

The Cross and the Lynching Tree

Dr. James H. Cone

Book Study Resource

Love Mercy Do Justice
Evangelical Covenant Church
2018

Strange Fruit

As performed by Billie Holiday

*Southern trees bear 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*

Written by Abel Meeropol
Recorded April 20, 1939

**“On the outskirts of every agony sits some observant fellow who points.”
-Virginia Woolf**

In The Cross and the Lynching Tree, James Cone points. He points us to the reality of the lynching tree. At least 5,000 African American victims between 1880 and 1940. He points. And he helps us to truly see our country’s malaise of anger, violence, and blindness. He points. And opens our eyes to the full horror of the lynching tree as central to our life and history. He points. And he helps us make the connection between the cross and the lynching tree and to understand that there is hope beyond tragedy. Hope for our country; hope for the church and, hope for racial understanding and reconciliation.

Hope begins with seeing. We must see that, as Jim Wallis writes, America “was established as a white society, founded upon the near genocide of one race and then the enslavement of yet another...racism is America’s original sin.” In seeing, we are called to confess and repent. In repentance, we are called to lament and weeping. William Stringfellow speaking to white social activists who wanted to do something “practical” to work for racial reconciliation said that they could “weep; first care enough to weep.” In our tears, as we see and confess, we are called to solidarity in acts of reconciliation, righteousness, and reparation.

This season of Lent, in the aftermath of Charlottesville and with the resurgence of white supremacy in our country, let’s go on this journey together. A journey of seeing black pain and naming white complicity in the sinful narrative of white supremacy. And let’s join in prayer that God may give us eyes to see; that he will lead us into a time of confession, repentance and lament; and that he will help us to be partners with Jesus and one another in destroying “the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14).

Dick Lucco
Executive Director of Ministry Development

Greetings from Love Mercy Do Justice!

Thank you for taking time to engage this resource, and the incredible work of Dr. James H. Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. While this text is deeply stirring, it is also seriously challenging. We recognize that meaningful engagement with this subject will undoubtedly surface much in the way of pain, anger, confusion or lament. As your group works through this book study, remember that this journey is a pastoral work. Recognize that, as people come together to prayerfully hear from God, the temptation might be to pull back and/or disengage. But we believe that within the bounds of the Christian community, held together by the love and grace of the Spirit of God, we can engage challenging topics, not only to remember and lament our shared story of racial violence, but also to frame it in a way that might call us to confession and repentance and toward a more faithful reflection of God's beloved community.

Each week, there are two brief reflections written by leaders and pastors within the Evangelical Covenant Church family. We are so grateful to be able to compile this resource full of examples of the rich well of wisdom that God has granted us within the ECC.

As your group gathers, people should come having read the assigned chapter from *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* and the appropriate reflections. We've also provided 7 questions to ask each week, intended to orient the group around essential reflections coming from each chapter. These questions, or others that you determine fit your context, will help to shape your group discussion each week.

We recommend doing this book study over the course of 6 weeks, with week 1 covering the Introduction *and* Chapter 1, and wrapping up in week 6 with the Conclusion and some final discussion/reflection together on the book as a whole.

As always, we relish the opportunity to journey with you, and your church, and so if there are ways we can join you in discernment about pathways forward as a community, please reach out to us at lmdj@covchurch.org. May God give us the courage to wade into these deep waters together and the grace to persevere in the journey.

The LMDJ Team

Group Discussion Questions for each Chapter

- 1. What are 1-2 things you learned from the reading in this chapter?*
- 2. How did the reading mesh with your previous understanding of race, the history of racial violence, and your theological perspective?*
- 3. Where did you feel challenged? stretched? provoked? as you read this chapter?*
- 4. Why do you think this chapter had that effect on you?*
- 5. What are 1-2 questions you want to explore further coming away from this chapter?*
- 6. What do you think God is asking you to consider in terms of a next step? (even this week...)*
- 7. What might God have in mind for this group as we continue to journey through this book together?*

Introduction

Reflection from Dave Kersten

Dean of the Seminary, North Park Theological Seminary and Vice President for Church Relations, North Park University- Chicago, IL

In rereading James Cones' important and powerful book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, two memories overwhelming me with grief and shame came to mind and heart. The first was from my Sankofa journey with Covenant leaders in the early 2000's. While in Atlanta we viewed the traveling exhibit "No Sanctuary", a pictorial history of lynching in the United States. Walking through the exhibit I was overwhelmed with the thought that this could have been Harold Spooner, this could have been Jerome Nelson, this could have been Robert Owens...people I know and love. And then one of the pictures, a black, dead body hanging from a horizontal branch with what looks like a church picnic with white people in their Sunday best with one dark-haired white girl who looked exactly like my mother at that age posing and smiling. Worlds collided, theologies collided, and family histories collided. We all live under the same cross, how could this be?

The second memory was going to Ferguson, MO with the Sankofa class for a reconciliation conference and visiting the site of Michael Brown's murder. Standing in the middle of the street where his body lay for hours, our little band of students and professors offering a prayer. I looked around and counted nearly 200 windows from the homes and public housing apartments that all could view the scene, the spectacle and one word came to me, "lynching." This was a modern-day lynching. As a white Christian, pastor, seminary dean the call of this book is urgent and unrelenting. The connection between the cross and the lynching tree cannot be denied. We must stand there, oppressor and oppressed owning our history, disentangling ourselves from white supremacy seeking a new forgiveness and transformative experience in the gospel.

This book, as a Lenten journey, reminds us of the deep truth of this season. The way of the cross, the way of death is ultimately the way to new life. It is our calling as pastors and teachers to connect the violence and terror of our world to the redemptive action of the cross. In order to do this we have to be willing to give up the false history of the country that we love and the false history of the church we serve. Hard work, but good work. T.S. Elliott, in his poem, "The Journey of the Magi" tells of a long hard death-like journey to birth. At the end of the journey they enter a temperate valley and see "three trees on a low sky" and it has been said the world has never gotten over three trees on a low sky. In this Lent we are called to those trees, who will journey with me?

Chapter 1- “Nobody Knows de Trouble I See”: The Cross and the Lynching Tree in the Black Experience

Reflection from Curtis Ivanoff

Superintendent of the Alaska Conference- Anchorage, Alaska

The first chapter of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, left me feeling sober. The lynching era that inflicted such deep suffering upon African Americans on our soil left me wondering, “how did I not know this?” It was astounding to read about the historical reality of the exercise of such violence. Learning that it was socially accepted, viewed by upwards of 20,000 people as a public spectacle, caused my heart to ache. It brought to mind what a fellow ECC pastor, mentor, and colleague said to me as we walked on the streets of a city in the south - “Oh, if these trees could talk, Curtis. This is where my people were hung.” Now, that statement rings in my ear and I grieve this history all the more as my friend’s statement has more gravity and as I understand more deeply the historical context. Not that I did not feel it at that moment as my brother shared with me, but I simply did not have the understanding I gained from reading Cone’s work.

It also causes me to feel a measure of anger. How is it that I did not know this? Also, as an Alaskan Native, someone who has a heritage of being indigenous to these lands, I found myself juxtaposing this era with what was happening to Native Americans. We have not done well at being honest with our history.

