Good Friday is about the death of Jesus. Death has been on our minds of late. In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, we are more aware of death than ever. The news stations report the number of the deaths from the virus each day – in the Bay Area, in California, in America, in the world, one after another after another. As time goes on, more and more of us know someone who has died, or is in danger of dying, or has narrowly escaped death because of the virus. This Good Friday we are under siege. Death surrounds us. It threatens us. It demands our attention. It takes us by the shoulders, shakes us up, and stares deeply into our souls with its piercing eyes. What is it that death wants of us? And why is it that our faith puts the gruesome death of our finest and most beloved teacher at the center of our key celebration?

The near presence of death in our lives changes us. What mattered to me as February ended and March rolled in pales in significance to other priorities. In early March, I was concerned about a water leak in our living room. Now I am making sure I am right with God, just in case I suppose. In early March, I was nursing a grievance with a member of my extended family, now I am calling to be sure he is healthy because I realize how much he means to me. In early March, I was actively avoiding my well -equipped gym, now I am happy to wake up at the crack of dawn simply to walk. I am more scared than I was a month ago. I am also more healthy spiritually and physically. I am more grateful. I am more attentive to more of my relationships. I am better in a number of ways.

I am further intrigued that although some of the young clients at the mental health agency at which I work, are more anxious or depressed since the COVID-19 crisis, the truth is that many of them are better than they have been. I believe their parents’ priorities have changed. They are home with their kids, paying personal attention to them, engaging with them more frequently, some while striving to work as well. It’s not easy for them, and I applaud them for their efforts. Many of the kids I talk to are eating it up. As one said to me, “Being at home is awesome.”

The thing about death is that it takes many forms. Before we draw our last breath, we die a thousand other deaths. Our language reflects this. We talk about “dying of embarrassment” and “feeling dead inside.” We hear people say, “he (or she) is dead to me” or “I simply can’t live without her.” We speak of dying industries, dying churches, and the death of civil discourse.

Our faith raises this question as do poets, musicians and other artists. Do we only die when we take our last breath, or our heart beats the last time or our brains show no activity? Or, do we die when make choices that deeply hurt our loved ones? Do we die when we stop caring about justice and about those who have less than we do? Do we die when we turn our backs on God, and refuse His forgiveness or his call? Do we die when we choose wealth over love?

Jesus died only once, because he was perfect. Jesus joins us in our many deaths because he loves us. He comes with forgiveness and acceptance when we are dying spiritually. With his arm around our shoulders, he stands with us as we survey the dead winter landscape created by our selfishness, our lack of courage, our meanness, our failure to act, our insensitivity. He is there when our illusions about our selves die, and we are face to face with ourselves just as we are. He is also there, even when no one else can be, when we take our last breath, when our heart beats the last time, when our brain activity flatlines. We never die alone. Not once in the thousand times we die before our physical death. And not at the end. Jesus, who knows what it is to die, joins us in love.

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.