 23-year old recent Reed College graduate with a man of long hair who worked in environmental consulting. Another was a 53-year-old Army veteran with the trimmest of haircuts and a record of service in Iraq and Afghanistan. The third was a 21-year old poet and Portland State University student on his way to a job at a pizzeria. What united the three was decency.

When they intervened, the man harassing the girls pulled a knife and slashed the three men before fleeing. Rick Best, the veteran died at the scene. Taliesin Namkai-Meche, the recent Reed graduate, was conscious as he waited for an ambulance. A good Samaritan took off her shirt to cover him; she recounted that some of his last words were: ‘I want everyone on the train to know that I love them.’ He died shortly after reaching the hospital.

Another passer-by staunch the bleeding of the student poet, Micah Fletcher, and called his mother to tell her to go to the hospital – but played down the injuries to avoid terrifying her. Fletcher underwent two hours of surgery to remove bone fragments from his throat. Fletcher survived.

Police arrested the man, a 35-year-old white supremacist and charged him with the murders. (New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof writes: “In tragedy, we sometimes find inspiration. In that train car, we saw that courage and leadership are alive...among ordinary Americans converging from varied backgrounds on a commuter train, standing together against a threat to our shared humanity.”

What happened on that train is a sign of the “expectation” that “fills” every heart longing for the coming of God’s kingdom of justice and peace. As John preached at the Jordan, we can only welcome the Messiah into our lives when we move beyond ourselves to embrace the hurt and brokenness, the needs and hopes of others. We can only realize the “best” of humanity by taking on greed and arrogance and bigotry that diminish our humanity.

It seems like a tough story to relate on Gaudete Sunday...but to “rejoice in the Lord always,” as Paul challenges the Philippians is marked by “our kindness to all, to everyone.” The Lord is near, have no anxiety. And so we are called to continual conversion. As Father Karban put it: “Our sacred authors believe that since we follow a God who is continually interacting with this world, we also must turn away from our natural selfishness and interact with this world. We simply cannot distance ourselves from God or others.”

So, what is that we’re called to do? That is the question for all of us today. In what way do we need to change to respond to the people in our lives? After we’ve answered that question, let’s do it, beginning now. It is time to rejoice!