As a community of Jesus followers, the cross is a symbol of such significance for our faith. This is a powerful piece to walk with congregants to gain a deeper understanding of how Christ identifies with those who suffer, giving us hope. We all have sufferings. But for this part of our history, and with the realities of the lingering manifestations of white supremacy, this is an opportunity for congregants to see the footprints and rooted nature of how our country has provided a crucible for racial dominance. All ethnicities must be on guard against such a belief.

Because this history exists, and because we see continued real struggles of racism in our society today, there is a need for communal lament. When one part of the body hurts, we all hurt. We need to properly remember history, and one way to pastorally walk with others is to create space for communal lament. And, from a place of understanding story, to be girded up to name and call out that which is evil today.

Cone presents the reason for hope that blacks had in the midst of hellacious suffering in the lynching tree era, by clinging to the cross of Christ. Both the lynching tree and the cross became symbols that evoked deep emotional responses as a result of such terrible suffering at the hands of white supremacists. Music became an outlet and avenue for blacks to affirm their humanity in the midst of great pain. The church provided a way for hope to be found, as the cross is the

ultimate symbol of God defeating the power of sin and death. Because Jesus suffered on the cross, blacks who suffered knew that God was not distant from the hanging bodies on the trees, for Christ himself hung on a tree. The pursuit of justice, for the change of social structures that fostered the notion of white supremacy and oppressed blacks, was fueled with the fire that came of knowing that Christ was crucified. This is what compelled blacks to go to the streets in protest in the civil rights era, and it should be what compels us today to speak and act on behalf of those being oppressed.

Reflection from Garth McGrath

Superintendent of the Great Lakes Conference- Canton, Michigan

I experienced a number of intense emotions as I read the first chapter of James Cone's book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Among those emotions are the following:

Grief: At the beginning of the chapter Cone cites a published account of the 1915 lynching of Thomas Brooks in Fayette County, Tennessee. The article describes white spectators taking hundreds of pictures, post cards of the "lynching" being printed and sold on site, and schools being delayed so boys and girls could view the lynched man's body. I grieve that a man's life was taken away from him in such a brutal way; and I grieve that his death became a spectacle for white onlookers. When I consider that historians have identified by name most of the nearly 5,000 African-Americans who were victims of lynching, and when I consider the possibility that similar crowds gathered in many of those instances, the grief I feel is profound. Human beings made in the image of God had their lives brutally taken from them. Their loved ones suffered not only from their loss, but also the fear that any one of them could be next. And whole communities of white people apparently saw this as some kind of "show."

Anger: Cone writes that after the Civil War and the end of slavery, lynching as primarily mob violence and torture directed against African-Americans began to increase because "white supremacists were furious at the very idea of granting ex-slaves social, political and economic freedom.... They felt insulted by the suggestion that whites and blacks might work together as equals." Lynching, in Cone's words, became a means of keeping ex-slaves subservient: "Should a black man lift his hand or raise his voice to reprimand a white person, he could be lynched. If he even looked at a white person in a manner regarded as disrespectful, he could be lynched." Cone describes how the Ku Klux Klan, initially organized simply as a social club, "soon transformed itself into a vigilante group whose primary purpose was to redeem the South and thereby ensure that America remained a white man's country." He goes on to say that when KKK members were tried in courts, they could usually count on their neighbors and friends to find them 'not guilty,' since all-white male juries almost never found white men guilty of lynching a black man." Elsewhere, Cone describes how individual African-Americans had to watch their step no matter where they were in America because "a black man could be walking down the road, minding his business, and his life could suddenly change by meeting a white man or a group of white men or boys who on a whim decided to have some fun with a Negro." And Cone describes how often as many as 20,000 men, women, and children attended lynching events, which "could not have happened without widespread knowledge and the explicit sanction of local, state... and federal authorities." Lynching itself, and everything associated with the practice of lynching is so deeply, deeply wrong! I feel anger toward those who carried out the

lynchings, those who condoned the lynchings, and those who did not stop them from taking place.

Inspiration: In the last part of the first chapter Cone writes that African-Americans survived the terrors of the lynching era (1880-1940) by turning to blues music and to Christian faith. In Cone's words, the blues expressed a feeling about their humanity: The blues were "an existential affirmation of joy in the midst of extreme suffering, especially the ever-present threat of death by lynching." But it was their faith that gave them hope to look beyond their current suffering. Cone writes, "On Sunday morning at church, black Christians spoke back in song, sermon, and prayer against the faceless, merciless, apocalyptic vengefulness of the massed white mob, to show that trouble and sorrow would not determine our final meaning. African Americans embraced the story of Jesus, the crucified Christ whose death they claimed paradoxically gave them life." I am inspired by the account Cone gives of how my African-American brothers and sisters in Christ turned to Jesus and found hope in him despite the deep despair they had every right to hold onto.

Based on my reading of the just the first chapter of the book, I would anticipate that the emotional responses of congregants to the contents of each chapter will be profound and intense. As a pastor of a local church, my inclination would be to extend an invitation to members of my congregation to participate in a group that would read the book chapter by chapter, meeting together weekly to discuss what we have read. I would limit the size of the group to 8 or 10 people total in order to maximize interaction. If more than 10 people express interest in participating in the group, I would be inclined to have two groups meet instead of one large group. And while there are 5 chapters in the book, I would plan for 10 weeks of meetings. Because I am Caucasian I would ask an African-American member of my church to co-lead the group meetings with me. Ideally, the group would be diverse in gender and race. If individuals were to come to me having read this book, I would offer to meet individually with them as they unpack the content of the book and explore the impact it is having on them.

This chapter calls me to lament the atrocities of the tragic 60-year period from 1880-1940 during which African-American men, women and children lived in constant fear (terror) of losing their life or losing a loved one through a lynching. It causes me to grieve the brutal deaths of almost 5,000 African-Americans during that period. This chapter increases my resolve to do my part in helping the Covenant Church strive toward racial righteousness, and to do my part in taking a stand against racism wherever it occurs. This chapter calls me to examine my own experience of white privilege and to be more sensitive to long history of injustice that my African-American friends and colleagues have endured.

Chapter 2: “The Terrible Beauty of the Cross” and the Tragedy of the Lynching Tree: A Reflection on Reinhold Niebuhr

Reflection from Sanetta Ponton

*Director of Justice, Advocacy and Compassion, Metro Community Church,
Englewood, New Jersey*

It’s hard for me to reflect on this chapter without feeling an overwhelming sense of grief and disappointment. I love the Church but for so long the Church has not loved me back. I am a black woman, and the same pain I felt reading this chapter I have felt time and again in my lifetime where my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ have failed to mourn when many people of color have mourned. I find myself torn between a hope that proclaims we are all one in Christ Jesus and a reality that feels fragmented, unloved, and misunderstood. This chapter made me feel overlooked, like a child neglected by a parent, longing to be loved and cared for, yet met with indifference. Have you ever felt ignored? I struggle to hold back feelings of anger and bitterness toward white Christians. How could Christians turn a blind eye to the thousands of black bodies murdered senselessly and unapologetically throughout the country? Even more frightening and disheartening are those who we might now call “woke” Christians like Niebuhr, who lack the courage to champion the cause of justice and be a modern-day prophet. In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King will lament, “we will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.” And yet as a black Christian, I stand in this nexus where both the victim and the “good” people are my people. It is painfully confusing. But I have hope that the journey is not over for the “good” people any less than it is over for those who are the victims of oppression. God’s kingdom of justice will come but only at the hands of those who walk in the boldness of the Holy Spirit to name the demons (white privilege) and seek with all their might to dismantle it within themselves and society.

Among others, this chapter focuses on two issues – divestment of self and internal struggle, both of which resonate with the Christian experience. Christ calls us to lay aside our own self-interest. Cone concludes that while Niebuhr had an intellectual understanding of the condition of black people, he lacked an emotional connection that would have compelled him to act with prophetic outrage against lynching. In his writing, Niebuhr recognized that nothing but “madness of the soul” would compel someone to “do battle with malignant power and ‘spiritual wickedness in high places.’” (56) Indeed, in the dialogue between James Baldwin and Niebuhr, Cone points out the “gulf of emotional orientation” between the two surrounding the

bombing of a black Baptist church and the murder of four little girls. Niebuhr could not (or would not?) identify with the black victimized community. Why? Niebuhr is correct in his estimation that humanity is inherently sinful and governed by self-interested power. It takes intentionality and requires great vulnerability to go the way of Christ and willingly enter another's pain and take on their hurt. Too often we are bound by self-interest. But Jesus shows us another way. Philippians 2:5-8 reminds us of the self-emptying of Christ. In Christ we see our Lord divest Himself of power (kenosis) to enter a world of sinful humanity *through suffering* in obedience to God. That God's love was hidden within the suffering of Jesus on the cross transvalues our human values – divine goodness and power is found in weakness, not in strength. Furthermore, God is inviting us to let go of our own self-interest and enter the suffering of others. It is through this process that one develops empathy for the other and is finally able to love the other. This happens through proximity, through developing relationships that allow for hard conversations. It requires listening (not speaking) and believing the experiences of the speaker. It requires prayerful self-evaluation. The aim is for us to be transformed into Christlikeness while aiding in the transformation of others.

One can feel Niebuhr's internal struggle with race and justice in this chapter. In some ways, it harkens back to Paul in Romans 7 as he wrestled with his flesh, wanting to be obedient but unable to do so under the law. Niebuhr wanted justice for African Americans, he just did not want it to come at the cost of the comfort of Southern white Christians (and maybe himself as well). Rather than empathize with black victims, he identified with white moderates of the South. He was aware of and vocal about the conditions of black people yet was a proponent of gradualism, patience, and prudence. He failed to see that for black people, waiting for justice is akin to the Pharisees denying healing to a man on the Sabbath (see Matthew 12:9-14). Why wait another day when people are in pain today? Niebuhr correctly surmised that what Cone proposes changes everything. White Christians would now be forced to be uncomfortable. They would be confronted with the ways they have benefitted from white supremacy and the ways they have been complicit. It is disorienting, as Daniel Hill describes in *White Awake*. And yet Christ calls us to break free from sin and the racism that binds each one of us. Christ calls us to inhabit a new kingdom, that for now requires our Christian imagination where our power and strength are hidden in the cross and justice is available to all.

Cone seeks to understand what blocks the American Christian imagination from seeing the connection between the cross and the lynching tree. Those who have been the victims of that terror recognize the obvious similarities. Both the cross and the lynching tree are "symbols of terror, instruments of torture and execution." (31) They are public displays of humiliation and indignity aimed to "strike terror in the subject community." (31) White supremacy has so embedded itself into Christianity

that traditional (white) theology could not imagine this connection and, therefore, has failed to speak to the black American experience. Even those, like Niebuhr, who seem aware of the condition of black Americans fail to seek justice for African Americans because they hold African Americans at arms' length. Proximity and engagement with those suffering is necessary when constructing a theology that speaks to the black American experience. We see the importance of proximity in the different ways Niebuhr spoke about African Americans verses Jews. (52) Niebuhr's theology was based in experience, but he failed to take into account (or listen to) those whose experience was other than his own. Had he engaged with black theologians and preachers, he would have developed the requisite empathy and theology to seek justice for the actual cross bearers in modern American society. (63)

Reflection from Greg Applequist
Lead Pastor, First Covenant Church- Omaha, Nebraska

The predominate feeling I have after reading chapter 2 of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* is one of sadness. The primary reason for my sadness is due to the deep connection I feel with Reinhold Niebuhr. Normally I would be honored to feel connected to such a great and respected theologian, but when it comes to issues of race, I am not proud of our similarities. Reading this chapter helped me see the complexity of Niebuhr's understanding and actions around the racial tensions of his day. He could name the pain and abuse that others felt, but it seems he was hesitant to engage in meaningful relationships with people who might not just enhance what he thought but affect how he felt. Had he allowed for his heart to be changed, perhaps he might have more faithfully entered the racial tensions of his day. I feel this is my experience too.

I have tried to make racial reconciliation an important part of my life, only to fail in living this out. I am an avid reader who engages with different voices (I read this book six months before being asked to write these thoughts). I have friends of color who have shared their stories of mistreatment. I have watched documentaries like Ava DuVernay's "13th" and I continue to be angered at the current prison industrial complex. It seems I am, like Niebuhr was, able to articulate many of the real racial challenges we face today. While I would not verbally support what Niebuhr did in a slow, patient process to equality and freedom, my lived reality would say otherwise. This is my sadness. On page 48, Dr. Cone quotes Niebuhr with words that are haunting to me, and should continue to haunt all white folks who at least claim some desire to be a part of meaningful change: "One wonders how we slept that long."

I hope to walk my congregation through this material both intellectually and experientially. The first of two churches I have served was in an ethnically changing neighborhood on the east side of Cleveland. My daughter was one of 3 white students in her elementary school class. Through a number of opportunities, our little church began volunteering at the school. This engagement with elementary school aged African American kids helped soften the hearts of our congregation. Since I have left, that church has continued to grow in their awareness of being white, and their intentional engagement with different ethnicities.

I now serve a church in west Omaha, a community with some racial diversity, but one that is primarily affluent and mostly white. Having been here only 18 months, I have not yet found the right place for our church to serve. In thinking about serving in Omaha, I was struck by the end of the chapter which comments on Niebuhr being erroneously called a prophet. Dr. Cone articulates well that "prophets take risks and speak out in righteous indignation against society's treatment of the poor (p. 61)". I don't see myself primarily as a prophet in my role as pastor. Instead, I see my role as a shepherd whose task is to draw people nearer to

Jesus. There are times when I have the invitation and privilege of being prophetic with my congregation. The challenge is knowing when and how to speak pastorally and/or prophetically. If and when I have been too prophetic, I have lost the ear of the congregation.

With that being said, I believe the best way to walk with congregants through this material would be to read the words together. I would strive to help our people, many of whom would be familiar with Niebuhr, see their similarities to Niebuhr. Dr. Cone does an excellent job of describing the need for white folks to engage with and know people of color so that we might not just have intellectual thoughts, but a burning desire for love and justice. I would be able to point to our work at my daughter's school in Cleveland and the blessing it had on us, and on the school. Our church needs to realize it is out of engagement with the other that we begin to become empathic and motivated to help bring about change.

Pastorally, I would hope to help our people realize that our motivation to help others change is as much about our own discipleship as it is about helping them. We love to help other people, swooping into the inner city to 'fix' some problem. The shift that needs to happen is in the mindset that we don't need to go and 'fix' anything; rather we need to go and be incarnational and in going, *we* might be 'fixed'. Certainly, we have gifts, skills and power that can be useful, but more than that we need to see how broken we are, how we have harmed other people (intentionally or not), how we need to be healed, how we need to receive forgiveness, how we need their friendship and teaching more than they need ours. I believe it is only from the posture of relationship and learning that change in all of us is possible.

This chapter, like the rest of the book, is extremely helpful. There are a few ideas that seem important as I go forward and think about engaging my congregation in this type of material.

First, we need to name and confess our indifference to matters of race. Many in my circle would be indifferent at best, combative to the reality of a racialized society at worst. Until we can name our complicity in our reality, I don't know that we have much hope.

Second, we must be willing to engage the other. I appreciate Dr. Cone's words (p. 61) around his desire to have worked at Union with Niebuhr and engaged with him in these conversations. We all must be willing to continue to walk with each other.

Third, we (white folks) need to go out of our way to understand the Black experience. At a minimum, this ought to be done through activities like reading diverse authors and watching different films. Ideally, this would be done in real, authentic relationship with diverse friends. It seems Dr. Cone's greatest critique of Niebuhr was his lack of authentic relationships with Black theologians, activists

and pastors. Niebuhr was quick to engage with Jewish leaders and was then able to understand their reality better. But he never did this at any depth with Black leaders in his day. We must become friends today, walking in other people's shoes so that we might have not just eyes to see, but hearts to feel.

Fourth, we must not be silent. In the moving quote from Rabbi Prinz (p. 55), we see that hatred and bigotry are not the most urgent problems, but the most urgent problem is the silence of good people who stand by and do nothing. Shame on us if we continue to watch silently.

Lastly, white folks need to turn to and learn from the Black experience, not just as an act of solidarity and justice making, but as a matter of discipleship. It is when we listen more and talk less that we just might see Jesus more clearly.

Chapter 3: Bearing the Cross and Staring Down the Lynching Tree: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Struggle to Redeem the Soul of America

Reflection from Catherine Gilliard
Co-Pastor; New Life Church- Atlanta, GA

I experienced deep pain and profound sadness as I searched for tissue to stop tears from flowing when reading this chapter. I am a mother of two sons, born in the South, and I can identify with Mamie Till Bradley, whose deepest test of her faith was challenged by the lynching of her only son in Mississippi. I am a woman and my heart was broken by the many ways women's voices were ignored and marginalized during the civil rights movement, making it that much harder for women to embody King's view of the necessity of redemptive suffering. I am a pastor, with white colleagues, whose theological voices have much influence when they speak. But many, like Niebuhr, have remained silent on traumatization of lynching and other injustices that continue to go on today. I am an African-American, who, like King, has grown weary of fighting for the things that should have been mine at birth. I recalled horrific memories around the stories Cone share, with each turn of the page. I've lived long enough and remember far too many conversations about the trauma inflicted upon those who fought in the struggle for freedom. I remember the profound realization that I, too, had to settle the question of death in my pursuit of justice. What you believe about death can have a catalytic or paralyzing influence as you answer the bigger questions embedded in determining what God is actually calling you to. As I finished the chapter, my sadness deepened. I had to acknowledge that I too was being called to personally live with the daily threat of death, to live sacrificially while experiencing the effects of terror, and to understand that the cross is something that I bear and will ultimately die on.

I would begin to walk our congregation through this material contextually and historically. Questions of justice always have deep roots. I would have our congregation comprehend King's back story, as Cone shared contextualized narratives, to gain a perspective about the ways injustices become accepted norms within society. This would be a necessary starting point. It is important to understand the events that surrounded Dr. King's decisions and the opinions of the people who shaped his thoughts. It would be critical to connect those experiences to our present-day struggle. Helping our congregation understand that lynching is not a strategy of the past, as it continues to happen in schools, colleges and communities, even today would be essential. Our congregation would need to discuss why non-violence is also not simply a historical strategy, but a calling to demonstrate the power of God's love over evil. Non-violence is not simply about

learning how to take abuse from an abuser. The intent in the methodology of non-violence is to reveal to the perpetrator, not the victim, how evil a heart becomes when it is filled with hatred. The soul of America is redeemed through conviction and heart change. Our congregation would also need to study how people have historically used terror. We must remember that the aim of terror was to leave victims and those who watched the act traumatized for a lifetime. The deep roots of lynching trees grow from Jim Crow seeds planted by prejudiced white supremacists in soil nurtured by the blood dripping from the 'strange fruit' swaying from their branches. Our congregations need to wrestle with how we are called to demonstrate God's love and God's power in moments where these acts of terror display the sickness of those who plant these seeds. King wrote: "We do not know what we truly believe, or what our theology is worth, until *our highest hopes are turned into shambles of despair, or we are victims of some tragic injustice and some terrible exploitation.*" We couldn't leave this chapter without exploring the role of Niebuhr then, with those who have voice and influence today. How it is possible to be a Christian leader who intentionally refuses to speak, teach, or write about the injustices people are experiencing? We could not leave the struggle - to stare down the lynching tree - without doing communal, theological work on the meaning of the cross, the sickness of our society, death as an open door, the redemptive suffering invoked in bearing the cross, and the hope that emerges out of experiencing and surviving terrible circumstances.

There are five quotes from this chapter that compel us to face these days of evil and injustice with a faith that demonstrates God's anointing to go into the darkest places of society and be an ambassador of hope and a repairer of the breach. Read, pray and wrestle with each one: Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door which leads into life eternal. Let this daring faith, this great invincible surmise, be your sustaining power during trying days. Jesus never promised that his disciples would not suffer. Quite the opposite: suffering is the inevitable fate of those who stand up to the forces of hatred. When I took up the cross, I recognized its meaning ... It is not something that you wear. The cross is something that you bear and ultimately, that you die on. Black ministers preached about Jesus's death more than any other theme because they saw in Jesus' suffering and persecution, a parallel to their own encounter with slavery, segregation and the lynching tree. In considering the subject of God and the problem of race in America, King reflected that God's love created blacks and whites and other human beings, for each other in community (*thesis*). White supremacy was the sin that separated them in America and in much of the world (*antithesis*). God reconciled humanity through Jesus' cross, and thereby white supremacy could never have the "final and ultimate word" on human relationships (*synthesis*). God's reconciling love -- embodied by the cross -- empowered human beings to love one another, while bearing witness with "our whole being in the struggle against evil, whatever the cost."

Reflection from Mark Tao

Assistant English Pastor; Chinese Christian Union Church- Chicago, IL

“There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?” ~ D. Foster Wallace

The preservation of white supremacy and the consequent death and disfigurement of the black body is our water; our milieu. Many of us are ignorant to this reality, or simply refuse to believe it, or are amnesic. And like the young fishes in Wallace’s story- unless we ourselves are enfleshed in blackness, or intimate with such bodies, we’ll just continue swimming on undisturbed by the banality of evil, unmoved by a nation of persons suffering trauma and lasting physiological damage.

In his third chapter, James Cone opens with the story of Emmett Till. Here, Cone opines that it was the very open and public display of such a body, which in laying bare the grotesque reality (not only of the body but of the very principality which mutilated his flesh), that led to social outcry and change! This was made possible by a maternal faith in the midst of wrenching grief, that hoped beyond hope in the power of God- declaring: “who knows, but that the death of my son might bring an end (a death) to lynching”.

And, yet, the pain of Lent reminds us that this hope has not yet been realized. Despite our confession in an inaugurated eschatology, Lent focuses on the difficult now in the not yet, in contrast to the heavenly not yet in the now (we have to wait on Easter for that). The broadcasting of spectacle lynchings have not yet lead to lasting social change. Sixty-three years after Emmett Till, we’re still witnessing with the lynchings of Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Jordan Davis, Jason Ike Pero, Alex Nieto, Rekia Boyd, and Aiyana Jones; all of whom had their bodies disfigured by bullets and were posthumously blamed for their own deaths by media. We witnessed these victims slandered as criminals and their assailants acquitted of all charges. We still witness the courage of mothers trying to get us to see the water for what it is, and still to no great avail. For White supremacy hasn’t abated in the last century, it has metastasized. We still find nooses and swastikas strung up and sprayed on university campuses. We fund our prisons and our military and fill our cemeteries with young black bodies. We see Klansmen and Neo-Nazis re-emboldened alongside the Alt-right to advance the agendas of Arianism. We observe the Oval Office furthering an America first philosophy, all while extolling the virtues of a post-racial America.

The critical question for us today, is whether we will allow/content ourselves to keep imbibing the lead-infused water of white supremacy- Or - whether our ontic concern with the black body (especially an incarnate black Christ) will cause in us an ontological crisis; reforming our “being in the world”. There always exists a temptation to be as Reinhold Niebuhr was- fearful to stir the waters of supremacy for fear of anarchy, trading “proximity” for “proximate power” from the windows of his Union office. But we, as the Church, cannot afford to seal ourselves off from on high. Rather, we must become participants in a “Kingdom revolt” from below, suspending our fragility, and risking even our own standing in our communities without concern of reprisal from the powers that be. We must believe as Frantz Fanon did, that revolution is merely the consequence of a people’s inability to breathe. We must put the marginalized’s ability to breathe, over our own right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of property, face, status, and traditionalism- because we are bound together as Dr. King has said, “in a single garment of destiny.”

In the tradition of Dr. King, we are called to be a people bearing a revolutionary spirit. To believe in the possibility of the impossible, without succumbing to the politics of respectability. And to represent truth and rightness with persistent militant words and actions ready to lobby for freedom and liberation of the oppressed now. King believed that justice delayed was justice denied, and that the time is always right to do what is right. Are we willing to take up that call (and that cross) not in a deferred sense, but in a present ongoing ethic?

This may at times mean mass mobilization, engagement in political advocacy, and collective action- demonstrations, marches, etc. but more often than not, it means paying close attention to what is banal in our own churches, homes, and other communities of belonging. In his parable of water, D. Foster Wallace elaborates in explaining the parable’s meaning as such:

“The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about....The fact is that in the day to day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have a life or death importance....The capital-T Truth is about life BEFORE death. It is about the real value of a real education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: This is water. This is water.”

Part of my self-understanding and sense of call, serving in Chicago’s Chinatown is to keep asking the question (in part to myself) and in part to my own people: “How’s the water?” To look deeply at that which seems banal and ordinary, and to interrogate our own deeply rooted complicity in white supremacy and anti-

blackness; our enchantment with neo-liberalism, American exceptionalism, modernism, social Darwinism and the model minority myth. To inquire as to how these ideologies have taken root in our liturgies, our communal practices and programs. It is not always an easy place to be; bearing the (imposed) cross of white supremacy and the (assumed) cross of Asian leadership, but it is no martyrdom. It is rather, a call borne of a conviction that for our discipleship to be cruciform, it necessarily must always be tied to the struggle for black liberation and racial righteousness in our world.

Chapter 4: The Recrucified Christ in Black Literary Imagination

Reflection from David Swanson

Lead Pastor; New Community Covenant Church- Chicago, IL

In the appendix to his autobiography, Frederick Douglass clarified what he had written about Christianity in the preceding pages. He was nervous that he'd be misunderstood to be "an opponent of all religion" and wanted to ensure that his readers understood his love for the "pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ." In contrast, the sort of Christianity Douglass experienced first in enslavement and then as an abolitionist was "slaveholding religion" and it was contemptible: "corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial, and hypocritical."

I thought of Douglass' description of slaveholding Christianity when I read James Cone's lament toward the end of this chapter. "It was not easy for blacks to find a language to talk about Christianity publicly because the Jesus they embraced was also, at least in name, embraced by whites who lynched black people." I thought too that this difficulty of accurately talking about Jesus in a land that is so often corrupt and hypocritical is not only a fact of history, neither is it limited to African Americans. I remember my coworker, a Latina woman, describing how her Spanish-speaking church prayed and fasted before the most recent presidential election, their courageous response to dehumanizing rhetoric all but invisible to neighboring white churches. Or I think about the African American woman who last year turned to me on the way out of church and asked, "How can evangelicals support this man?" Her question was less about the candidate who would become president than it was about her own invisibility to his white, Christian supporters.

Could it be that the ongoing dissonance between the lived faith of so many people of color and the dominant cultural expression of Christianity is at the root of why churches of all kinds have been slow to link Jesus' crucifixion with the thousands of black men and women who were lynched by their white Christian neighbors? As Cone recognizes, it was impossible for black people to ignore the rampant cases of lynching but most black ministers avoided connecting this racial terror with the cross. Did they not see the connection or were they "too fearful of the dire consequences" if they had been too blatant about making it? After all, if the lynched bodies of black women and men had been associated with Christ, the question of who white Christians represented would be dangerously obvious.

Into this void stepped artists like Countee Cullen, Walter Everette Hawkins, and Gwendolyn Brooks among others. As artists they utilized the tools of their

crafts – fiction, poetry, photography – and asked Christians to look more closely, more specifically at the threads that ran from Christ’s body on the tree to the bodies that had been hanged throughout the Jim Crow south. Brooks’s poem about the racist tumult of public school desegregation, “The Chicago Sends a Man to Little Rock,” begins with this particularity:

*In Little Rock the people bear
Babes, and comb and part their hair
And watch the want ads, put repair
To roof and latch. While wheat toast burns
A woman waters multiferns.*

And then, at the end, the poet turns from these mundane rhythms of life to reveal the persistent, looming threat of racial terrorism.

*I saw a bleeding brownish boy....
The lariat lynch-wish I deplored.
The loveliest lynchee was our Lord.*

Here is the essential genius of the artist: By starting with the lived reality of black people – combs, want ads, burnt toast – Brooks draws their suffering alongside that of their crucified Savior. Here doubt and faith coexist; God is questioned even while hope is maintained. And, perhaps most significantly, the experience of black joy and suffering is elevated beyond the dominant culture’s malevolent ignorance and finds its meaning at Calvary. But, as Cone notes, the black artist’s impact has another function, a “creative resistance against an oppressive status quo.” That is, by associating white Christianity’s participation in or tolerance of lynching with the crucifixion, these artists undermined the moral authority of the culture’s most powerful expression of Christianity. It’s no wonder that such a potent and risky message was sounded by those on the margins of the church.

Will our churches have the humility to hear from our artists today? The cross is more than an artifact of history and its more than a doctrine to which we assent. The cross, with all of its particular suffering and terror, holds within in the capacity to interpret the suffering faced by so many today, even as much of American Christianity remains willfully deaf to the laments and protests of those who suffer. The slaveholding religion Douglass first lamented 150 years ago has survived and exerts its malicious misrepresentation of Jesus even today. May the Spirit raise up new generations of poets, writers, songwriters, and artists of all kinds who will open our eyes to the presence of the crucified and resurrected Christ amidst each of our particular sufferings.

Reflection from Adam Gustine

Director of Ministry Initiatives, Love Mercy Do Justice, ECC- Chicago, IL

“Lynch him! Lynch him!” O savage cry, Why should you echo, “Crucify!”
Countee Cullen

Every time I engage Cone’s work in this text I come away with a very similar set of emotions. On the one hand, his theological imagination, and the literary imagination of black poets and writers quoted throughout this chapter, is stunning as his connection between the crucifixion and the egregious American story of lynching find innumerable parallels.

When Cone notes that the ‘night was a scary time in the African American community’ (111) because of the fear instilled by the silent (or not so silent) mob of white terrorism, I picture the deep, guttural fear we see in the night at Gethsemane; as Jesus labors through the pain of anticipated violence; and as that silent night is shattered by a crowd intent on kidnapping a victim to parade through the streets. As he describes the approval of the white crowds who stood around taking photos of the bodies of victims; I can hear the crowds in 1st century Palestine screaming their approval *Crucify! Crucify!*

I think of how the lynching tree was more than an instrument of violence; it was also a symbol of oppression, a brutal warning to any who might dare to turn their face against the system of supremacy and it reminds me that the cross was the same; not only an instrument but a symbol of tyranny and used as a violent warning to anyone who might nurture some small notion of liberation. And in the aftermath of lynching, communities encountered a deafening white silence. A tacit permission for, and perhaps even celebration of, the incredible evil flood of extrajudicial killings that tear apart homes and communities. It brings to mind the way in which those closest to Jesus were pressured or shamed into a kind of silence that did not rise up in opposition to the greatest of all injustices.

Truly, on the one hand, Cone’s theological work is something to behold.

But, on the other hand, I find myself asking, if Christ was symbolically “the first lynchee” (96), then *what does that say about me?* If I’m being honest, it is incredibly natural for me to, when coming to the text of Scripture, read myself into the position of protagonist. When I read the story of the crucifixion, my natural inclination is to read myself into the position of Simon helping Jesus shoulder the burden of the cross, or the women who solemnly and tenderly mourn his death, or even Joseph who makes his tomb available for use. There might even be, in my best moments, the occasion to read myself into the position of Peter, aware of my

embodied *denials* and willing to confess and lament my *betrayals*, all the while hopeful to experience a kind of beachfront restoration.

When I read Cone though, I realize that his connections act to *re-locate* me in the story. In nearly every other way I read this story of Christ crucified, I find myself on good ground. But Cone doesn't let me off that easy; I cannot be content to envision myself as merely a heartbroken disciple, or a grateful receiver of the grace of God. The connection between cross and lynching tree puts me in the position of Roman soldier. I am not only a beneficiary of the cross (which I certainly am); but I am also a proponent of, and accomplice to, its violent and destructive use.

Admittedly, this is unfamiliar ground on which to walk out my faith. Swimming in the sea of God's grace has trained me, unwittingly, to resist the notion that I find in myself some reason to shoulder the guilt of the legacy of lynching and the profound sin of racial violence and hatred. I imagine myself, and many others who share my hue, thinking, *these are stories that I am either not personally guilty of, or at least forgiven for; so what use is there for sitting in the tension Cone creates between cross and lynching tree?*

But pastorally, the reality of "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" should call me, and my white brothers and sisters, to *more freely and honestly* interrogate our shared story of racialized violence and oppression. Because if it is true that to be in Christ means that I have been set free from the condemnation my sinfulness makes me worthy of, I am also free to come out of hiding and speak honestly and confess truthfully. It might help us to consider the way Isaiah, when he encounters God, is driven to repentance, not just for his sin, but for the sins of his people. In my experience, this is a seriously difficult pastoral work; but, as we open ourselves to confession for 'our people' it actually helps us see the ways in which, in fact, we are guilty of various expressions, or microaggressions, of racialized violence in our day to day.

So, if I am Roman soldier...*where does that leave me?*

Will I stand at the foot of the cross and cast lots for his clothes, or will I confess and repent because '*truly, this man was the Son of God?*' For me, this is a different way of engaging the passion narrative and one that opens up different windows into my guilt, my need, and my longing for redemption.

But what about those of us who stand in the story of American racial violence as the progeny of Roman soldiers? What will be our response? For all too long the response has been to stand at the historical 'foot' of the lynching tree in silence, watching as lots are cast for the spoils of this legacy of oppression. It seems we need to be able to imitate the voice of the solitary soldier who dared to declare the true reality of the 'Sonship' of Jesus. Tragically, this recognition came after the damage

was done. This centurion's confession was merely a devastating admission of his complicity in violence.

So too, if the only time we confess is in the aftermath of instances of racial violence, our repentance will amount to little more than an admission of complicity in our nation's original sin. I wonder if we are in need of a new era of American centurions who see the *daughter* or *son* of God in the faces of those under the oppressive thumb of racism *before* violent injustice happens. We are in need of those who inhabit the bodies of the centurion class to see and celebrate the *imago dei* in the lives of our sisters and brothers before it is denigrated and destroyed by oppressive violence. Certainly, the deadly results of racialized violence should cause an upheaval in our soul that pushes us to cry out for God's shalom justice. But these lives have to matter to us in the living; not just in the dying.

One of the ways the unending cycle of racial violence that characterizes our national story is upended is if those who occupy the position and privilege that gives permission to violence interrupt that violence and refuse to be cowed into a silent, tacit endorsement. So, I am Roman soldier...*where does that leave me?*

Chapter 5: “Oh Mary, Don’t You Weep”

Reflection from David Holder

Senior Pastor, New York Covenant Church- New Rochelle, NY

I feel angry yet exhilarated. My anger arises not only out of the graphic depiction of the lynchings and the unimaginable suffering of the victim, but equally out of the sufferings inflicted on the families left behind. I am angry that Black women had to endure through the great struggle of providing for her family alone - because of accusations by White women and White men. I say it this way because this is the heart-wrenching reality of racism in America. I am angry because most White Christians in America don’t see this reality as the centerpiece of our greatest challenge as a country. W.E.B. Dubois said that the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line. It is the problem of the twenty-first century. I am angry because the pain has morphed, but not lessened. I am angry because the lynchings continue today through the mass incarceration of Black men at the judicial hands of our White led government, leaving the Black woman again to endure alone. I am angry because the demonstrative guilty verdict declared by our now president on [the Central Park Five](#) (five Black males) did not factor into most evangelicals’ decision-making process for the highest office in the land.

I am exhilarated, however, by the historical witness of Black women, and largely Black church-going women—the continual unsung and fearless heroes, the midwives of Israel in Egypt.

I would impress upon my church the names of these incredible Black women of the Church. I would help them to see that those are names that not only represent individual persons, but the broken families left to fend without their men, as well as the names of lynched men and women themselves. I would help them construct the great contrast between the historical Black woman’s interpretation of true Christianity during the time of historical lynchings, and its White evangelical counterpart. I would want them to see, largely on their own, the dichotomy in Biblical interpretation that not only existed then, but continues in earnest today. And then I would want them to understand that arguably, the greatest interpreter of Scripture is the victim, not the victimizer. I would then want to discuss why there are so few Black women preachers in our multi-ethnic denomination, and why we have yet to break the problem of the color line that Dubois spoke of with the highest office in the Covenant. If mine was a mostly non-Black congregation, instead of inviting a Black woman pastor to speak at our church (like most non-Black churches do if they do it at all), I would take them on a trip to a Black church to experience the preaching of a Black woman preacher in her own uninhibited church environment. Because it is easy to listen to a Black woman preach in a place of

familiarity and comfort for the congregants, and we as Black people typically tone down our messages in some considerable way to appease the non-Black masses.

The way Black people historically have worshipped and continue to worship is reflective of the ‘unspeakable Black suffering’ that we have and continue to journey through. That needs to be understood, honored and even embraced within the broader context of the larger Church. This long-suffering is where our faith and interpretation of Scripture originates in this country. This is where our socio-political protests come from. Our Black women during the time of lynchings, represented in spirit and in human form, the fulcrum of the Black Church. They were and are presently the majority of my church members and our head of households. They are the primary political force of our justice movements in Jesus’ name. And so, it is their voice that cries out from the strange fruit that perpetually swings from poplar trees. They are truest human form of Christ hung on a tree in the American landscape. We must, therefore, listen intently to their historical and present-day witness because they bear much if not most of the incarnation of Christ for us all.

Reflection from Amanda Kaminski, PhD

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“Lament, Religious Imagination, and Racial Consciousness: The Prayers of Black Women as Keys to Understanding Jesus Christ Today”

Cone’s fifth chapter memorializes the lament of faith-filled black women from the Reconstruction Era through the Civil Rights Movement in US history. In the journalism of Ida B. Wells, the poetry and prose of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and the songs of Billie Holiday, the ghosts of suffering, prayerful, innocent black bodies haunt the contemporary reader. The words, images, and cadence of black female voices resonating through these pages provoked my imagination, stirring sorrow, horror, shame, sadness, anger, faith, and, finally solidarity in me.

My experience with this text started with a deep rumination on the stories of black female experience that Cone presents. I noticed the inherent spirituality operative in many of these women as they sought to find meaning in the midst of their suffering and as they likened their own anguish, particularly around the lynching of loved ones, to the crucifixion of Jesus. The poignant words of a free black woman from Savannah, Georgia, named Nellie, capture the disturbing and helpless feeling shared by those who experience God’s seeming absence and inattentiveness to their prayers and demands for justice. Connecting her pain to the tradition of biblical prayers like those of Job, the prophets, and the exilic community in Babylon, Nellie articulates her lament, saying,

It has been a terrible mystery, to know why the good Lord should so long afflict my people, and keep them in bondage—to be abused, and trampled down, without any rights of their own—with no ray of light in the future. Some of my folks said there wasn’t any God, for if there was he wouldn’t let white folks do as they do for so many years.¹

Biblical scholar Patrick Miller argues that narratives function to literalize the poetic metaphors of the Hebrew Bible.² He suggest that if biblical interpreters would pay greater heed to the presence of lament in storytelling, then they would learn much more not only about the function, faith, and form of such prayers in the religion of the Israelites but also about the potency of lament as a spiritual

¹ James Cone, “Oh May, Don’t You Weep,” in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 123, quoting Albert J. Raboteau, “‘The Blood of the Martyrs Is the Seed of Faith’: Suffering in the Christianity of American Slaves,” in *The Courage to Hope: From Black Suffering to Human Redemption*, ed. Quinton H. Dixie and Cornel West (Boston: Beacon, 1999), 31.

² Patrick Miller, “Trouble and Woe: Interpreting the Biblical Laments,” *Interpretations* 37 (1983): 32-45.

resource. Nellie's confession of God's goodness and her simultaneous struggle to understand God's inactivity in liberating black folks in the United States concretizes the profundity of this ancient prayer tradition. The agency of God in the Hebrew mindset creates a major problem since God is both immanent and sovereign. Slave testimonies like Nellie's show the way that honest faith in situations of extremity—violence, trauma, existential crisis, political instability, economic insecurity—can all at once express itself in outrage, sorrow, accusation, and petition to the God of salvation. Lament has the scope to concurrently express inarticulable grief, faith in God's redemptive power, and rage at God's seeming neglect of God's promises to rise up against injustice.

As I finished the chapter, I attended to Cone's rhetorical emphasis in entitling this section, "Oh Mary, Don't You Weep" and then concluding with the same lyrics. Noting that the reference comes from a Negro spiritual, a quintessential genre of lament in black spirituality, I recalled the way that meter, cadence, and tone play a key role in making meaning in this type of poetic prayer. The irregularity of beats in the rhythmic pattern of the text of Lamentations, for instance, forms something like a sob, a choke, or a gasp for breath, indicative of mourning, grief, and suffering.³ Jewish scholar Naomi Seidman demonstrates the way that lament encodes pain, shock, and struggle in the very articulation of the prayer. She explains that the opening cry, "how," that begins three of the five poems of Lamentations (called the Book of "How" in Hebrew) should be pronounced "with a catch in the throat."⁴ In order to more fully immerse myself as a white woman in the musical key of black female suffering and spirituality, I found the Commodore recording of Billie Holiday's, "Strange Fruit."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Web007rzSOI>

Listening to this unforgettable piece of jazz awakens the imagination and the senses. Through the somber pound of strategic piano chords, the wail of the horn, the key moments of quiet pause, and the brilliant syncopation of Holiday's gravelly voice, the meaning of the lyrics come alive. The visceral juxtaposition of the scent of the magnolia trees and the smell of burning flesh demands the kind of howl with which the famous Lady Day draws this poem to a close.

As we seek to use our imaginations to meditate on the Passion of Christ again this year, the stories, songs, and prayers of black women can convict us ethically, teach us theologically, move us emotionally, mobilize us politically, and inspire us spiritually. Cone reminds us of the power of old slave spirituals, like

³ Dianne Bergant, *Lamentations*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentary Series (Abingdon Press, 2003), 18.

⁴ Naomi Seidman, "Burning the Book of Lamentations," in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. D. Buchmann and C. Spiegel (New York: Fawcett Columbine), 278-288.

“Were You There?” for “placing [us] at the foot of the cross.”⁵ In conclusion, a few key takeaways from this chapter emerge for our practice of faith as we seek to be awakened anew to the beauty and horror of the Roman execution of Jesus and to the presence of crucified people in our midst. First, both in the texts of the Bible and in our society, we can listen deeply to voices lamenting. Then, we can let these expressions of faith, in all their anger, accusation, and accountability move us. Then, we can seek to hear the narrative of Israel and the prayers of Jesus in the cries of lament around us, especially those coming from black women. Finally, we can seek solidarity with those who lament. Only when we seek to really hear and understand the experience of black women can we allow their faith to act as “a lens for our interpretation of Jesus Christ today.”⁶

⁵ Cone, 138.

⁶ Cone, 121.

Conclusion: Legacies of the Cross and the Lynching Tree

Reflection by Dominique Gilliard

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Somewhere along the way, we modern Christians got lament wrong: we began thinking of it as optional instead of a required practice of the faith. A strange word to modern ears, “lamentation” feels inherently ancient. It brings to mind images of an overwrought demonstration of mourning -- sackcloth and ashes, “wailing and gnashing of teeth” of biblical proportions.

More than the mere expression of sorrow and regret, however, lamentation is a powerful act, one that the church desperately needs to reclaim. In our world of nonstop news and social media, lamentation is an essential and even revolutionary act.

Scripture suggests that lamentation is a liturgical act that reorients and transforms us. Lamentation is uncensored communion with God -- visceral worship where we learn to be honest, intimate and humble before God. Lamentation is both an acknowledgment that things are not as they should be and an anguished wail, beckoning the Lord to intervene with righteousness and justice.

When we lament, we confess our humanity and concede that we are too weak to combat the world’s powers, principalities and spiritual wickedness on our own. When we lament, we declare that only God has the power to truly mend the world’s pain and brokenness.

Still, why lament? Because, paradoxically, often the best way to cure pain is to engage it.

Lamentation prevents us from becoming numb and apathetic to the pain of our world and of those whom we shepherd. Lamentation begets revelation. It opens our eyes to death, injustice and oppression we had not even noticed. It opens our ears to the sounds of torture, anguish and weeping that are the white noise of our world. To live without lament is to live an unexamined life.

Lamentation requires four steps: remembrance, reflection, confession and repentance.

The first step, always, is to remember.

Memory and faith are fundamentally connected. Again and again, more than 100 times, Scripture implores believers to “remember.”

God repeatedly instructed Israel to remember that they were once slaves, foreigners and exiles. As a people liberated by God's grace, Israel was to use that memory to shape and dictate their purpose, praxis and relationships. Remembrance was the backbone of Israel's faithfulness.

When Israel forgot, they turned from God, became self-centered, practiced idolatry and enacted injustice. Forgetting God's command to "not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice" (Deuteronomy 24:17 NIV), Israel became disobedient, building social systems and structures that privileged some while discriminating against others.

Remembrance, therefore, is vitally important; it anchors our identity and compels us to make connections to the past. History is essential, because it provides context and greater clarity for our present and future.

Without history, lamentation seems unnecessary. Why would you lament what you do not remember?

A faith devoid of lamentation aborts history and forsakes remembrance. This is the predicament we find ourselves in today.

One of the primary failures of Western Christianity is its ahistorical nature. History summons us as Christians to confess, lament and repent of our role in and apathy toward our nation's record of injustice and exploitation. Lamentation compels us to expose what the powerful seek to conceal and deny. If the church took history seriously, it would have no choice but to lament the exterminated, demarcated and violated bodies of our nation's past and present.

In light of this, Dr. Cone ultimately concludes that until the U.S., and particularly the Church, can openly and forthrightly discuss lynching, there will cease to be true progress regarding racial reconciliation. Cone's prayer was that this text would help foster this long-overdue, honest, conversation. On the surface, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree* is simply Cone's latest theological exercise of grappling with the meaning of black existence in the U.S. In fact, Cone defines the theologians' task as "reflecting on the articulated claims of the Gospel in light of scriptural and social realities; therefore, explaining the contradictions which exist in the world around us concerning the truth revealed to us in scripture." In light of this, Cone believes that the theological question for African Americans becomes: how can one believe that God loves black people in a society that has been predicated, defined, and financially stabilized by four hundred years of black oppression?

However, it is upon answering this essential question of African American spirituality that *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* pivots and ultimately transcends the depth of Cone's prior scholastic inquiries. As a theologian renowned for his

concreteness, Cone theologically explores the Christological significance of lynching. Through a provocative invitation, Cone beckons us to engage in critical self-reflection which ultimately unearths the fundamental parallels between the sociopolitical function of the cross and lynching tree within the Roman and U.S. empires.

Cone, therefore, draws parallels between these two trees, and empires, with the hope that reflections on the cross and its functionality within Rome will shed light upon how the lynching tree was coercively deployed as a form of racial and social control within the U.S. Empire in the post-emancipation era.

Theologically exploring the cross in this manner exposes the fallacy of U.S. innocence through illuminating our nation's history of barbarism and institutionally sanctioned injustice. Moreover, it elucidates the reality that the U.S. is not as far removed as it likes to think of itself concerning racially incited mob rule and violence. By connecting the cross and the lynching tree, two social symbols of terror separated by nearly 2,000 years, Cone illustrates how these two trees, while rarely linked, are theologically wed by their uncanny ability to interpret one another.

The cross exists as the paragon symbol of the Christian faith; the lynching tree is the quintessential symbol of black oppression in the U.S. Both are symbols of death, functioning as mechanisms of domestic terrorism incited by the powers that be within their given social context. One represents a message of hope and salvation, while the other signifies the negation of those messages by white supremacy. The lynching tree testifies to the ominous presence of the cross within Roman society, while the cross redeems those victimized by the lynching tree, ensuring us that neither death, the lyncher, nor white supremacy has the final say.

Cone's most significant assertion throughout the text is that the crucified and battered body of Christ stands in solidarity with the victims of society's numerous lynching trees throughout the course of time. Cone exemplifies an incredibly unique ability to theologically link the restorative hope of redemption to the suffering populations of both those alive and dead. He makes this connect relevant both tangibly in the present and eschatologically in the future, by rooting the sufferings' existence within the power of Christ's death and resurrection. Through this, he masterfully illustrates how Christ's cross served as the transvaluation of death. In this, African Americans are able to overcome the utter hopelessness of the legacy of the lynching tree by residing in Christ. This is because through the crucified Christ lynched, castrated, and mangled black bodies are reconfigured and amalgamated into one cruciform flesh.

Conversations about the cross and the lynching tree demand the acknowledgement of African American humanity, which is so critical in this unprecedented era of mass incarceration—where African American men represent

only 6.5% of the U.S. population, yet constitute 40.2% of our nation's incarcerated populace. The U.S. church needs something as tangible as the lynching tree to anchor and cement the concept of the crucifixion for us today. Remembering lynching, and the re-crucified bodies (of all hues and ethnicities) among us today, makes the lamentation of black bodies, which have been devalued, commodified, and objectified, obligatory for the church.

History roots us in humility, and remembrance compels us to lament. In lamentation, we acknowledge that sin has distorted our relationship with God, our neighbors and creation. Lament beckons us to discern how we can recalibrate our relating in light of the gospel.

When faithfully engaged and authentically enacted, lamentation keeps us accountable to our baptismal vows. It reminds us of our need for God, one another and the Holy Spirit's guidance. Lamentation is a form of centering prayer that shapes our discipleship and missiology; it illuminates blind spots in our lives and ministry, helping us to make our evangelism more responsible and contextual.